

# OUTLANDISH NEW WAYS TO PUNISH STRANGERS

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Smashwords Edition

*to mare,*

*promises, promises*

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*The Gravedigger Tales*

a brief prologue  
EARLY MORNING EYES

An old man mouths the word “walk” to his wife as they leave the restaