Coda

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Coda

by James Boyle

Mentor: Professor Mark Mirsky

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts of the City College of the City University of New York.
I do not love the woman I married. In terms of stability, she is probably the best I could do. My credit has gone up. My savings account has money in it. I have a job with a salary, a retirement plan, tax sheltered annuities, medical, dental, hospitalization, term life insurance. In all respects, the quality of my life has improved. And I resent her for it.

We have a house in the suburbs: a little white one with black shutters and flower boxes under the windows. An ivy lined trellis above a little hinged gate . . . The walkway, interwoven paving stones lined with geraniums, curves up to the front door like the yellow brick road. A birdbath in the front surrounded by statues of sickeningly cute forest animals: a squirrel, chipmunk, and a rabbit . . . The rabbit has one ear broken off and a crack running down the side of its face. It’s the only one I don’t want to smash with a hammer.

An acre of land with a little stream and a bridge that crosses it . . . There’s a Magnolia tree that blooms delicate pink petals. A white gravel path leading to a gazebo . . . A tree house for if we ever have kids . . . It’s on a dead end street, so there’s no through traffic. It’s got a great school system. And it’s quiet. So quiet I want to jam a newly sharpened pencil in my ear.

For the past ten years I’ve been lulled to sleep by the sound of garbage trucks at four in the morning. By neighbors arguing in a foreign language heard through the thin walls of a one bedroom apartment . . . By the scent of different
restaurants, all representing different ethnicities, the olfactory version of the United Nations . . . By a thumping hip-hop bass line heard from the trunk of a car. By screeching tires. By fire, police, and ambulance sirens. By all the endearing chaos of New York City . . . And even though it’s only a thirty minute drive away, less time than it takes to go from 125th Street to Times Square on the One train, Manhattan may as well be on the other side of the country.
I stood alone in the corner. I felt like a shadow in a room full of people. The brim of my hat was pulled down over my eyes. I didn’t really want to see them anyway; a room full of strangers. I used to know everyone here; this was once a familiar place, now they were all blank faces. That familiar stench, the sweat hung heavy in the air. I swayed with the rolling bass lines that vibrated the whole room. As the tempo increased so did my movement. With each beat, a pop: wrist, elbow, shoulder . . . My neck swiveled and my hips swayed. I felt my knees buckle and my ankles tightened at an impossible angle. The jungle rhythms climaxd in an auditory explosion and I spun and corkscrewed down on one foot, holding my arms in tight to maintain velocity. I used the momentum to pounce across the floor and slide along on one knee. As I rose, the dark tribal drums echoed in my head.

The DJ changed tracks and melodic chants backed by quick snare beats filled the room. The mix was ok. I could tell the DJ was young and inexperienced, his track selection was good, but there were some mismatched beats as the songs changed. The flow wasn’t continuous. And almost no one was dancing. This new generation of music and kids are different. We danced all night. The music moved us, carried us through the night. The DJ was as much of a guide as he was an entertainer. It wasn’t the same anymore. I sighed and looked around. That world seemed dead and gone.
Konkrete Jungle was a weekly Drum and Bass party held on Monday nights. It was small and intimate. There was usually good upcoming talent. The cover was cheap, but I had been going there so long that they never charged me at the door anymore. We usually rolled up with a big crew, but they were gone now. The scene itself was dying out. A miniature cultural revolution brought about by electronic music and empty warehouses. The media called them Raves, we just called them parties. That’s what they were. Huge drug fueled dance parties. What was once underground quickly became commercialized. Club and venue owners, promoters, DJs, they were all able to cash in. The scene just took on a whole different vibe. Maybe it was time to move on; maybe they had the right idea all along.

It was only two in the morning, early by our previous standards, but it was time to go. I grabbed my jacket and stepped out onto Avenue A in downtown Manhattan. It was cold; Christmas was right around the corner. That meant family. . . I took a flat cigarette from my damp pack and lit it. As I did, I felt a muscle knot in my calf. To relieve the pain I took a seat on a bench just outside Tomkins Square Park. I stretched my calf and made little circles with my foot.

I saw her from down the street. I knew what was coming. We called girls like her “poser party bitches”. A girl who dressed the part for the night: baggy UFO pants, little blond pigtails streaked with purple on either side of her head. Her pierced bellybutton peeked out from under her shirt. The sleeves were ripped
along the arms, and then tied back together with string. It was clearly too cold for what she was wearing. Her complexion was light but the humidity of the room took its toll on her makeup. A pacifier hung from around her neck, a good indicator that she was on Ecstasy. The drug gives terrible lockjaw and the pacifier was a good relief. It prevented the person from grinding their teeth and chewing on their own face. It also made her look like a giant baby.

“Hi,” she said with a smile. “I’m Zoe.”

“Zoe.” I repeated.

“Yeah…” she responded, a bit confused.

I just stared, waiting.

“And you are…?” She picked up.

“Edward.”

“I was inside tonight. I really like the way you dance.”

“Oh.” She didn’t get the hint.

“Are you alright?” She finally asked.

“Yeah, I just …” My eyes darted from her face to the ground, unable to maintain focus. I was caught off guard. My thoughts scattered. The streetlights pulsed with a multi-colored halo. I could feel and hear my own heartbeat. Inside I was comfortable, I was in control. The dark made everything easier. Outside in the fresh cold air, the oxygen and new scenery refreshed the LSD coursing through my system.
“Hellloo?…” Zoe said waiving her hand in front of my face. “Are you on drugs or something?”

“Sorry, I’m not much of a talker…” My voice faded and trailed off.

“So, you’re not on drugs?” she asked.

“Never said that.” I smiled and hoped that all the words came out correctly.

“What’d you take?”

“Acid.” It felt like an autonomous response. “I think I’m gonna go. Did you want something?” She looked a little hurt but gave me her phone number and asked me to call her. I put on my headphones and walked down Saint Marks Street without turning back. As soon as I hit Second Avenue I crumpled up the paper and threw it into a sewer grate.

An MTA worker buffed the floor of the Eighth Street N Station. The tile mosaic on the wall spun and reflected flecks of gold and glass as the headlamps of passing trains went by. It was fascinating. Time slowed but three trains must have passed. I giggled each time from the rush of wind and the rumbling of the tracks. I thought I caught the worker staring, watching me. I could feel his gaze. I left on the next train.

The doors opened, fear and claustrophobia set in during the indecipherable announcement of the next stop. I took a seat and avoided the looks of anyone on the train. I tried to breath and focus on a spot on the floor. Even then, the
splattered floor design swirled and warped. Tight crowded spaces were not a good thing on a head full of acid.

Hell’s Kitchen was somewhere between high class and halfway house. I lived only a few avenues from Times Square. Bright flashing neon lights and the lack of crowds made it a particularly successful sensory detour. Pre-dawn Forty-Second Street was a surreal flashback. The seedy reputation masked by lights and tourists was stripped away. Any real New Yorker avoids Times Square unless absolutely necessary. Tourists didn’t see the strip clubs, full release massage parlors, XXX sex shops with whack-off booths for a quarter. At this hour, these are the only places still open. I felt a sense of revulsion as I walked past these places, their clientele hovering around outside scrounging for cigarettes and loose change. Even this was changing, by day Times Square was like a warped Disney theme park. The grit and grime were being replaced by Bubba Gump Shrimp and an M&M’s candy store.

I turned up on Ninth Avenue and made my way to Fifty First Street. I walked into my empty apartment. Just few months ago, this place would be lively at any given time of the day. Was the whole friendship a façade? Did we really do nothing of value? Or was life just moving on? Now, everyone was gone, gone their separate ways. Yet I remain.
New Year’s Eve is supposed to be a time for high spirits, a time for new beginnings, for parties, and poor decisions. Half-hearted, rarely kept resolutions follow the botched singing of “Should old acquaintance be forgot, and never hrum fram daaahhhhh.” That’s when people usually just kissed to avoid destroying the song anymore. The warmth and merriment was infectious, it filled the entire room. Leaning on the guardrail, I watched from behind the sliding glass door on the balcony of my brother’s apartment. People were smiling and laughing. Claire, my brother’s wife, was going around placing cheap party hats on everyone’s head and handing out noise makers. I took a last drag of the cigarette and flicked it off the balcony. I watched the glowing ember spiral down and wondered if my own body would spin with the wind if I were to throw myself off. I immediately lit another and looked at the Manhattan skyline. I could see the Empire State Building, glowing purple, blue, yellow, green, and red. There was supposed to be some kind of light show tonight in celebration of the New Year.

I heard the door slide open behind me. A young woman with dark hair and a pierced septum stepped out. She rubbed her arms briskly and shivered almost violently to ward off the cold. She removed her sparkly paper tiara, flung it off the balcony, and watched it flutter to the ground. We exchanged weak smiles of acknowledgement. She placed a cigarette between her thin lips and rummaged through her bag. After a minute, she gave up and asked for a light. I reached into
my pocket and handed her a yellow lighter. Huddled over to shield the wind she flicked it a few times before taking the initial draw. She exhaled a “thanks” as she handed the lighter back. We stared at the cityscape in a moment of silence.

“Nice night.”

“Yeah …”

“I’m Edward.”

“Julia.” We exchanged a tepid handshake. I could tell she was trying not to stare at my black eye. We smirked at each other knowingly.

“Rough night?”

“You have no idea.”

“So …”

“So …”

“So, what do you do?”

“Huh?”

“What-do-you-do? She mimed in exaggerated sign language. “You do know how small talk works, right? We start with the weather, move on to our miserable jobs, feign interest in each other, then find some awkward reason to get out of the conversation. In this case it’ll be easy, flick the butt and go back inside.” She blew a thin stream of smoke, “cigarettes are a just a socially acceptable excuse to be rude and anti-social.”

“How can you be socially acceptably anti-social?”
“You know what I mean. So again, what do you do?”

“I play the piano.”

“Really?” she asked with seemingly genuine interest.

“Really.”

“No shit, like with anyone famous.”

“No nothing like that, I put on a fucking penguin suit and play to a desolate cocktail lounge.”

“Huh …” she paused to take a drag. “So, how long have you been playing?”

“Ever since I can remember. I hated it up until a few years ago.”

“So what brought you back?”

“Thelonious Monk.”

“Seems a bit old, who really listens to that stuff anymore?”

“It’s something different, even if it is old. Better than that bubble gum pop you hear on the radio. You know why they call it that right? It’s not meant to be digested, just chewed on for a little while then spit out, stepped on, and stuck to the bottom of someone’s shoe.”

“Some of that stuff’s not so bad.”

“Are you kidding me? It’s all manufactured. You don’t even need talent.”

“Listen man, I didn’t ask for the state of affairs on modern music. They must be doing something right. They make a shit load of money.”
“But they’re not musicians, being a musician takes passion, pain, perseverance.”

“And how’s that workin’ out for you?” She said with a smirk, pointing to my black eye.

“Yeah, well right now the only thing my passion is creating is more pain.”

“I thought artists were supposed to thrive on pain.”

I turned away to lean on the railing, “You have no idea. As a musician it’s hard not to get frustrated, you know? Celebrity status is handed out to the first sellout. The thing is . . .” I turned around and noticed Julia already back inside refilling her wine glass. “Never mind.” I watched her for another minute. She wasn’t one of Tommy’s friends. My brother didn’t have friends. He had associates, acquaintances, co-workers. I don’t think I can recall him ever really having a close knit group of friends. Clearly, Claire knew her. The way they laughed knowingly, shared those moments, those silent conversations through eye contact women have a penchant for. The kind men are incapable of deciphering.

I slid open the door and felt a rush of heat. I looked around the room and aside from my brother; I didn’t really know anyone there. Tommy was in the kitchen standing next to a center island. I walked up close and spoke in a low voice, trying to keep the conversation private, “Tom, do you know a Julia?”


“I met her outside, she was . . . interesting.”
“What’s she look like?”

“Not too tall, dark hair, septum ring.”

“Show me.”

I scanned the room, “There, near the painting.”

“Oh, her. She’s one of Claire’s friends. They work together. Sorry man, I think she’s got a boyfriend.”

“You sure?”

“No, I’ve only met her once or twice. Listen man, don’t dwell on it.”

“I’m not.”

“Yeah, now. This happens every time you get interested in a girl. Ed, it’s New Year’s Eve man, lighten up. Here, take a shot with me.” He grabbed a bottle of tequila and poured into a couple of shot glasses. “When the kids are away the parents will play, cheers.”

“The kids at Mom’s?”

Tommy winced, “Whoo! Yeah. A godsend man, I tell you. Every Christmas break they’re off to Grandma and Grandpa’s.” He poured another shot and handed it to me.

“May you have the hindsight to know where you’ve been, the insight to know where you are, and the foresight to know when you’re going too far. Sláinte.”

“Cheers. I’ve gotta go play host. You alright?”
“Yeah.”

People had wine glasses, champagne flutes, and plastic solo cups. I drank straight from the bottle. Everyone around me seemed to move at increased speed. Cups piled up and were cleared, a couple hooked up behind me, a group of five took a round of shots, a game of quarters began and ended, a woman put a New Year’s hat on my head crookedly and kissed me on the cheek.

After a while I got up stumbled towards the bathroom. I tried the knob but the door was locked. I continued down the hall and opened the door to my nephew Sean’s room. Back in the living room I heard the countdown to the New Year as the ball dropped. In the center of the room was a rainbow colored child’s xylophone. I sat down, picked up the plastic orange mallet, and started to play Auld Lang Syne.

I later found out that she saw me then. She was the one in the bathroom. She said it was much better than her first impression. The chiming of a familiar song could be heard down the hall. Softly, she walked over and peeked in. I was huddled over, cross legged, back towards the door, playing what appeared to be a toy. She smiled and watched, being careful not to be noticed. She told me I stopped playing and looked up, but didn’t turn. It was then she slipped back to the party.

The next morning I awoke on the floor, not quite sure of where I was. Someone had covered me with a Scooby-Doo blanket. I looked around the room
and finally saw a picture of my brother’s family on the nightstand. I stood up, unfortunately too fast. Dizzy, I stumbled to the bathroom, closed the door, lurched for the toilet and heaved. Tears flooded my eyes and regurgitated tequila burned my throat. Blindly, I reached for the towel rack I knew was there, pulled a towel from the bar and wiped my mouth. I searched the cabinet behind the mirror for an extra toothbrush and scoured the New Year’s Eve film from my mouth.

I shuffled into the kitchen holding my temples. Claire was cleaning up the mess from the night before. Tommy was on the balcony talking on the phone.

“Good morning,” she said, way too cheery for the morning after New Year’s.

“Shhh, not so loud.”

“Coffee?”

I grumbled an affirmation. Claire poured a cup and handed it to me as Tommy came in from the balcony.

“I’ll be leaving in a bit to pick up the kids. You need a ride, Ed?”

I grunted and took a sip. Toothpaste always made coffee taste like shit.
I stepped out of the car and was almost hit by a yellow cab. I flipped off the driver and yelled, “Asshole!” Tommy waved out his window and he drove off. I took a breath of the crisp winter air and began walking. The first stop was a bodega to grab coffee and a pack of cigarettes, then a liquor store to buy a fifth of Jameson. I walked uptown a bit to Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Lincoln Center has its own Christmas tree, not as big as Rockefeller Center, but certainly just as pretty and way less tourists. There’s something about the architecture, the lack of a crowd, it seems more Christmasy; maybe because no one tried to sell you a picture of yourself for ten dollars. I sat on the steps in front of the fountain, drank my coffee and watched people go by. Coffee finished, I walked south and stopped at the ticket booth for Jazz at Lincoln Center. Sonny Rollins was playing that week.

Across the street from Columbus Circle was Central Park. Passing the golden statue at the entrance I took a seat on the bench and closed my eyes. The soundtrack of the city took over: impatient car horns honked, the hooves of horse drawn carriages clacked on the pavement, indecipherable chatter, subway trains heard through street grates, children squealed in the park. Suddenly, all sounds stopped. I took a breath and lifted my hands as if to play an imaginary piano as music wafted through my mind.

“What are you doing?”
I opened my eyes and had to squint against the bright sun. After a moment I realized who it was and smiled, “Practicing.”

“For what?”

“Dunno,” I shrugged.

Julia shook her head and raised an eyebrow, “Weird.” From below I could see her septum ring tucked up into her nose.

*Of all the gin joints in all the towns, in all world ...*

“So, what are you up to?” I asked.

“Ugh, the early dinner shift at the Porter House.”

“That’s that steak house down the road right? How is it?”

“Meh. Overpriced.”

“Shocker, an overpriced restaurant in Manhattan.”

“Tips are good though, the clientele’s got money to burn.”

“Better than the living dead I guess.”

“What?”

“Never mind. I’ll walk with you,” I said as I stood and stretched.

“No, it’s ok, I’m running late anyway, I’ve gotta hoof it,” she said as she continued to walk.

“Hey, can I call you sometime?”

Julia turned and walked backwards, “maybe. When you don’t look like you just did the walk of shame. You need a shower.”
“Awww, come on. It was New Year’s Eve, I don’t get a pass for that.”

“Not when I’m in uniform on my way to work. And it’s two o’clock in the afternoon. Goodbye Edward.”

I watched her leave then sniffed myself. “Mmmmmm, coffee, cigarettes, vomit, stale tequila. The effluvium of the gods.” I sat back down and played Beethoven’s Fifth on the imaginary piano, “Bum, bum, bum, bum.”

It’s not like I was stalking her or anything. It’s just that the only thing I knew about her was where she worked. Claire was no help; she actually just laughed and said no when I asked for Julia’s number. All I knew was she worked ten blocks up and one block over from my Ninth Avenue apartment. Ok, maybe I was stalking a little. But maybe a staged coincidence could be arranged. Assuming she worked the dinner shift, she probably went in around four or five and got out around nine or ten. And it couldn’t be the same spot we saw each other the other day. No, near a subway maybe. There are only a few lines in the direction she came from. The N, R goes along Fifty-ninth street, and the 4, 5, 6 is just a few avenues up.

Ok, maybe more than a little.

We’d made a joke of it. A chance meeting on the stairway.

“Are you stalking me?”

“Just a little.” She looked at me as if she were seriously considering the possibility, “I’m heading home; I live just down a little on Ninth Avenue.”
“Hm.”

“What?”

“Well, you can’t be doing that bad for yourself if you can afford a place in Manhattan.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I kind of had you pegged as a loser.” She smiled and I couldn’t tell whether she was serious or not.

“Again, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t date losers,” she said indifferently. “You’ve at least got to have a job and support yourself, and definitely not still live at home. I’ve gone down that road one too many times.”

“High standards I see.”

“Just reasonable ones. You don’t live with your parents do you?”

“No.” I stopped at the top of the stairs. She kept walking but turned around on the middle landing of the staircase. “Good, then you can meet me tomorrow down by Astor Place. In front of the cube.”

“The what?”

“Just take the Six train to Astor Place. You can’t miss it; there is literally a giant cube in the middle of the road.”

“A Cube?”
“Yes Edward, a three dimensional quadrilateral. You’ll know it when you see it. Meet me there at noon. We’ll get lunch at one of those little cafe places on St. Marks.”

“What about tonight? Let’s grab a drink.”

“I’m going home; it’s been a long day.”

“Even more of a reason to grab a drink.”

“I’ve got a long ride home.”

Where’s home?”

“I’d rather not say. You might be a stalker remember? Tomorrow.

Goodnight Edward.” And with that, she turned and walked down to the train.
I sat behind an aged baby grand piano playing the same chord over and over. The top button of my collared shirt was undone and the tendrils of my bow tie hung loosely around my neck. On the bench was the empty fifth of Jameson. I lifted my eyes a bit to see if there was any reaction from the crowd. Nothing…

In the 1950’s this place was one of those smoky piano bars with red velvet booths, table lamps, and cocktail waitresses in skimpy outfits selling cigars and cigarettes. Even though smoking in New York City bars wasn’t allowed, you could still detect the faint aroma of tobacco, liquor, and post-World War II excitement that emanated from the unchanged upholstery. The smoke in the air became a thin layer of ashen sediment as it settled on the regulars. They sat, and nursed eternal Pink Ladies and Manhattans, their cocktail Martini glasses, perpetually full. They were as much a part of the décor as the metal and wood Atomic age Sunburst clocks hung on the wall.

What kept them coming back? Why here of all places? What are they trying to reclaim? A glimpse at their youth? Some sentimental attachment linked to the dusty décor, as if somehow those objects, this place, this music could revert them to their past selves, where they can once again relive their youth.

“Play another god damned chord!” shouted Cedric behind the bar. He had a voice like he used gravel for chewing gum.
“What’s the point? They’re all deaf or senile. Can’t even tell what I’m doing.”

“I can tell, and it’s annoying the hell out of me.”

I grumbled, “Blind son of a … can’t wait till you go deaf … one step from being a fossil like the rest of these . . .”

“What’s that?”

“Never mind. How’s this?” I stuck out my tongue, let out a long “pthhhhhhh”, and mangled the keys creating a cacophony that made a few of the patrons blink.

“You treat that instrument with the respect you know it deserves! What kind of half assed musician treats his instrument like that?”

I sobered a bit at the remark. I stopped and closed my eyes, hands hovering above the keys for a moment. Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue* went through my mind. The opening notes . . . slow . . . painful . . . sounds like rain, but just a drizzle. A walking bass in the back . . . Increase tempo . . . It sounds like New York City, then and now. Steady, alive, a little sleazy . . . The cymbal crash just before Miles really kicks in . . . Keep it sparse, it’s the backbone for Davis and Coltrane. The piano gets its chance. In Jazz, all the instruments do. I took a breath and set my fingers lightly on the keys, feeling the electric space only an atom’s width apart; the space between the musician and the instrument. Cedric shook his balding head and smiled at me.
I lit a cigarette with one hand and kept the music going with the other. I didn’t need my hands to smoke. It was a kind of reverse circular breathing, in through the mouth and out the nose, continuous, a perpetual cherried flame with an elongated ash holding up against the odds of gravity. Cigarettes had recently been outlawed in most places in New York. Cedric didn’t mind though. He said smoke and art were like bacon smothered in maple syrup: Bad for the heart but oh so delicious. There’s something about it, writing, playing, painting, something about the creative process that fits so well with a cigarette in hand. He also said it reminded him of how the place used to be before everyone in society got so uptight. He used to keep a lit smoke between the strings and pegs of his stand-up bass when he played.

Unfortunately, my boss, Phillip, did not see it that way. I noticed him just in time, those quick shuffling steps, the throbbing vein in his forehead, fists clenched. I slipped the empty fifth into my pants pocket.

“Put that out now or it’s your ass! And fix you bow tie, you look like shit.”

I snuffed out the butt on the bottom of my shoe and placed it in the same pocket as the fifth. “Just trying to relive the good ol’ days boss.” He was not amused.

“Don’t give me that shit smartass. You were just a glimmer in your father’s sack at the time. We had class. You look like a disheveled piece of shit.”
“Classy,” I said with a smirk, noticing one of the patrons who had fallen asleep at her booth. Her head was cocked to one side, a line of spittle on her chin, hand still clutching the stem of her Martini glass.

“Do you like getting a paycheck or not?”

“Sorry sir.”

“Whatever. I like what I hear when your mouth is shut. This,” he knocked on the hood of the piano, “should be the only sound you make when you’re up here. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good,” he turned to walk out and stopped briefly at the bar. He downed a drink and held up the glass, looking through it. He rotated it in his hand and said something to Cedric before he left.

After my shift I took it upon myself to partake in one of the perks of working at a bar. “I’m heading out.” I said, as I refilled my fifth from the bottle on the shelf.

“Hold up a minute,” Cedric called from behind the bar.

I quickly replaced the cap and stashed the fifth in my breast pocket. Cedric came out wiping his hands with a rag. He looked hard at me for a moment,

“Listen kid, you gotta rein it in a bit. I let the drinking slide, but now it’s coming back to me.”

“Did he say something?”
“Yeah, he asked me to keep an eye on you.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“You? I’m not worried about you. I’m the one who got you the gig. It’s now my name on the line. I’ve been working here for over fifty years now. Seen a lot of people come and go. You’ve got talent, but if it’s you or me, it’s gonna be me.”

“Gig? I’d hardly call playing for a bunch of living stiffs a gig. Who the fuck comes to a piano bar anymore anyway? That world is dead and gone.”

“It pays doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, but …”

“But what? What were you expecting? Fame and glory? If that’s all you’re in this for then you’re missing the whole point. And if you think Jazz is dead in New York City, then you don’t know jack. Jazz is the pulse of this city. Tell me Milestones doesn’t capture that.”

“Whatever.”

Cedric shook his head, this time in genuine disappointment, “You just don’t get it. Go home, get some sleep.”

I walked out into the New York night. Leaving work always felt like time travel. Stepping out from a semi-living anachronism, I turned up my collar and walked outside onto Avenue A in downtown Manhattan. There were still plenty of people out, even at three a.m. on a Wednesday night. I lit a cigarette from my
pack and walked a few blocks. I sat on an exterior water pipe between Sixth and Seventh Avenue, took a swig, and watched cabs crawl by hoping for potential fares. They honked their horns at successive groups exiting the dive bars along the avenue, slowing traffic behind them, who, in turn, honked their horns.

A block over, next to the Tompkins Square Park entrance, one car rear-ended another. A shouting match escalated between the two drivers: A young man with a white backwards baseball cap driving a neon-laced Subaru and a foreign gypsy cab driver in a Lincoln Towncar. Cigarette in one hand, fifth in the other, I watched the two argue. The young man was white and I couldn’t make out the ethnicity of the cab driver.

The young man clearly blamed the cab driver for the accident. He flipped off the driver, walked around the navy blue, already dented, Towncar and kicked the passenger side window. Again, he lifted his leg, knee almost to his chest, and stomped the glass with his boot. It reminded me of how cops kick down a perp’s front door on TV. After a few solid kicks the glass spider-webbed. He took a step back and gave one more good kick and the window shattered. I looked around. No one did anything. Not one person on the sidewalk said a thing. Most watched, some people went right back to their conversations. The cab driver hopped around with his hands on his head pleading for him to stop. The young man went for the rear window, but his friend jumped out of the car and pulled him away. The two got into the Subaru and sped away, blowing through a series of red lights. I took a
drag of my cigarette and looked up to the starless sky. It was one of those cold nights where you couldn’t tell where the smoke ended and the crystallized breath began.
There it was. I walked up the subway stairs, turned around and there was a cube roughly eight feet in length on each side, tilted to one corner. And there she was. Wearing pink earmuffs and gloves with the fingers cut off. She sat on the base of the sculpture. A book rested between her knees. Faint tendrils of smoke arose from her left hand and she chewed on her right thumbnail. I was tempted to sit and watch her all day in that moment. The way she bit little slivers of her nails and spit them onto the street. The way she leafed back and forth through the book. The way she teared up and cursed when she got smoke in her eye. I walked over.

“Whatcha reading?”

“Experimental Decomposition in the Northeast Environment.”

She didn’t even look up. “Experimental what?”

“Decomposition.”

“A read nail biter huh?” She looked up and was clearly not amused. Her eyes were green.

“Ugh, it’s for school. An NYU Master’s, I must’ve been out of my mind. But enough about that,” she flicked her cigarette, folded over the corner of the page she was reading, closed the book, and placed it into one of those women’s bags that can hold an entire apartment’s worth of personal items. She stood up and walked over to one side of the cube and placed her hands on it. “Here, it can
be spun on its vertical axis.”

“What?”

“Just help me push.”

I placed my hands next to hers and pushed. With a bit of force, it started to move. It was like rotating a giant black diamond. She laughed and kind of squealed once we gained momentum. After the first lap, the following three were easy. We both breathed heavily afterwards.

“Gets the blood pumping,” she said between gasps.

“And reminds you it’s time to quit smoking.” I coughed a few times and spit onto the street.

“Attractive.”

“You know,” I panted, “I’ve been living in New York for a while and never knew about this thing. I even work not too far from here.”

“Isn’t that the great thing about the city? You can live here for years and still find something new every day. Something you never knew even existed. Sometimes it’s a cool little restaurant or bar, sometimes it’s little fashion boutique. And other times it’s a 2000 pound cube in the middle of the street.

Come on,” she slipped her arm into the crook of mine, “I’m hungry.”

We walked east up Saint Mark’s Street. Despite the cold, open-air vendors haggled with tourists over the price of their dodgy merchandise. We passed vintage clothing shops, St. Marks Comics, and the Yaffa Café. As we approached
Avenue A I realized this was around the same place the accident occurred last night. How different the neighborhood seemed during the day. We finally stopped at a cafe on the corner called 7A. The waitress seated us near the window. Both of us immediately ordered coffee. I strained to look for the location of the accident. I thought I could make out the sparkle of shattered glass on the street as it reflected in the sun.

“What are you looking for?” She asked.

“I saw some crazy shit go down right over there last night, some guy kicked out the window of a Lincoln Towncar.”

“I hate Towncars.”

“You hate a car?”

“Anytime I ride my bike in Manhattan, I almost get hit by a Lincoln Towncar. Actually, I’ve been hit twice, same model and everything. Asshole decided it would be a good idea to make a left from the center lane. Never saw me. I rolled right over the hood. Those and yellow cabs. They really should put in bike lanes.”

The waitress brought us our drinks and took our order. As she stirred milk and two packets of Sweet ‘N Low into her coffee, she smirked at me, “Speaking of crazy shit, what’s with the eye?” The purple and black had faded to a mottled green and yellow. “I’ve left it alone, ‘til now.”
Embarrassed, I was tempted to tell her about the fight. I was saved by the waitress who came to take our order. Julia asked for a bacon cheese burger, medium-rare. Thinking I would have to pay for lunch, I ordered the cheapest thing on the menu, a grilled cheese sandwich with tomato. She looked at me funny.

"A grilled cheese?"

"I don't know. It's what I feel like having." She gave me a look like she didn't believe me.

Doing a mental tally of the money left on my debit card, I had wiggle room. I ordered a shot of whiskey to mask my destitution. When the waitress brought it, I poured it into my coffee.

“Are you from New York?” she asked.

“Not the city, from a suburb about forty minutes north. Originally, I came to go to school.”

"Where?"

"IAR, the Institute for Audio Research. It's down on Tenth and University."

"So you've always been involved in music?"

"Sort of, I was going to study sound engineering. I got really into the rave scene and electronic music in the mid-ninties and thought it was a good fit for me."
"And the piano?"

"Was something Mom taught me in grade school. I hated it, found it too structured and proper, until I discovered Jazz. I had a cool uncle, Uncle Biss, he had all these old jazz records in his basement. We used to sit and listen to those. Now, playing at least pays the rent. It's the one skill I have that people even seem to give a damn about."

“You’re able to afford a place in Hell’s Kitchen by playing a few gigs a week? I find that hard to believe.”

“Well, about that …”

The waitress brought over our food. Her hulking burger and mound of steak fries embarrassed my grilled cheese. She smiled and rubbed her hands. I watched with envy as she glopped ketchup on the side of her plate. With what seemed like extreme concentration, she stacked the lettuce, tomato, and onion just right, as if she were building a monument and placed the bun lightly on top. With two hands she examined her work, looking for an entry point for that first bite. I heard the crunch of vegetables and the soft squish of the medium rare meat as she bit. A sliver of juice streamed down her chin and she wiped it with her sleeve.

My cheese was congealed and the bread soggy.

Her mouth full, she nudged her plate towards me offering to share the fries.

"And school? What happened there?"
"Apathy and September 11th."

She choked a little, "Excuse me?"

"Well, two weeks into the first semester of school 9-11 happened. The city all but shut down for a few weeks. I watched it happen actually."

"Really?"

Mhm, I was living in the Saint George Hotel at the time . . ."

"A hotel?"

"Kind of, it used to be an upscale hotel in the twenties and thirties. It was converted into student housing. Think of it like a dorm for anyone who goes to school in New York City."

"Where is it?"

"Brooklyn Heights. There's a promenade that runs along the east river. If you look across you can see downtown Manhattan. I woke up in the morning after the first plane hit. It was all over the news. My roommate and I ran down to watch. We stood with other onlookers and saw the second plane hit. A few minutes later they came down. A huge dust cloud rolled over the river. Totally surreal. We saw it coming and headed back. For an entire day the neighborhood was clouded with dust and debris. The semester was postponed for months. Once it started back up, I flaked."

"You flaked?"

"Just stopped going."
"So what'd you do?"

"A lot of acid. I moved out eventually, you had to be a student to live in the Saint George."

"What'd your parents say?"

"They got pissed. Ten grand down the drain. They kind of all but disowned me, or they would have if I had moved back home. The relationship's been strained since then. My mom's gotten over it and is ok that I can at least support myself. And Dad . . . well Dad's a whole other story."

"Hm," she wiped her mouth with a napkin and seemed to study me for a moment. She looked like she was making up her mind about something. Her eyes squinted as she chewed her food. "So," she covered her mouth with her hand, "basically you flunked out of college, did a bunch of drugs for a few years, and now you're on your own."

"More or less," it seemed depressing put that way. I stared down at my pitiful grilled cheese sandwich.

"So what are you doing with your music?"

Again, she had hit the heart of the matter.

“Right now, just living.”

“And in the future?”

“Dunno, I’m kind of working on some original stuff. Work is a good place to practice,” I lied. “Not much of an audience there.”
“Can I come to hear you?”

“I’d rather you not. It’s kind of sad, a bunch of old stiffs sitting around drinking Rob Roys. I’m pretty sure a few of them are actually dead …”

The waitress came over and placed the check on the table. Julia swiped it up before I even had the chance. She studied it, adding up the numbers in her head, “Well at least you’re a cheap date,” she said as she placed a credit card on the little plastic tray. “You can pay me back by playing the piano for me. And no chopsticks, that doesn’t count. A real song.”

Partly relieved, slightly embarrassed, and totally scared, I asked, “Now?”

“Do you have a piano?”

My stunned silence and slight smile gave me away.

“You do, don’t you?” She grew excited, “Yes, now.” She pointed her finger at me, “And you better not let me down.”

“Can I take a rain check? My place is kind of trashed right now.”

“No you may not. And don’t expect any funny business mister, it’s the first date, remember that.”

We walked out the door and a viciously cold gust of wind blew down the avenue. Julia turned and nuzzled her head in my chest. Her hair whipped my face. It smelled like coconut. She took my arm and led me uptown on Avenue A. We had not even walked a block when both of us stepped in a camouflaged puddle
near the edge of a sidewalk; the dark slush gave the appearance of solid pavement. It's a trap almost all New Yorkers have fallen into. Water seeped through the fabric of my shoe and soaked through my sock.

“Shit. I hate those.”

She hopped around shaking her foot. “Are we gonna get frostbite?”

“What? Are you serious?”

“I happen to like my toes.”

“No, we’re not going to get frostbite.”

“But it’s like zero degrees out. Let’s hurry, before my feet fall off.” She was serious; there was legitimate concern in her voice, a paranoid look in her eyes. The confidence was gone, replaced by real worry. The shift was disorienting. She was like a completely different person.

“What do I do?” She asked fearfully.

“What do you mean ‘what do I do?’ Have you never stepped in a puddle before?”

“Let’s take a cab,” she insisted.

“What? Really? No, I’ll just go buy you socks at Duane Reade.”

She already paid for lunch; there was no way I was going to let her pay for a cab, especially since I couldn’t afford one. I finally convinced her that her foot would not turn black, and that we could take the train to my apartment. I’d give her socks and we could put our shoes on the radiator to dry. But now I was
trapped. I complain about not having a real audience, yet I was afraid to play for a single person in the privacy of my own home. My foot squished in my shoe the whole walk to the train.

I paused just before I put the key into the lock, “I wasn’t making excuses, my place really is trashed.”

“Whatever, I can’t feel my toes. And you owe me a song,” she said shivering, “And hot chocolate,” she added under her breath.

Stacks of unwashed dishes piled in the sink. Unopened mail, unread newspapers, rank laundry, unfinished work, unwritten music, un-emptied ashtrays piled high around us. It smelled like a single man’s apartment. She didn’t seem to mind. She just pushed over a pile of clothes and took a seat on my couch. She untied her shoe and removed the wet sock. Her toenails were orange.

I sat down at my small scratched and worn spinet piano, took a breath and pounded the opening chords to Beethoven’s Fifth. She looked up and smiled, her thin lips almost disappeared behind her teeth when she did. I went in for the kiss and our teeth clinked.

We smiled, laughed, and clinked again. “Hot Chocolate,” I said as I got up off the bench.

“That’s not it, was it?”

“No. Don’t worry; you’ll get your song.” I was stalling. I fumbled around the kitchen; luckily I had two clean mugs. “Marshmallows?”
“Of course.”

“What would you have done it I didn’t have any hot chocolate.”

“I knew you would. You’ve got that kind of little boy quality. I can totally picture you playing kickball and climbing trees.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You should, it’s kind of endearing.”

I handed her the mug and sat down again. I looked at her and brushed my imaginary coattails and adjusted my “gloves”. Still stalling, but she seemed to buy it. Chopsticks… She slapped my arm.

I stopped, sighed, reached up and dug through a pile of papers on top of the piano until I found a half filled sheet music page. I set it in front of me and grabbed a pen. With my right hand I followed the notes, while my left played the corresponding keys. I put the pen down and I rocked back and forth as I played, but something was missing. The song was good, but kind of flat, not in pitch but it lacked an edge, a soul. On paper it looked fine, in my head all the notes were there. I played all the right keys; the timing was fine, but still…

I held the last notes for a moment before looking over to her.

“That was good,” she smiled. She reached over, grabbed the sheet, and looked it over. “It’s not done yet, is it?”

“You can read music?”
“A little, I played the French Horn in high school. Nothing since then, my twin can play all the low brass instruments.”

“Identical or Fraternal?”

“Identical, but we’re totally different people. She’s kind of a head case.”

“No one has a totally functional family do they?”

Instead of a response, it seemed that both of us became sad for a moment.

I got up and put her soaked sock and shoe on the radiator. She sipped her hot chocolate and used the spoon to play with the mini marshmallows in her mug.

“So what are you studying at NYU?”

“Human Osteology.”

“Bones, right? What do you do, like CSI type stuff?”

“Very Good,” she perked up a bit. “Some of it’s really cool; some of it’s terribly boring. For instance, right now I’m working on repatriating over four hundred Native American skulls.”

“That sounds cool.”

“Yeah, for the first few, and every once in a while I’ll get a syphilitic skull that’s been eaten away, but besides that it’s all cataloguing. Totally boring and tedious. Gross Anatomy on the other hand, elbow deep in a cadaver, pulling and holding the different organs. That’s the fun stuff. I did an internship at the city Medical Examiner’s office for a summer, that was really cool: real life situations not test dummies.”
I felt out of my league. It was then I wondered what she was even doing here. She was exciting, alive, and intelligent. She had a real future ahead of her, something I had not even considered. My future: uncertain was an understatement. Direction? Yeah, right. Goals and aspirations? A half complete sheet with one mediocre song. And yet, she was here.
Fat Cat bar down on Christopher, apparently I was supposed to like it. They had nightly jazz and table games. She was trying. It’s not that she didn’t like music. It was more indifference. Anything that was catchy, top forty or whatever was popular on the radio, was what she listened to. I tried to introduce her to some of the classics. She actually asked me if Thelonius Monk knew how to play the piano or if he was just mashing keys. *Summertime* belonged in an elevator. Brubeck put her to sleep. She didn’t mind Coletrane; *Giant Steps* was one she actually liked. I appreciated that. She wanted to engage me, involve me in her life. She thought if the music was right, I’d be comfortable.

We paid our cover charge and pushed our way past the bar. The space was huge, deceptive from the outside: a small unassuming chalkboard out front with a quarantined smoking section lined by a velvet rope. During the day one might have just walked on by. Nets were hung around the bar dividing seating areas from gaming ones. Ping-pong tables were set up around the room. Pool tables lined the back. Spread around were lounge chairs and small tables. People were playing scrabble, cards, and various board games. I noticed one group taking shots and playing Chutes and Ladders, whenever someone landed on a slide they
had to take a shot. An NYU bar, I heard passing conversations about "

socioeconomic discourse . . . class disparity . . . apartheid . . . epidemiology."

There was something strangely unsettling about two drunks arguing about child psychology while spilling tequila shots on Candyland.

"Isn't this place cool?" She asked.

I wasn't quite sure. Fun yes, cool, maybe.

She spotted a group of her friends. She started over, and I motioned that I was heading to the bar. I pushed passed the throng, got our drinks, and did the don't-spill-a-full-drink-through-a-crowd dance. I got back to the table and she was already involved in conversation. When she saw me, she made introductions around. The only name I actually remembered was a Tom. They were all obviously part of the same program and I was definitely lost; a broke musician amongst a group of geneticists, anthropologists, and future PhD students. These people had devoted their life to academics. According to them, there wasn't much money in it; they were in it for the science.

Having nothing to contribute to the conversation, I got up and attempted to take a walk around. The singer belted, the pianist pounded. An attempt at improvisation resulted in a cacophony, but the bassist just kept walking, almost as if he was playing his own song. He was great. I stopped drinking mid-sip. Camouflage shorts with striped socks up to his knees, a yellow shirt with graffiti written on the front, tattoos swirled up his dark skinned arm. He wore sunglasses
and his hair was shaved into a mohawk. Cool ... He was cool. His fingers walked up and down those strings, he was subtle and unassuming; the back bone of the trio. I closed my eyes and tuned them out. Him, just him... What does he hear? Who is he playing with? I looked closer and saw little yellow ear plugs.

"What's so funny?" Julia asked from behind.

"Nothing." I put my arm around her shoulders.

"Tell me," she persisted.

"The bass player."

"What about him?"

"He's not playing with the band." Her brow wrinkled in confusion. "Look closely," I pointed, "he's wearing ear plugs. He's on stage with them, but he's not playing with them."

"How can you tell?"

"Just listen."

"Sounds like noise to me."

"It is. Don't listen to them, listen to him." I positioned myself behind her and wrapped my arms around her waist. I nibbled her ear and whispered, "close your eyes, ignore them, listen for the lows, the soft strumming." I hummed almost a low growl, trying to match the pitch with my throat, to tune her ear.

“I can’t hear it, but I like this.” She swayed to her own rhythm and we danced a bit. “Listen, I’m sorry about them.”
“Who?”

“The others, I know you’re kind of an outsider and it’s hard being with people who all know each other and spend lots of time together.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it. They’re your friends.”

“Sort of. I mean I party with them and spend time at school but they’re more like acquaintances.”

I couldn’t stand the word. I thought of my brother. An acquaintance was so impersonal. Why even bother? I had lost most of my friends and it killed me. We were once happy, living where I live now. We were poor party kids, but we were friends living on part-time work and youthful energy. An acquaintance is an affront to a friend. They can be passed along and leave your life forever without a second thought.

We went back and sat with them. After a few minutes, a strange familiarity swept over me. I had been in situations like this many times before. The movements were erratic. Their conversation veered in many directions, totally unfocused. They were licking and chewing on their lips. I could see the telltale white crust gather in the corners of their mouths. It was then that I noticed the small jar being passed under the table. It was making its way around. Julia took the handoff and dumped a small mound of white powder onto the cleft of her hand between her thumb and forefinger. She scanned the room quickly before
sniffing. She pinched the ridge of her nose and a few tears seeped out. She passed the jar to me. “Be careful with that.” She warned.

“What is it?”

“Speed. Straight from the chemist. It’s good to know scientists. Actually the chemical composition isn’t that complex, the synthesis process …”

She was still talking. I hesitated. I knew this road. I knew where it led. In my drug-addled history, methamphetamine was definitely a regret. I became emaciated and gaunt. It was probably the only time in my life that I truly looked like a drug addict. We developed a serious habit perpetuated by a live-in dealer. It was a breaking point for my group of friends at the time. Before, it was always share and share alike, this drug brought about a new demon. One that was sitting atop my shoulder right now, and there was no angelic counterpart. Maybe just a taste… My hand trembled a little and the next person in the circle was eager for me to go. I saw him watching me, that familiar hunger. Even though it had probably only been a few minutes since his last hit, the desire was apparent; the way he licked his lips and shook his leg on the balls of his feet. He was next and the anticipation was momentous. His eyes were wide, watching every movement I made. I passed and felt a simultaneous pain and relief. I had to take a walk. I got up from the table again and made my way through the crowd. From behind, I could hear someone say “what’s with him?” I had to step outside.
I pushed my way up the stairs through the crowd of people and stepped out onto Christopher Street. I passed the entrance and lit a cigarette.

“Eddie.”

It was her but I kept walking.

“Hey…” She ran to catch up. “Wait. Are you ok?”

“I just need a minute. I’m fine.”

“We were just having a little fun. I mean you told me you did stuff like this before so I figured…”

“A little bit of fun turns into freebasing out of a light bulb, or are you all too smart for that to happen?”

“Ouch.”

“I’m sorry. If it had been anything else, maybe a little bit of coke or something, fine. I just… That stuff’s bad news. And if it’s all the same I think I’d rather go.”

“Seriously?”

I nodded and avoided eye contact. “Feel free to stay, but I can’t.”

She thought for a moment. “Let me get my bag and we’ll go. Ok?”
I wish I could say that our first real sexual encounter was violently passionate, but the truth was it was rather normal. We were still learning about each other’s bodies: where to touch and not touch, what to grab and what to spank, when to scratch and when to tickle. Anyone can repetitively pound away, knowing when to breathe in your partner’s ear, or when to pull their hair is an acquired skill.

She simply came out and asked. “Do you want to have sex?” It caught me off guard. In a way she took the mature approach. We were both past the coy games of teenagers. Sex was a normal part of life and adult relationships and why shouldn’t one express that desire openly. She had said it like we had been together for years.

I grabbed her hand and lead her to the bedroom. We quickly undressed and flopped onto the bed. She shivered audibly and nuzzled her head under my arm. We pulled the blanket over us. She drew her body close and moved her thigh between mine. I lifted one leg and hooked it almost around her hip. We lay intertwined and almost writhed against each other for warmth under the blanket. I
moved my hand along her rib cage and flattened my palm against her hip. I pulled her close[,] then gave a playful slap. She responded by lightly scratching my back.

We kissed lightly and the tips of our tongues swirled. I kissed the nape of her neck and her fingers ran through my hair. We rolled and she sat on top, curling her feel below my thighs. She grabbed me and guided me inside her. She winced in pain briefly and lowered herself. I started to move and she held me fast.

“It’s been a while, just let me get used to you.” Julia sat for a moment and adjusted on top of me. She swiveled her hips a little, slowly she began the rhythmic gliding up and down. “Ok,” she breathed in my ear. I matched her motions and rhythm as I thrush inside her. I grabbed her round bottom and we rocked and bucked. Our climaxes were almost simultaneous.

We moved in harmony.

Afterward, as we lied in bed staring at each other with knowing smirks, I remember thinking, “She could be it.”
The phone rang; it was Julia, “Eddie, can I store some skeletons at your place?”

“Wait…”

“Don’t worry, they’re in boxes.”

“Hold on…”

“Except Mr. Duck, he’s not…”

“Jules…”

“…Or is it a she?”

“Jules…”

“How can you tell if it’s a boy?” She wasn’t even listening.

“Stop.”

“What?” She asked innocently.

“You want to bring dead things into my apartment?” They were a part of her thesis research but still…

“Yes.”
“How many?”

“Five: a pig, a chipmunk, a cat, a human, and the duck.”

“Did you kill them?” I had to ask.

“No.”

“But the duck’s not in a box?”

“No.”

“What do you plan on doing with the duck?”

“Dinner?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “Then she needs to be macerated.”

“Needs to be what?”

The door buzzer rang.

“Is that you?”

“Maybe.”

I pressed the button.

“Open the door please,” I heard the echo in both speakers. I hung up the phone and spoke into the intercom “Do you need help?”

“Yes please.”

I put on some slippers and a shirt and walked down the two flights of stairs. I saw her through the window. She was wearing a green hoodie, a blue vest, an orange knit hat. Septum ring down, her brown hair curled to her shoulders. There was a stack of large plastic Tupperware at her feet, a big black
case next to her, and she was holding one of those roasted ducks you see in the windows of restaurants down in Chinatown. She was actually holding it by the neck.

“You know you could have gotten a bag for that.”

“And deprive you of an image like this, no way. Grab Phil, be careful he’s heavy. And expensive.”

“Phil?”

“Yeah, he’s in the black box.”

My closet was bigger than my kitchen. It was more of an alcove really. I had no formal eating table, barely any counter space, and just enough room to spin in a circle. I usually just ate sitting on the couch or floor at the coffee table. If I was cooking on the stove and turned around, I’d be in the sink. I couldn’t even open my oven all the way. The door would rest on the cabinet below the sink at an acute angle. Eating the duck turned out to be a disaster. We didn’t quite know how to prepare it. She needed most of it in tact so I couldn’t butcher it. We kind of just picked at it randomly like it was a chicken.

Once we were done, she started digging through my cabinets. “Do you have a giant pot? When you macerate something you place it in a water bath at a set temperature. It’s called putrefaction, the process basically forces decomposition, and all the tissue, cartilage, and unfused bones separate.”

I nodded dumbly.
“You have to literally scrape these things off the top. It’s a nasty foam. When it’s done you have, depending on the animal, a mostly whole clean skeleton. You do have to clean the grease off, but warm soap does the job. When it’s done it’ll look like those,” she motioned towards one of the closed plastic bins. I opened one and the skull of a cat hissed at me.

She filled the pot up in the sink and moved it over to the stove. “The problem is that it takes anywhere from one to three days. And it smells terrible. Maceration forces the rotting process…”

“Wait. So, this thing is going to rot in my apartment for two days? Why can’t you do it at your place?”

“I tried. It did not go well.”

“What happened?

“Someone called the police. The entire building was overwhelmed.” She lit the burner on the stove, and set it to a medium low setting. “People really thought someone died. When the cops showed up, they pounded on the door, expecting a dead body. What they got was me wearing goggles, a mask, a pair of yellow dishwashing gloves, and a plastic apron. I was in handcuffs before I knew it. I tried to explain, they had to call the head of the Osteology down to clarify the situation. I was almost kicked out of the building, they kind of frown on that stuff in student housing.”

“So what makes you think here will be ok?”
“I’ll tell the neighbors if you want,” she said, “there’s only, what, like three other apartments in the building. Plus, Pluck U downstairs already stinks like fried chicken, so it won’t be so out of place. And you’ve got a window in your kitchen;” she pointed, “we can set up an exhaust fan.”

I didn’t know what to say. I just let it happen. She was set up before I could protest any further. For a few hours, the smell wasn’t so bad. The spices on the roast duck made the apartment smell like a Thai stew. I went downstairs to pick up a few bottles of wine. According to her, we were going to be there for a while. She wouldn’t leave the duck alone in the apartment, and truthfully I didn’t want her to.

We got drunk and played with the skeleton. After the first bottle, she opened the black box. He was folded in half; metal screws and wires ran through the bones keeping him intact. She carefully pulled him out and did a little marionette dance with him. Half way through the second bottle, we started snapping pictures of him around the apartment. We sat him on the couch, crossed his leg over his knee, and set up the cat next to him: Death relaxing at home. We put him on the toilet reading a magazine. I sat him at the piano, tied strings to his wrists and made him play. Julia got into bed with him and folded his arms behind his head. “Hey look, I just got boned. Ha!” That one disturbed me, I pictured quick shuffling steps, clenched fists and the throbbing vein was no longer in his forehead.
After about four hours, the odor changed from sweet and spicy to noxious. She wasn’t bothered in the least by this. I couldn’t take it. I ripped down my plastic shower curtain and found a roll of duct tape. I covered the arch leading to the kitchen and taped the curtain to the wall. She thought it was a great idea. It helped for about an hour. We retreated back to the bedroom and shoved a towel under the door. It did nothing.

“We need to go.” I pleaded.

“What if something catches fire?” She asked.

“It’s on low and there’s nothing near it.”

“But gas could leak, or grease…”

“I don’t care; I just can’t stay in here anymore.”

“Do you smell smoke?”

“No, I smell death.”

“No really. Do you smell smoke?” She moved the towel and ran to the kitchen. She checked the burners, the cabinets, the alley in the back, even the refrigerator. Everything was exactly as we had left it a few hours ago. But she had that same wild look of sincere panic as when she thought her toes would fall off.

“Come on, we’ll just go to the bar downstairs.”

“But what if something happens?”

“It’s my place, so it’ll be my stuff that gets ruined.”

“But …”
“We’ll be right downstairs. You can be up here in a second to check on it if you really want.”

Next to Pluck U was a small dive bar called McCoy’s. The owners were a set of Irish twins, Ryan and Eamon McCoy. They looked like wild Vikings: flaming red beards, unkempt hair, and harsh undecipherable brogues. Once you had a few whiskeys or pints, either the accent softened or your ear adjusted, you could hold an actual conversation. I had been to Ireland a few times, and as coincidence would have it, our families were from the same counties of Donegal in northwestern Ireland.

They bought the place a year ago. Together they built the bar Eamon was a carpenter while Ryan handled the business aspect. They picked up used bar stools from the huge Salvation Army down on Forty-Seventh street, and hung a giant rectangular mirror behind the bar to create the illusion of space. Classic ads featuring Gilroy the Zoo-Keeper with the slogan “My Goodness My Guiness” and “Guiness for Stength” hung on the walls. Behind the bar, they had the standard low to middle brow spirits and three beers on tap: Guinness, Smithwick’s, and Pabst Blue Ribbon. If you wanted something else, you had to go somewhere else. There was one booth by the window next to the entrance. That was the smoking section. Even though smoking was newly-banned indoors, after nine p.m. they allowed it.
After the duck fiasco and two bottles of wine, we were ravenous. The McCoy’s had worked out a deal with the twenty-four hour Renaissance Diner a few doors down. The diner delivered bar food until last call: assorted appetizers, finger foods, burgers. The twins charged an extra dollar-fifty to eat it inside the bar. They provided business to the diner, and earned a little extra themselves. A heap of fried food, six more drinks, and a pack and a half of cigarettes later, we closed out the bar. I couldn’t have smelled anything if I wanted to, getting up the stairs to bed was hard enough. The last thing on my mind was the foul rotting fowl in my kitchen.
The next morning my phone went off at an ungodly hour. My father’s ringtone was “The Imperial March” from Star Wars, the menacing orchestral whenever Darth Vader walked into a room. It was a sure sign to hit the cancel button. Of course he was calling at six in the morning. He was probably on his third cup of coffee already. My mouth was dry, lips cracked, throat hoarse from too many cigarettes last night. I reached for the water on the bedside table. Then rolled back over and let it go to voicemail. He called back and Julia elbowed me. “Just pick it up.”

I groaned and rolled over. I hesitated for a moment before connecting. “Eddie?” There was a slight crack to his normally deep and powerful voice. “Yeah …” There was a strange pause; neither of us was too comfortable talking on the phone. But this awkward silence was different.

Julia poked me playfully and I swatted her hand away. I hadn’t meant for it to be a violent gesture, but she recoiled and went into the kitchen, staring me down the whole way.

I had barely spoken to my father in years, and now he was asking me to deliver my grandfather’s eulogy. It was strange to hear my father cry. He could
barely get the words out. It had been a long time since there was anything besides anger and disappointment in his voice. He didn’t have to explain. Despite our falling out, I knew how close he and my grandfather were. Whatever happened between us was now in the past.

I hung up the phone and rubbed my face with my hands. He had taken the first step. He was proud and stubborn man humbled but he even asked me to come home. It was the first time in a long time. I had to accept, partially out of respect for him, but more for my grandfather. A few tears seeped down my face. When was the last time I cried? I couldn’t even remember.

I got up, put on my robe, and went into the kitchen; she was leaning against the wall in the two-foot space between the refrigerator and the sink.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

“My grandfather died last night.”

“So… now what?”

I didn’t respond. I left and slammed the door behind me.

I wasn’t the only person in a bathrobe talking to themselves around Hell’s Kitchen early Sunday. That morning I was offered crack, a blowjob, and Jesus. Apparently I was wearing the crack head’s uniform. I probably could have used all three. However, my mind kept coming back to my grandfather. Like my father, it had been a while since we had spoken. Only it was more amicable. I found myself wandering uptown. In the span of ten blocks my attire went from quasi-
normal to totally out of place. As I passed Fifty-Seventh street, the stares and
muffled snickers increased. Women clutched their handbags tightly and people
crossed the street to avoid passing me by. I was thankful for the space, whatever
the reason.

I found myself turning east on Sixtieth street up towards Columbus Circle.
I wound up in front of the Porter House. Claire was outside; she took care of all
the purchase ordering for the restaurant. She was standing next to a delivery truck,
the back was open with a ramp that led to those cellar doors New Yorkers
persistently fear falling into. She was holding a clipboard, checking off the
delivered items. She saw me coming and glanced around nervously. She seemed
to be looking for an avenue of escape. I could see the futility and frustration on
her face. She did not want to deal with me. She never wanted to deal with me.

“No,” she said as I got closer. “Whatever it is, no.”

“Have you spoken to Tommy today?”

“I told you, no.”

“Is that a real no or a ‘just go away’ no.”

“A real no, I’m out the door at five in the morning, he was sleeping.”

“Do you have a phone?”

“No. And that’s the ‘go away’ no.”

“Give me the phone.”
“No, look at you. You look like shit.” She sighed and rolled her eyes.

“What else is new? You never could take care of yourself.”

“Just give me the phone,” I pleaded.

“No, go home, get cleaned up and use your own goddam phone.” She turned away and started counting bags of onions.

“Pop died last night.”

She paused, turned, and softened.

“Eddie, I’m sorry…” Just then an NYPD patrol car pulled up. One look at me and I’d have stopped me: blue raggedy bathrobe, open, exposing a pair of black mesh shorts and a dirty white tee, bedhead, and desperately in need of a shave. I looked down and realized I forgot to put on shoes before leaving. He could probably smell the hangover from inside his car. He got out and asked Claire if there was a problem. She looked at me for a moment. I could tell she was tempted. She sighed dejectedly, “No, he’s my brother-in-law.” She had never actually called me that before, always by name, never by family association. “I’ll bring him inside and get him cleaned up.” The officer took another look, nodded skeptically and got back into his car.

She led me to a booth in one of the back corners, “You want a drink?”

“I think I’m gonna puke.”

“Coffee it is.”
I felt out of place sitting in the empty restaurant, like a homeless man waiting for a hand out. I couldn’t afford to eat there. Claire came out of the kitchen with a pot of coffee, some checkered pants, a white chef’s coat, and a pair of Crocs. “Here, some spares,” she handed me the pile of clothes, “I can’t have you sitting in here looking like that. If any one of my bosses stops by…well, I don’t know what’ll happen, but I’m not willing to chance it. Go get changed in the bathroom. I’ll call Tommy.”

“No, let me. Please.”

The pants were too big, the coat too small, but at least the shoes fit. I had walked around Manhattan in bare feet for close to an hour and my soles were black. I could feel the little granules of dirt and debris scratch my feet, like putting shoes on after walking on the beach. I got back to the table and the coffee was steaming in a cup. Beside it were some pastries and a cell phone. I sat and dialed Tommy’s number. His voicemail picked up. “Hey, it’s me. I don’t know if you’ve talked to Dad yet today, but…” I paused. My throat trembled, my voice cracked. I sounded like my father. It scared me. “Pop…pop died last night. Dad called this morning…” A call-waiting beep chirped in my ear. I looked at the phone expecting to see Tommy’s name. It was Julia’s. “Um, yeah, he called me at like six this morning; don’t know if he called you. So if he calls, pick it up. You can try back, but I might not be here. I’ll call you later.” I hung up the phone and
sipped my coffee. It was delicious. Probably better than almost any coffee I ever
tasted. A moment later, the phone vibrated. She had left a voicemail.

I craned my neck to see where Claire was. She was back outside with the
delivery. I dialed the voice mail, the mechanical voice asked for a password. I
tried their wedding anniversary, wrong. Sean’s birthday, Ellie’s birthday,
Tommy’s birthday, all wrong. I looked at her out the window: uptight, rigid,
always thinks she’s right. She did help out, but more out of obligation. I smiled
and punched in her own birthday. It connected. I heard Julia on the other end, she
sounded a little frantic. “Claire, listen, I’m sorry, but I might be late today. I don’t
know if you spoke with Tommy, but their dad called this morning. Their
grandfather died. I think I said something that set Eddie off and he stormed out. I
don’t know when he’s coming back; I don’t even think he was wearing any shoes.
Anyway, he didn’t take his keys, so I’m gonna wait for him to come back. Call
me.” I hung up the phone. “Shit.” I had hoped to wait out the conversation. I
hoped she would leave and take that fucking duck with her. Now I had to go back.

I wadded my clothes in a ball and walked out. I thanked Claire and told
her I’d get the clothes back to her soon. Early on a Sunday morning, even in
Manhattan, things are relatively quiet. I walked around Columbus Circle a few
times working out the conversation in my head. At least she realized what set me
off. What kind of reaction was that? Even Claire, as coldhearted as she seemed,
understood the remorse involved with death. That was just so matter of fact, so
sudden. Yes, her life is death but still… We both danced with death last night, but this was personal.

“How high the moon …”

What am I gonna say? She knows she was wrong …

“… Is the name of this song . . .”

And that duck is still there. Rotting flesh, right when I walk in the door.

“… How high the moon, does it touch the stars?”

I have no choice, I have to get inside.

“How high, high, doo woo doo bee doo bee woo wee …”

And I’ve got to give the eulogy. What am I going to say?

“Baa baa booeee, mmm, ba doo waaeee”

That was Ella and Ellington live, the scat version.

“How high highhighhighhigh How high the moon, The darkest night would shine, If you would come to me soon, Until you will, how still my heart …”

I looked around. Where was it coming from? It echoed around the circle. I followed. She waited at the crosswalk next to the One Train station, just opposite Sixtieth Street. From behind, I could see her red hair sway as she sung. The bones in her spine protruded through the skin on her neck giving her a reptilian appearance. I touched her shoulder and she turned. She was young, not more than seventeen or eighteen. Her face was round, her eyes almond shaped. She
acknowledged me but kept humming. I motioned that I wanted to speak with her. She removed her headphones.

“Do you need a pianist?”

She blinked a few times. “Excuse me?”

It happened all the time. For a moment, I imagined me asking her this question barefoot in a bathrobe. “Pianist.” I enunciated very carefully and waggled my fingers in the air. “One who plays a piano. I heard you singing. Ella Fitzgerald, right?” She was cautious. I could tell that if the crosswalk was clear she would have gone. “You sounded great. Not many people even know what scat is anymore.”

“No, yes, and thanks.”

“Listen, I know it’s weird. But, I mean… I think you’ve got a great voice. I play the piano, you sing jazz and scat, if you don’t sing with anyone maybe we could get together.”

She was hesitant, but took my number anyway. She wouldn’t give me hers.

I walked home feeling a little bit better about myself. My finger hovered just above the button for a moment before I pushed it.

“It’s me.”

I walked up the stairs and she opened the door. “Eddie, I’m really sorry. I just…”
I walked in, “It’s ok. You didn’t know.” The duck was off the stove and set out on the counter drying on paper towels.

She was visibly upset about setting me off, “I just, I’m around death all the time. It doesn’t really faze me. Even my own family doesn’t really deal with death. My grandmother died during my undergrad midterms and my father told me not to bother coming home. We don’t really mourn.”

“It’s ok. It was just sudden, that’s all.” I sat down on the couch. “Listen the wake’s in a few days. I’ve got to head home. I’ll probably be there for the rest of the week. There are two services Wednesday and a church service Thursday morning.

“Do you want me to come?”

I had to think about it for a moment. Aside from Tommy, she’s never met the rest of the family. “If you want to come to the services on Thursday, that’s fine.” I didn’t know if she was ready for an Irish wake. I wasn’t sure I was. Is anyone?
When I was a teenager I had a shoplifting problem. Punishment didn't work; grounding and taking away privileges did nothing. A good old fashioned beat down had no effect either and I got my fair share. I probably deserved every whack with a fist, belt, or wooden spoon that I got. Both of my parents worked and I had a piece of shit car that could be unlocked and started with a flathead screwdriver. Even before the car, I’d walk or ride my bike wherever I wanted to go. After my fifth arrest in one year, a charge that now carried some weight adding possession of marijuana to the list, my parents were at their wits end. Our family lived in the county for some time, and my parents had a few strings they could pull. Luckily, I was only 16 and the crimes were petty enough.

The summer was approaching and my parents feared leaving me alone all day. At least during the school year they could account for my whereabouts for a portion of the day. So they arranged to send me to Ireland with my grandfather for the summer. I don't know whether or not he knew what he was getting into, but he
agreed. I resisted, there was no way I wanted to spend my summer with my
grandfather. My parents packed my bags, shoved me into the car, and practically
dragged me to the terminal.

The flight was spent in relative silence. I pretended we were strangers and
he played along. Rusty Nail (Scotch and Drambuie) in hand, he made
conversation with the people around him like he knew them. I absorbed myself in
Gameboy games, fantasy novels, and kept the volume of my Walkman cassette
player at 10. I stepped off the plane and we immediately got onto a bus: a five-
hour bus ride to nowhere after a six hour flight. To make things worse was about
an hour into the trip the batteries to all my electronics died.

I was forced to look out the bus window and listen to my grandfather chat
up everyone around him. I don’t think I ever saw him smile and laugh so often.
He was embarrassingly friendly. My forehead rattled against the window as I
stared out into space. Pastures lined up one after another. Cows and sheep dotted
the hilled landscape. I felt a little motion sick, rising and falling, hill after hill.
Over the next mound a thatch-roofed cottage came into view. A sliver of smoke
rose from a stovepipe chimney and border collies scampered around. I couldn’t
believe people still lived like that. Where was I? When was I? A moment later my
grandfather pointed to a sign no bigger than a man’s arm, a sign that could have
easily been missed. The way pointed to Narin.
The bus let us off at the top of the hill overlooking the small coastal village. He pointed out various cottages, stores, and pubs. They all looked they were built by Thomas Kinkade. Quaint would be an excellent way to describe them. The ocean mist that enveloped the town created a dreamlike sedation. The scent of barnacles and brine hung heavy. The lapping waves kept time, a perpetual metronome. Pointing to fishing boats and orange lobster pot buoys along the coastline, he told me people still turned to the sea to catch their dinner. There were no billboards, no commercial presence; no McDonald’s, no convenience stores, no GAP, no Pepsi signs, no neon lights, no traffic lights. I clutched my skateboard tight as I realized that the road unpaved.

A bit off the coast was a little island. He told me that when the tide went out, a sandbar appeared leading to this island called Inniskeel which was uninhabited. You could walk along the sand, no more than a mile of two from end to end, right off the coast. If you timed the tide just right, you could walk on water. Even from a distance, I could make out old castles and ruins there; stone walls, miraculously are still standing after a thousand years. The whole scene was picturesque, beautiful. And I didn’t want to be there.

A creeping suspicion about my parent’s motives came to mind. For the first time, this trip felt like a punishment. They had been here before. A first look, there was nothing. And since there was nothing here, how could I cause any trouble? They were right, for about a week. I sulked and was bored. A priest he
knew growing up owned the house we stayed in. It didn't even have a TV. It had a bunch of old Elvis Presley records that I listened to over and over for a few days. My search for a bit of Americana, a taste of home, a bit of the risqué in a house filled with religious iconography. The novelty wore off and I was forced to venture outside and wander a town so far off the map from anything. Luckily, I did have family there, two boys only a year older than I, Ronin and Kevin. Awkward adolescent greetings aside, we became fast friends.

There was plenty to do; I just didn't know where to look. I had a brief tryst with a number of the local girls before finally getting caught. I got absolutely steamed a number of times, once so bad that I puked all over the bathroom floor and passed out cuddling up to the bath mat. My grandfather cleaned me up and dragged me to bed. I smoked hash with a boy from London and pumped twenty pence coins into the only two arcade games hidden in the back of the fish and chip shop, Maggie’s, the closest thing to fast food for miles. I had my first Guinness, which looked delicious, but tasted awful. The sixteen-year-old palate used to watered down Bud-Light was no match for real beer. Sacrilegiously, I abandoned it, leaving three-quarters of the drink left in the glass. I learned that the “Beware of Bull” sign on Inniskeel was not a joke.

I also thought I fell in love for the first time. She was a gypsy girl whose family had made camp near the beach. Every summer a group of caravans made their way to Narin’s coast. Strangely enough, I befriended her father first. Along
the only road in and out was Annora’s Pub, the sole inn and restaurant. The ceiling was low and the smell of burning bog turf warmed a room that reminded me of a hobbit hole. He sat along the back wall, beneath a display of nautical knots, strumming a bodhrán, a small Celtic hand drum, alternating between a brush and tiny drumstick. I watched him play for a bit before going over to ask about the instrument I had never seen before. He bought me a Guinness, (which I choked down a bit more prepared this time) and introduced me to his daughter. Her name now escapes me, but I can still picture her curly blonde hair, petite frame, and green eyes. I'd sneak out of the house and visit her tent late at night. We’d talk and kiss until the hint of dawn showed on the horizon. Then I walked dreamily back to the house and climbed in through my bedroom window.

About two weeks into the trip by grandfather rented me a bicycle to get around. I broke it within a week. The gypsy girl and I were racing around the campsite. We took off in opposite directions of a circle. When we came around, both of us too fast, we collided resulting in bruises, scrapes, a bent frame, and a warped front tire. This made the bike impossible to ride, even almost impossible to push. I walked the bike back to the house, set it in the back room, and left it for the remainder of the trip. I never told my grandfather. He tried to return it, not knowing it was broken. Out of all the things I had done, this made him the angriest. The drunkenness and the late nights he could chalk up to immaturity.
This made him look like a fool in front of someone he had known his entire life, but he never yelled. He took me out golfing that same day.

On rainy days we were forced to stay indoors and talk. By this time, I didn’t even miss television. We drank tea and he told me stories of growing up in Narin. He told me of his own drunken nights and brawls, of his own exploits with local women, the trouble he had caused, of the hardships faced by Ireland the few years before World War II, one of the reasons why he came to America. As a child his family lived and served one of the local land owners, in this way they escaped famine and depression.

When the weather cleared, he showed me places from his stories. Next to the house were the remnants of his original butcher shop. It was maybe twelve feet square. The roof had collapsed, and only three of the four walls remained. Above the doorway were faint black letters: Carey’s Cuts. After spending all morning elbow deep in sheep and cow carcasses, he packed up his wares and delivered them, door to door, on the back of his bicycle. We jumped off the pier into the ocean. Imagine my surprise, a seventy-year-old swan dive. The North Atlantic, even in the summer, is freezing. I hopped out as soon as I jumped in. He laughed, called me a little girl, and backstroked ashore. He told me that he had been diving off that pier since it was built when he was six.

Sitting on the shore, me shivering, him laughing, I asked why no one lived on Inniskeel. Instead of giving me an answer, he told me to follow him. We
walked along the sandbar to the island. From the island, I looked ashore and realized for the first time the place was beautiful. He called for me to catch up; I turned around and watched him spryly hop barefoot along the coastal rocks. I had to laugh, I never would have thought.

I caught up with him standing among some sheep grazing; together we walked for a few minutes before arriving at a graveyard. Some tombstones had crumbled and eroded into rubble, others bore the names of the family who still live in Narin. As he spoke, a kind of far-away look came to his eyes, as if he wasn’t speaking to me, but rather to the ghosts around us, affirming that our name lived on.

He pointed to a number of graves that bore our name. He connected our lineage, those old stones . . . to me. He told me that for a thousand years this place was a medieval ecclesiastic site, set up as a monastery in the sixth century. People would pilgrimage and pray the station in honor of Saint Connell, a clergyman who took part in a miracle involving the decapitated body of Saint Dallan whose head, once found, miraculously reattached to his body. The ruins of two churches built in the twelfth century were scattered about. Stone crosses with interlacing Celtic design and graves, some in decipherable, could be dated back to the eighth or ninth century. We moved along the dead, attempting to read the weathered writing. I inquired about the skull and crossbones etched into a number
of the graves. It was the mark of the black plague. He told me this place was
never for the living.

We lay down on Saint Connell’s bed, an enormous cairn and watched the
sun set. Maybe it was seeing him in his element; a place where everybody knew
him. Maybe it was that he became another man, he wasn't Pop. He was Tommy
Thomas. Maybe it was the legacy. All I did know was that the trip changed me.

11

Something strange happened at work that night. I noticed a woman,
maybe seventy years old, with a short blonde bouffant. She sat at a booth against
the wall in the back. She wore a red dress that dipped into a shallow ‘V’ showing
just a little bit of cleavage. Pinned to her breast was a gold and emerald broach
that twinkled as she moved. She was ticking the end of a maraschino cherry with
her tongue. Her painted red lips spread and she plucked the cherry off its stem.
Her laugh reminded me of the bleating of a lamb and she slapped the table in her
hysterics. I could see her make-up caked on thick. It didn’t matter. She was
beautiful and I played for her.

She smiled and spoke to her party while rubbing the rim of her glass with
her index finger. It was like she was hypnotizing herself. She gave me an idea. I
picked up the tempo and played something a bit more lighthearted. She tapped a
painted fingernail on the table and drew little invisible designs. Others followed, the room became awash with color and light and sound. Glasses clinked and the buzz of conversation filled the room. Cedric looked younger; there was a noticeable pep in his step. He seemed busier than he had been in a long time. After the rush I had chance to sit at the bar and have a drink. Cedric was grinning from ear to ear.

“What’s new kid?”

“Nothing really,” I responded.

“Got to be something. This place hasn’t jumped like that in a long time. You get laid or something?”

“Something.” I blushed and he knew the truth.

“You happy?”

“I think so.” I was thrown by the question. It had been a long time since I thought about my own happiness. I was at the point where I realized doing years of drugs may have made me feel good but that didn’t necessarily mean I was happy. Did I finally deserve to be happy? Would I allow myself this without screwing it up at the last minute like I always do?

“Who is she?”

“Julia. I met her at one of my brother’s parties.”

“Oh yeah?” he asked skeptically.
“It’s not like that. She’s smart. Probably the smartest person I’ve ever met.”

“So what’s she doing with you?”

“That’s just it, I don’t know. She’s science smart. Like CSI, Medical Examiner smart.”

He laughed, “Whatever it is, it’s working. What was that you were playing?”

“Dunno, just in the moment.”

“That wasn’t improv. That was something else. Who were you playing for?”

“Huh?”

“When you play and you have someone in mind it always comes out better. Lose the selfishness and play for someone else. That’s the secret of dedications, always have someone in mind.”

“Her.” I pointed to the woman in the booth.

“Who?” He looked, “Ms. Patti? Oh, she was fine lookin’ in her day. She used to drive a school bus for years. Why her?”

“Dunno. She caught my eye. She seemed down and bored, so I picked her up.”

“Now you’re learning. That’s how to reach an audience. They don’t want the music to mimic their feelings. The total opposite in fact. Music is an escape.”
The blues tells us we’re not alone. Even then, no one wants to wallow for too long. We listen and play and adapt. Play only what you want and no one cares. Play only what they want and you’re a sellout. The tune needs to fit the time. Even if you hit the sweet spot for one person, it can change their whole night. Hell, their whole life.”

A slap on the back made me spill my drink a little.

“Damn kid, you’re a pain in the ass, but you got this place jumping tonight.” Phil sucked his teeth and tousled my hair. I pictured him disarticulated and folded up in a black box. “Next round’s on me.”

They were all on him. He did a little dance as he walked away towards the exit. I had to laugh.

“You learned something important tonight kid. Don’t let it go to waste.”
The wake, as it should have been, was a somber event. Bouquets of flowers surrounded the casket. He was skinny. He had survived a bout with leukemia, but the chemo took a real toll on his once powerful frame. It wasn’t the cancer that he succumbed to. His body just broke down from age. All I could think about were his hands. Large and calloused, even at ninety they were impervious to nicks or cuts. His arm hair grew to almost his knuckles. They looked out of place, almost comical. His body looked weak, thin, his face, gaunt, and stretched. His lips were thin, and there was the strange sheen of mortuary makeup. He barely looked like himself. But his hands…His hands told his story. The gripped each other over his lap tight and firm. Those hands had cracked ribs, built homes and stone walls, scythed fields of grass. They reminded me that some things never really die.

My grandmother looked frailer than ever. She too was a cancer survivor. About ten years ago she had a mastectomy. They had fought so hard for so long.
Now her body was giving out. It would only be another month or so before she passed. My father was leading her with his elbow. Everyone looked around for my aunt. She wasn’t there. Whispers filled the room. She had a drinking problem. We all had a drinking problem, but her liver was in decline. Her doctors told her that if she didn’t quit, the liver would fail. And they don’t give transplant donations to alcoholics. My father was the only member left of his immediate family by the end of that year. The services were a blur. I probably shook a hundred hands with no names or faces attached.

The next day was the requiem mass. It had been a long time since I stepped foot in a church. I had put religion on hold for a while. Until then, I never really gave it much thought. Sure, I was raised loosely Catholic. I went to Sunday school. We attended church on major holidays and every other Sunday, but life also got in the way. My parents knew that, so religion wasn’t really a priority. I felt selfish, thinking about acknowledging God only in a time of need. They rebuilt the church in the decade since I had been there. It was a whole new building. The classic high steeple and chapel building had been replaced by a squat octagonal shaped structure with a huge bell in the center. It reminded me of an old time circus tent

Right outside the door a bronze statue of Saint Augustine sat pensively as if awaiting the congregation. The hearse backed up to a halt. Once the door opened, the bagpiper began *Flowers of the Forest*. The sons and grandsons were
the pallbearers. We pulled out the coffin and gripped the handlebars. The casket was heavy to be sure, but he was lighter than I expected. We laid him on the metallic roller and wheeled him in the door.

At the entrance, the priest halted us. He laid a ceremonial garb embossed with a golden cross over the casket. He made the sign of the cross and cast holy water over all of us. A few drops got on my face and I didn’t dare wipe them. I faced with a strange nostalgia standing there, like facing a childhood bully/friend twenty years later. You want to be happy to see them, but a part of you wants to run and hide.

To my left, they had put in a large baptismal pool the size of a small Jacuzzi; the pews angled to form a semi-circle around the stop sign shaped room. The altar and tabernacle were straight ahead down the aisle. Behind that and off to the side was a huge ornate, probably restored, pipe organ. On each wall were two huge baroque stained glass windows depicting the Stations of the Cross. The priest motioned us forward and I gripped the handle aside the casket. We rolled him to the front of the congregation and took our seats in the front row.

My palms were sweaty. To many of these people, the ones I hadn’t seen in a while, I was sort of the black sheep, the runt. My father, brother, and all my cousins were well over six feet tall, massive men (except Tommy, he was lanky), with strong brows and tight jaws. Their hands and fists were bear claws and crushed mine with every shake. They were firefighters, police officers, and three
generations of butchers. I went dancing and played the piano. But there was no way my father could speak, he could barely keep himself together, and I don’t know why he didn’t ask Tommy. So it came to me, the first born son of the first born son.

When it was my turn, I walked up to the podium and unfolded the speech tucked away in my breast pocket. It was church, so I thought a call and response would be appropriate, the priest do it all the time. I told my siblings about my plan before so they knew what was coming. My first words asked everyone to give the appropriate response. Murmurs of confusion rippled through the congregation.

“’ello…” I imitated my grandfather. Almost seventy years in the United States and he never lost his brogue. But they all knew the voice. They responded with a simple ‘hello’

“’ow we doin’? . . .”

“Alright, and you?”

“’angin in there . . .” I hoped I could give everyone just one more moment, one more chance to hear his voice. I remember making my Grandmother laugh at her husband’s funeral. All my nerves calmed, I could have sat down after that and it would have been enough.

“This was a greeting we all knew and loved.” We had a very open door policy in our homes. The doors were never locked. People never bothered to knock or ring a bell; they just walked in and loudly announced themselves.
“For me, I heard this every Saturday morning; like clockwork. He brought table scraps and huge bones for the dog. He would sit down to sausage, eggs, and tea with my father. The two would talk for hours. As a child, time is something you take for granted. Back then, I couldn’t wait to leave the table for Saturday morning cartoons. But as I got older, I stayed. I joined some of those conversations. He continued his Saturday morning visits continued long after I had moved out of the house. It’s only as an adult I realize the influence he had on me. He was a reliable, consistent, and good-hearted part of my life. I’m sure he the same for all of you.”

As I read my hands shook, but my voice was clear.

“The tradition of an open door policy, of giving respite, and, in a way, asylum was built along with their house. With people in and out it was like playing “musical chairs” with all the vehicles in the driveway. Almost every one of the grandchildren learned the basics of driving pulling in and out of that driveway. As early as eight, he’d sit us on his lap in the driver’s seat of his old powder blue work truck. He would explain how to use the mirrors and keep the wheel still as we backed up the treacherous stucco lined walls. One wrong move and any of us could have seriously scratched the whole side of the truck, or any of the cars we moved. Once we had the basics (and could reach the pedals) it was our job to sort of valet the cars.” I could tell I was hitting familiar notes. I played to the audience; I could see heads nodding as they recalled similar memories.
“He constantly put us all to work, and as a kid it was probably one of the worst things ever; as an adult I realize that everyone had a role to play, and whatever they could do to help would be done. It was more than that though; Pop was big on the ‘learn by doing’ philosophy. We were all his little apprentices, we just didn’t know it. His house next door was the bane of the grandkids’ existence. After the neighbors moved out, he bought the property next door and began building. It was actually my parents’ first apartment during the first year or two of my life. Pop was either working…or he was working.” Another laugh.

“We’d be sent over for menial jobs: picking up sticks in the yard, searching the interior for any dropped screws, or holding a flashlight so he could get into tight spaces to work. We’d run through the skeleton of the house, between the framing, until the telltale whistle signaled for us to get back to work. It was also the first time I held a screwdriver. It was where I learned how to hammer a nail, how to use a saw, how to change an electrical outlet, how to measure.

Pop was born on October seventh, 1920 in County Donegal, Ireland to Thomas and Anne Carey. He was the youngest of his siblings, two brothers: Barney and Edward and two sisters: Eileen and Gertie. I’m sure many of you can picture him mowing his lawn or shoveling his driveway after a snowstorm. He always stubbornly refused to have anyone do it for him. When he was a young man back in Ireland he ran a butcher’s shop. And after spending all day with
cattle and sheep, he packed up his bicycle and delivered meat to the rest of the town. He was well known and loved all throughout Narin.

Pop decided to leave Ireland in 1944 at the age of twenty-five. He eventually moved to the Bronx and married my grandmother Patricia. Together, they had two children, my father, Ed, and my aunt, Maureen. In 1960 the family bought a small plot of land and moved upstate; to build the Colonial Drive house many of us know so well.”

Whenever I complained about being put to work, my father would tell me that he did the exact same thing.

“Pop continued butchering, became a meat manager, and eventually a Union Representative. He finally retired in 1985. Although he loved America and the family and friends he surrounded himself with, a piece of his heart never left Narin back in Donegal. He travelled back annually to see family and visit the place he also called home. He shared that experience with many of us here. Bringing us back with him, telling us stories of life growing up there, introducing us to family that, if not for him, we might never have known. Even after so many years in America it was easy to see he was well loved there. There’s something humbling about seeing and experiencing your heritage firsthand. Comfort is found in the familial bonds that remained strong even across 3000 miles of ocean. I know everyone in Ireland sends their condolences and wishes they could be here.”
“His memory lives on in spirit and in name. It’s become a bit of a joke that it’s hard to keep track of all the Toms and Eds. Back in Ireland he was known as Tommy’s Thomas. So when my dad was born, he became Tommy Thomas’ son Edward Thomas. That would make me Tommy Thomas’ son Eddie’s son Edward Thomas. My Brother: Thomas. My Uncle, Pop’s nephew: Thomas and his first born son: Thomas; the third: Edward. There is a reason for the namesake tradition: To revere, to acknowledge, to express a high regard for, and to attest to the influence and worth of another. But above all else, to remember. To remember that in some way, in name and deed, through loyalty and love, hardship and heartbreak he has touched our lives and hearts in ways we will never forget.”

I folded the paper back up and stepped down. As I walked back to the pew, I saw a look of pride in my father’s eyes. I couldn’t remember ever seeing that look on his face. At the commencement of the services, the priest announced that there would be no burial. He wished to be cremated. That was news to me, but I could think of only one place he would want his ashes strewn: Inniskeel.
The party after the funeral was at my Uncle Tom’s house. The males in my family have two names: Edward and Thomas. I’ve got both. There are a few Kevins and Patricks floating around. There’s even a Barney, but overall, Edward and Thomas are dominant. This becomes difficult when trying to carve out an individual identity, especially when there are six other Edward Careys in the room. We developed our own way of distinguishing and keeping track. My father was Big Ed, I was Eddie, and my cousins became the possessive of their father: Uncle Tommy’s Eddie.

We walked around back and everything was in full swing. People were broken off into factions around the yard. The older generation claimed the deck near the kitchen. The kids ran around the back yard playing tag or kicking around a ball. Those of us in the middle milled about the patio near the in-ground pool.
Two kegs were already gone by the time we arrived. There were two more to go. A bagpiper, fiddler and a bodhrán drummer set themselves up on the corner of the patio. The drinks flowed and bottles of whiskey were passed around. We drank and sung, we drank and cried. The bodhrán was the heartbeat of the party. Its tempo increased and I became anxious. The slow bleat of the bagpipe filling with air made my fists clench. The fiddle made my feet twitch.

I found my brother and caught him with a right hook under his left eye. Tommy was tall and lean; to give him distance was a mistake. I was shorter, stockier, broader. I didn't have his reach, which worked to my advantage. At the end of that reach was my father's fist, a massive paw, clenched, like a swinging mace. You had to get inside on Tommy. He didn't have a wide body, but enough that a rib-shot left him breathless. Up close his long arms couldn't gain momentum. But if you gave him the distance, he'd put you out in a second. I caught him under the chin. He stepped back; I was relentless. Step in, step in, step in. A jab to the nose drew blood. Step in. His elbow caught me on the jaw. I stumbled just enough. His fist came down hard. I tasted blood and saw it splatter on the sidewalk. I knew the left wasn’t far behind. He loosened a tooth. I caught him in the gut. His forehead slammed down on my brow. Blood seeped into my eye. We stepped back and squared off.

The music intensified, this was as much a traditional Irish dance as any choreographed. We danced this dance a thousand times. I heard my family
laughing. Not at us, but at some story or joke told a hundred times before. Eddie and Tommy were fighting. We've been fighting for hundreds of years. We fought in stables. We fought on dirt roads. We fought on the hills and pastures. We pounded away at each other through eternity.

We were ten years old again: "You started it."

"Did not!"

His eye was swelling. Another right, in the same spot.

Twelve: “You crashed my bike!”

Again. The skin under his left eye spilt and blood trickled down his cheek.

His eye was swelling shut.

Sixteen: “Really, a yo-yo, are you an idiot?

I almost blocked a left hook, but he caught me in the ear. It disoriented me, made me dizzy.

Nineteen: “Don’t even think about dropping out.”

A jab hit me in the forehead.

Twenty two: “Happy Birthday!”

Perfect choreography, two lefts landed.

Twenty six: "Your wife's a bitch."

We were tired boxers, leaning on each other for support.

"I know," he breathed getting in one last body shot.
We heaved, we laughed, we winced and laughed more. Someone handed us a bottle of whiskey. I rinsed my mouth and spit. The burn was soothing. I took another swig and handed it to my brother; he did likewise. We sat on together on the diving board, sharing the bottle.

"I think I'm gonna need stitches," I laughed, tenderly touching my brow. I lit a cigarette and handed it to him.

"Feel better?" He asked.

"Yeah." He took a long drag and played with the smoke a little.

"Something’s been building, don’t know what. I’ve been feeling…a little bland. Like I’m half asleep." I took a swig from the bottle and passed it over.

"When was the last time we had it out like that."

"Christmas."

"Oh yeah, you had that shiner for the New Year’s party. What was that over again?"

"Sweet Potatoes."

"Yams."

We looked at each other and smiled. That was exactly how it began. The truth was that there was always some underlying factor to our bouts. Sometimes the real reasons had nothing to do with either one of us. Tommy almost lost his job right before Christmas. He worked for the United Food and Commercial Workers as a Union Representative. He mainly focused on arbitration and
mediation. He, like my father and grandfather, started working in the meat
department as a butcher. It was later that he took a job with the Union. He spent
most of his time dealing with idiots who steal, cheat, and lie. Even though he was
supposed to defend the workers, many of the people lacked any common sense
and were usually caught red handed trying to take advantage of a system designed
to help them in the first place.

He spent most of his time on the road driving between supermarkets in
Westchester and the Bronx. Every few years his job was in jeopardy. A Union
representative is essentially an elected position. It’s always a stressful time. It
seemed he walked more picket lines during an election year than any other.

Some people punched a pillow or a wall. We punched each other. Neither
of us asked for reasons, there was no need.

One of my cousins came over, “Eddie I think some chick’s looking for
you.”

We looked at each other.

“Yeah she’s going around looking for Edward Carey.”

“Well he’s about to be buried. And my father is inside.” I responded.

“No, I think she means you, I think she said something about…”

“Eddie.” We all turned to look. “There you are. Do you know how many
Eddie and Tommys are oh my god what happened to your face?”

We laughed.
“Oh my god, seriously, you’re bleeding.”

We laughed harder.

“Oh my god, you too,” she said pointing to Tommy, “your eye is swollen shut.”

We almost cried.

“it’s but a flesh wound.” I shouted.

“I can still bite your ankles off.” Tommy responded.

“What is wrong with you two?” She dug through her purse and pulled out some tissues. “You’re gonna need stiches.” She said as she dabbed my brow.

“How’d you get here?” I asked.

“Claire brought me.”

“Hey Tommy,” I shouted, “your wife’s here, the party’s over.” Four Thomass frowned, six Eddies laughed, and two Tommys looked around nervously, except the one sitting next to me.

“Very funny.”

“Jesus,” I jumped, “you’re like a vampire. I wasn’t talking about you Claire; I was talking about Tommy over there.”

“And what sound should I make.”

Tommy let out a high pitched squeal “Ni!”

“What?”

“As long as you bring us a shrubbery.” I mocked.
“And a nice one too.” Tommy responded.

“What are you two talking about?”

“But not too expensive.”

“Your mother was a hamster and your father smelled of elderberries.”

“Excuse me?” Claire was utterly confused. She hated it when we spoke in movie quotes.

“I fart in your general direction.”

“Claire, what’s wrong with them?” Julia asked.

“Nothing, they’re just retarded.”

My laughing subsided and I wiped away a tear. “Oh Claire, why do you hate me?”

“Really? You have to ask? Look at you two, peas in a fucked up pod. If it wasn’t for me, he’d be like you.”

“Claire…” Julia laid her hand on Claire’s shoulder in an attempt to stop her.

She brushed Julia off “No, we’re doing this. You have no idea. You see this mess? They did it to themselves. You just haven’t been around long enough to know it. Get ready; this is the family you’re getting yourselves into.”

Tommy stood up, “Claire, relax, you need to cool off a little. Have a drink…”
“I don’t want a drink, I drove here and I’m gonna have to drive our assed home.”

“We are home,” I said.

“You know what I mean.” She scowled at me.

Then Tommy did something completely out of character. He pushed her into the pool and cannonballed in after her. He always defended her, always was a bit submissive. He knew her anger could have made the pool boil, but he did it anyway. She came up swinging. “You asshole.”

Tommy let out a harsh whisper, “Cool off. You do realize what happened to this family right? It’s lost its patriarch.”

Patriarch… What an appropriate word. I never really thought of my grandfather that way. He was actively involved in all our lives. He came over every Saturday morning, like clockwork. He even brought table scraps for the dog. Every Saturday … For as long as I can remember … I looked around the party, counted at least six Edwards, not including myself. It had always been a joke, but behind every joke…

“You’re making a scene”

“I’m making a scene? I’m not the one fist fighting in the back yard.”

Someone shouted, “Eddie and Tommy are fighting!” The piper picked up. We all looked up to the deck and sure enough, our father, Big Ed, had our Uncle
Tom held against the railing. He got in a quick jab to the face before Uncle Tom heaved in the opposite direction and we could no longer see them.

My brother and I smiled, Claire frowned, and poor Julia just looked lost and scared.

“This is the family you got yourself into.”

“There ya’ar dearies,” came a high-pitched brogue. Everyone loved Aunt Sarah. She was Pop’s cousin. A massive woman, at least six foot two, with a short dark red hair. She could drink with the worst of us, brawl with the best of us, and always had a joke or a smart remark. Once in a subway station someone tried to steal her purse. She chased the man down, knocked him over the head and sat on him until the police arrived. She had been a nurse during World War II, but the only action she really saw was during the bombings of Dublin by the Germans in 1941. It was action enough, but she never left the country during the war. When she was in her cups, she’d retell the stories, continually enhancing her heroism. I think by now she carries three bodies on her back at a time, which was not wholly unbelievable given her stature.

“Tommy boy, get up here,” she reach out her hand. Tommy grabbed it and she effortlessly hoisted him out of the pool. She had a bag with her, which she reached into. She pulled out a T-bone steak and slapped it to Tommy’s eye.

“Here, when you’re done with that, give it to Kevin to throw on the grill.” She turned towards Claire, “Here, lass, let’s get you outta there.” She pulled her out
more delicately than my brother. Again, she reached into her bag and pulled out a towel and wrapped it around Claire. “Inside, third room to your right. Look through the dresser to get some dry clothes. Off ya’ go now.” She gave Claire a little nudge. We were all eight years old again. Claire even took tiny shuffling steps like a little girl.

“And you…” She shook her head at me and knelt down to look at my eye. “What’re we ta do with you?” She looked at my eye closer, “For Christ’sake, ya’ need ta be sown up now. Can see right through to the bone.”

Julia got in for a closer look. “It’s the super orbital margin of the frontal bone. Not far from zygomatic process. That could have been trouble.”


“Smart lass, hold on to this one Eddie m’boy. Give me that.” She took the bottle of whiskey and poured it in her hands, rubbing them together briskly. She told me to close my eye, and disinfected the wound.

She gave the bottle back and I took another swig.

“Better take one more m’boy. This’ll sting. Here lass, hold here.” She pinched the skin of my brow together and took one of Julia’s free hands. “Hold tight.” Julia looked into my eyes as she pinched my brow together. I couldn’t tell if she was disappointed, confused, or angry. Sarah reached into her bag and pulled out a small suturing needle and some thread. She pushed the needle
through my brow, looped around a few times, and tied off the knot. “It’ll hold for now, but you should see a real doctor.”

“You’ll be in sorry shape tomorrow boyo.” The tussle on the deck sounded like it was calming down. “At least you won’t be alone,” she sighed. She gave me a little slap on the opposite side of my face and pointed to Julia, “You take care of her now, you hear. And sober up.”

After a few minutes, I walked towards the deck and up the stairs. My father was sitting on one of the patio chairs. We nodded to each other and I sat down next to him; each of us nursed a wound and a beer. Despite our ideological differences, I was just like him. We had similar body types: short legs, long torsos, and stocky. Only he was a full head taller than I was. We made the same grunting noises when sitting or standing. We had the exact same violent sneeze that shook our bodies and sprayed spit everywhere. When we got upset, our brows furrowed the same way creating deep creases in our foreheads. We walked alike, we laughed alike, even had similar signatures when writing. The idea of becoming my father, as much as I fought it, I couldn’t help acknowledge that I had become what I had once resented.

After a minute or two he broke the silence. “It was the nicest death I think I’ve ever seen.” His crystal blue eyes stared off into space, I wasn’t even sure he was talking to me. “We went to the hospital the last night. He knew he was going. He told me … he told me that family was what is important. To not hold a grudge
… To forgive you guys. After that, he slept and didn’t speak again. I thought that was it, you know? But he held on for a few more hours. The Yankee game was on and we brought some of his favorite Irish cassettes. It was eerie: the Yankees won and the tape clicked to a halt; he took his last breath and was gone.”

Just then Julia came walking up the steps. I introduced her to my father and she took a seat beside me. She held my hand and was almost chipper as they went through the rudimentary small talk. Julia could talk to anyone. It didn’t matter where or when. She always fit in with any conversation and always ended up the center of attention. It was never planned that way; there were never any selfish intentions. She was herself and people gravitated towards that. It was funny; she was a terrible conversationalist. She swore and mispronounced words, even made up her own words because, in her head, that was what she had defined. Weird freestyling portmanteaus combined with her own grammatical rules. She’d ask herself questions and answer them. She’d smoke and pick her nose in front of anyone, babies and old people included. She had no shame and no filter. And people loved it.

“So, Eddie tells me you’re a butcher.”

My father nodded and sipped his beer.

“Can you get me a goat head?”

He was stunned for a moment and actually thought about it.

“Yeah, I can do that.” He responded nonchalantly.
“I know it’s a little weird . . .”

In any other context this might be ...

“I really want something with horns. I don’t have anything with horns.”

... the weirdest...

“You need an older male then. The meat isn’t too good but if it’s just the skull ...”

... conversation...

“If possible a fresh kill though, recently decapitated.”

... ever.

“That shouldn’t be too much of a problem. When do you want to pick it up?”

I sat between two butchers.

While I may not have ever entered the trade, I still have a fair amount of experience with a blade. A whole section of kitchen drawers was dedicated to my father’s collection of knives: curved scimitar carving knives, spits, spikes, and bleeders, massive wooded handled cleavers, miniature hacksaws, grisly looking hooks, some with handles others meant to be hung, delicate filleting knives, tournes, sheep’s feet, clip points, slicers, boners, oysters, peelers.

A number of these were handed down from my grandfather. They had tarnished flats, but the blade was always sharp; their handled worn and eroded into handprints from their bear grip. They didn’t really make knives like that
anymore. These weren’t the tools of a chef. These were meant to maim and dismember, to slash, gut, chop, and bleed out. Yet they took as much finesse to wield. They were clearly dangerous, but from a young age I was taught to respect the blade. The minute you didn’t was when you lost a finger.

They hit it off fantastically. He was even smiling.

After a while, Julia got up and offered to get us drinks. We sat in silence for a minute before he asked, “Where’d you meet her?”

“Tommy’s New Year’s party. She works with Claire.”

“At the restaurant?”

“Yup.”

He turned to me, “So how are you?”

I still could barely look him in the eyes, but I knew he was sincere. “I’m alright. Work was slow for a while, but it picked up a bit recently.”

“Good.” He wanted more.

“And I met her and I guess it’s going pretty well so far.”

“Good.” He was a man of few words.

We sat awkwardly, shifting in our seats. He was trying to reconnect. The problem was we both felt like we had nothing in common. Our conversations were usually exercises in redundancy. We didn’t reminisce or crack jokes with each other. Despite years of separation, we were stuck in the same rut. I wasn’t going to tell him the truth about what I’d done. Despite our similar mannerisms
and obvious relation, we were strangers. In a way, it was good. Neither of us wanted to be our past selves at the moment.

“He wanted his ashes spread back in Ireland.”

“Inniskeel?”

“You knew?”

“I knew. As soon as the priest said Pop wouldn’t be buried, I knew.”

“Will you come?”

“Dad …”

“I’ll pay for the tickets, and we’ll stay at Ann’s”

“When are you going?”

“Don’t know.”

“Gram.”

He sighed, “Yeah.”

“How is she?”

“Not good. Doctors say it’s coming. Could be five days, could be five months.”

“She’s lost a lot of weight.”

“I know. She can’t take care of herself anymore. I finally hired a hospice nurse.”

“And you don’t want to go and not be here if …”

He nodded.
“What about Aunt Maureen?”

“What about her?” He growled and his brow deepened. I knew this tone; I knew I had to tread lightly.

“Is she around?” A generic question… At least I thought so.

“You know what? Fuck her.”

“Dad . . .”

“No, fuck her. She missed the wake last night. And the other day I caught her digging through your grandmother’s jewelry.”

“Maybe she was looking for something.”

“Something she could sell. She’s a selfish bitch.” He grit his teeth and spoke through his moustache. I could see the muscles in his hand grip the arms of the chair. He looked like he was ready to snap them off. “She’s going to fucking die too. A husband and two boys . . . Not because she’s sick, because she’s selfish.”

I tried to calm him down. “You don’t know that . . .”

He pointed a plump finger in my face, “No, you don’t know. Where have you been? Off dancing in la-la land.” I felt like he was going to bash my face in.

He was right. I had not realized how much time actually passed. I missed the past few years of my family’s life. I ran away thinking time would stand still.

He calmed a little and looked at me. I could tell he was thinking about the last words from his father. He was trying, but it was hard for him.
“Just let me know when you’re planning to go and I’ll be there,” I promised.

“I have a bunch of things to settle here first. It’ll probably be in a few months.”

“Is Tommy coming?”

“I haven’t asked him yet, but I don’t think he’ll have a problem with it.”

“What about Tara?”

“Is she still with that nigger?”

“Dad …”

“What? He’s a nigger. He knocked up your sister and treats her like shit. He’s a nigger.”

“Dad, stop.”

“No, why should I?”

And we were having such a nice moment.

“Because of your grandson.”
Women love to ask difficult questions: “What was the worst thing you’ve ever done?” Exactly what I couldn’t share with anyone else.

They all knew. Every single person . . . I was more nervous than I had ever been. Yet, I was here by choice, sort of. There was something instinctively wrong. I knew it; they knew it, an imaginary line I was in the process of crossing. The woman behind the counter of the CVS Pharmacy handed me a packet of ten 1cc syringes along with a suspicious glare. I was no diabetic. These weren’t for my daily insulin injections.

Given the dubious reputation of Hell’s Kitchen, she probably shouldn’t have been surprised. The since renamed Clinton neighborhood has certainly seen its fair share of junkies and prostitutes. The Methadone clinic on Fiftieth street and Ninth Avenue was a testament to the pre-Giuliani years of New York City: the once seedy Times Square, before the M&M’s and Disney store takeover. This probably wasn’t her first time selling syringes to a skinny, unkempt, and scraggly young man. Yet that didn’t stop the judgment in her eyes. It was nothing to how I
was feeling about myself at the moment. My hand trembled as I handed her a ten-
dollar bill. I didn’t even wait for the change.

Drugs were always recreational with my group of friends. However, this was
something else: a new low for a new high. Ingesting and snorting never really
posed much of a moral dilemma. Needles on the other hand … needles scared me.
My only consolation, if it could be called that, was that I knew they were clean.

Every step weighed me down. Every crinkle of plastic and paper in my pocket
forced me to face the reality of what I was about to do.

I was sent out by default. I had no money to contribute, so I was assigned
the embarrassing task of getting the syringes. If I had it, I would have easily
thrown in the sixty dollars to avoid this trip. This also meant I could still back out.
I would have lost nothing. As I stood at the corner of Fifty-First and Ninth I
considered just that, I could hop a cab and never come back; I could lie and say
they didn’t have any. I was dizzy and nauseous, but I had already taken the first
step, the hardest step. Behind closed doors it’s easy to dismiss your own vices.
They suddenly become harrowing once public.

I could feel them anticipating me behind the door. I was about to cross the
threshold. I entered and there was a fire in all their eyes. A hunger I had never
noticed. There was always a “share and share alike” mentality in the apartment. A
joint could be passed; a line could be cut and drawn while still being fair. The
syringe is selfish. It measures with accuracy. It is solitary, a single serving.

What’s mine is mine, and no one else’s. “It wasn’t H” was the justification we all told ourselves. Yet we all knew we were in unfamiliar territory.

Ketamine, in its uncooked form, is a pharmaceutical tranquilizer that comes in little rubber-stopped bottles. You plunge the needle through the stopper and extract the liquid with the syringe. We had seen it done hundreds of times by T.V. doctors. Usually, the apartment was boisterous, music blasting around the clock, multiple conversations going on at once, groups of friends stopped by all the time. It was a twenty-four hour party. Today, it was silent.

I tore open the package and handed out the needles. One by one we extracted our own. No one and everyone wanted to be first. We agreed it would be better if we shot each other up. We all looked at each other awkwardly ashamed and paired off; Anthony and Amy, Derek and Alexis, Errol and I. Anna watched with disgust, but was too curious to actually leave the room. Timing was critical; no one wanted to be stabbed with a syringe by someone who is in the process of losing consciousness. We all went at once. The needle pierced the skin of my shoulder so easily. It was painless. I couldn’t help but watch. I was disgusted but could not turn away.

My heart felt like it was going to explode. My hand shook. My palms were sweaty. I had to calm myself; Errol was next. I wiped his arm with a little alcohol
pad and squeezed the skin. I hesitated for a moment, stuck him, and slowly pressed down on the plunger. I was glad I was with him. We had both expressed our reservations about using needles. We were both perfectly happy blowing lines of K. Yet, we were out voted, and he had actually paid. We both waited. And waited . . . And waited . . . And nothing . . . Nothing . . . Usually Ketamine literally knocked you out. We took a walk. We didn’t say a word to each other, there was no need.

I would like to think that I don’t know why I did it. I tried to come up with justifications. Sure, I was young. But I wasn’t that young. I wasn’t uneducated; I knew the consequences. I could chalk it up to an experimental phase, but looking back one answer kept coming up: that was how badly I wanted to get high. We even tried it again, just the two of us; just to be sure we didn’t get a bad hit, to make sure we weren’t cheated in some way. Again, nothing . . . The friendships in the apartment soon fell apart after that. The syringe is selfish, solitary. And that’s what we became. We destroyed each other through jealousy, greed, and addiction. Everyone except Errol and I. After that second time, we vowed, never again. And we never did.
“Who’s Amy Clark?” She was digging through the stack of unopened mail.

“Technically, the family who owns the apartment. She’s a friend. She moved out to travel. I think she ended up in Brazil.”

“You know this is a summons, right?”

“I don’t know where she is. Or her sister or family for that matter. They may come back so I’m holding on to the stuff that looks important.”

“Not the point, why is she getting a summons to housing court?” She opened the letter and read it. “This is in response to an eviction notice. Did you get an eviction notice?”

“Not that I know of.”

“What do you mean ‘not that I know of’, how do you not know if you’re being evicted?” She began digging through the stacks of unopened mail. “Her name is on everything, except the utility bills. Eddie, what’s going on?”

I closed the book I was reading and sat up. “It’s because we all were the previous tenants, they all moved out and I stayed.”
“Which means everything should have been transferred over into your name, right?”

I looked away.

“Right?” She asked sternly.

“Well …”

She narrowed her eyes, “How much do you pay in rent?”

“About that …”

“What about that?”

“I don’t really.”

“Don’t really what? Pay rent?”

Silence …

“How are you even living here? Shouldn’t the cops be beating down the door or something.”

“Not if no one calls them.”

Again, not the point. Are you allowed to be here?

“Sort of.”

“What do you mean sort of, either you are or you aren’t.”

Technically, I was squatting. I had been a tenant; I just no longer paid any rent. The apartment belonged to two sisters, Amy and Anna Clark. They had inherited it from their parents. I didn’t really know why the parents were no longer in the picture. The girls had come to New York to be ballet dancers. They
were successful for a while, Amy took up modeling and Anna continued to dance. Somewhere along the line, their parents moved out and the girls stayed. It was definitely illegal; Anna was in her last two years of high school when I lived there. Maybe Amy was her guardian. She left not long after her graduation. The parents paid the bills and we paid Amy and Anna. It was a nice set up. It allowed us the freedom from contracts, legalities, and landlords. As a result, friends and new roommates were in and out all the time. In general, we all had three major things in common: Music, Dance, and the fact that we had all dropped out of something; a collective failure so to speak. With the exception of Anna, no one that lived there actually accomplished the things they set out to do. It was an escape for most of us, a way for us to run away from reality. Apparently, reality had caught up with me.

“Everyone pretty much left after last summer. I stayed.”

“Everyone?”

“Yeah, there were five of us: Amy and Anna were in the back room where we are, Errol and I were in the side room. And Derek slept on the couch.”

“You had a guy on the couch.”

“Yeah, he didn’t mind, he paid less rent than the rest of us.” I got up, “Come, follow me.” I walked her slowly through the railroad apartment starting with the front that faced Ninth Ave. “The couch was turned this way into the corner. I got rid of the pullout portion to make some room for the piano. It’s
probably half the size it was.” This couch that fed us with loose change, you could
scrounge enough to go across the street and grab a bacon egg and cheese. We
would dig through the folds and find random drugs all the time: little jars of K,
small bags of weed, anything that slipped from the pockets of unconscious guests
as they slept.

We had so many people in and out all the time. It was a rave cave. We just
called them parties. That’s what they were: massive parties, electronic music
festivals, raves. Whatever they were referred to: music, dancing and drugs, that’s
what mattered. It didn’t matter where or when. The clock on the wall was a
decoration, none of us really kept time. We never really had to. There was awake,
asleep, and the altered state in between. People would come back on and with
any number of drugs to crash or tweak out. We had big thick curtains that blotted
out any light, and while New York is extremely tolerant of the inebriated,
wandering the streets on a head full of acid at four or five in the morning invited
trouble. It was a “safe” place for people to go after being out all night long.

I walked down the hall touching the walls with my fingertips. “These used
to be covered in graffiti, like a giant canvas. I painted over them, but if you look
close you can make out some of the spray paint beneath.”

I showed her to the end of the hall. As we reached the corner of the hall I
traced out a giant face, well, a half of a face really. The corner of the wall ended
so only half the face was there. A perplexed look was in the large eye. Its nappy
hair shaved into a Mohawk. A moustache shaded his upper lip and he had a
goatee on his chin. There was a word bubble, much like the one in comic books,
which simply stated “Huh?” It was one of Errol’s self-portraits. Various sized
faces could be found in random places around the apartment: under the sink in the
kitchen, on the ceiling above the shower, behind the roll of toilet paper. He found
it funny that people were forced to look at his face while sitting on the toilet.
Graffiti artists use tags like a calling card: a symbol, a picture, or a stencil. Errol
used his face. He’d draw them on Hello, my name is… name tags and plaster them
all over the city. It was easier, less time consuming, and safer than actually spray
painting the walls
    “We had two cats.”
    “I knew it! I could tell there were cats here. I’m always itchy when I go
into that room.”
    “Boy Kitty and Girl Kitty.”
    “Seriously?”
    “Yup, both cats were identical. People usually asked if it was the boy or
girl they were petting instead of their actual names. Boy Kitty and Girl Kitty just
stuck.”
    “Eventually we drew on them and gave them distinguishing marks.”
    “You drew on them.”
    “They were completely white, and we were on lots of drugs.”
“Girl Kitty was usually painted pink or orange. Some girly association and Boy were usually blue, purple or green.”

“You’re serious aren’t you?”

It had never occurred to me in all those years that we were doing anything bizarre or wrong. The strange behavior was attached to the complete freedom. Give a group money, drugs, and no real consequences and some unusual circumstances arise. It was only after everyone left and I had to venture out into the real world that any eccentricity became apparent. While our clothing, huge baggy pants, candy bracelets, made from with various plastic colored beads, up to our elbows, and graffiti stenciled t-shirts were absolutely acceptable for an all-night drug and dance party, to the rest of the world we were a bunch of freaks.

I opened the door to the smaller bedroom. The loft area was still intact. Errol had built a single bed and the equivalent size of a night table into the loft. You could still make out the cat scratches up and down the ladder.

“There were two of you in here? There’s barely enough room for the two of us. How did two guys share this?”

“The beds were sort of bunked. His was directly below mine. There was enough room above for a small T.V. and a lamp. We shared the closet and most of our clothes for that matter. We didn’t really spend much time in here. We were either out or out there in the living room. We came in her to sleep…for the most part.”
“For the most part?”

“Strange things happened when people are on drugs. Let’s just say I’m glad my bed wasn’t so easy to get to.”

“Ewww. Seriously?”

“We ran the gamut of the drug experience. Hallucinogens, ecstasy, angel dust, cocaine, ketamine, crystal meth. You name it we tried it, everything pretty much short of heroin. I can only speak for myself on that one.”

“How did you all pay for this?”

“We stole. A lot … Like I said, we really didn’t worry about rent. Drugs were more important than food. You know the basement door on the first floor? That’s Pluck U’s storeroom. The first door on the ground level, on the right, that’s an entrance to their kitchen. They used to drop off the deliveries in the hall right there. We’d steal tons of food: ten pound bags of fries and onion rings, cases of soda, anything we could get our hands on. We’d steal from the bodegas and supermarkets, from clothing and hardware stores. All of it added up, and if we didn’t have to pay for that stuff, we could spend our money on drugs.”

We were good too. The key to thievery is to know the tells and subtle nuances of behavior: ticks, eye movement, the direction people were facing. We make predictions based on behaviors. We were aware and observant. Any skilled card player can tell you it’s not simply the cards you are dealt that lead to a winning hand, but the ability to judge your opponent. Even if you have a good
hand, based on what you see in them, it may be a good idea to fold. If you went in with a partner that could draw attention, then the odds are most likely in your favor. I was a white guy with a group of black friends. Who do you think most store clerks followed? I already had a history of stealing; only now I had a “team.” We’d stakeout places, know the right times to go, which stores had the worst employees. All security cameras had a blind spot. A crowd was always our friend. Half the reason so many people get away with so much in New York City was the sheer capacity of people. The New York attitude helped tremendously. We have seen it all, and most of us, done it all. Many, if not most people, simply don’t care. Almost nothing surprised New Yorkers.

“So everyone just up and left, no one told anyone or anything? I find that hard to believe.”

“Why?”

“People don’t just do things like that, do they?”

“People aren’t supposed to paint their cats either but it happened. We went our separate ways. Everyone had a different reason. Errol went home to Westchester to do construction with his father; he failed out of SVA, and had to work off the debt. Sort of like me, except he went home to face his parents. Anna graduated high school and spent the summer in South Africa with one of her friends. She came home for a few weeks to collect her stuff and then went back. Amy always had this romantic notion about Brazil. For that past few years she
became really involved in Capoeira. She saw the opportunity and ran with it.

Derek, he kind of fell off the map. I don’t really know what happened to him.”

“So what’s your reason for staying?”

I knew what she meant, but I gave her the answer she didn’t want to hear.

“Because it’s a free place to stay. It’s not my name on the lease. I pay the utilities
so I don’t freeze or starve. Ever wonder why I have no T.V.? Cable is just another
expense. She knew she was going to leave the country, who’s going to follow?
Her parents would just break a lease, no real penalty there. Maybe a fine.” I
shrugged. “She knew I didn’t really have a plan, so she said to try and ride it out
as long as I could.”

“These are all just rationalized excuses. I still think you’re not telling me
the whole story.”

“Why not? Is it so hard to believe that someone would just up and leave
their life to start over?

“So why are you still here?”

“There’s no way I can afford this by myself.”

“What if I moved in?”

I couldn’t believe she actually asked me that. It had only really been a few
months.

That was moving a little too fast. Yes, I pretty much almost stalked the
girl. But moving in? It was then that I realized how little I actually knew about
Julia. A few months’ worth really… I knew about her present. Nothing, except she has a twin, about her past. Nothing truly intimate …

“Rent is around $2200, probably even more now.”

It shouldn’t matter, should it? One month, one year if the person is right, the amount of time really shouldn’t matter. She could flip the crazy switch; I saw it a few times before with the frozen feet and she definitely had a thing about fire. What was I afraid of?

“Holy shit, seriously?”

“It’s a two bedroom in Manhattan. On Ninth Avenue and Fifty First Street. I’m surprised it was even that low to begin with.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Nothing. Stay as long as possible.”

“How could you do nothing?”

“What can I do?”

“You have to leave. You could get in some serious trouble.”

“Not really actually, I’ve done a little research. I have a key, so it’s not breaking and entering. The neighbors all know me as a tenant so it’s not really suspicious. I pay utilities so I do have some tenants’ rights, they can’t just come and kick me out. Changing the locks is illegal, and unless the Clarks say I have to leave, I don’t really have to. It’s a civil matter, so the cops are kind of powerless. I
have to be brought to court and even then, I get a moderate amount of time, maybe a few months. ”

“I can’t believe you! Why are you doing this? What are you running away from? Why do you have this constant desire to self-destruct? You can’t follow through with anything. You just roll over and let whatever happens happen.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

“What’s the harm in looking?”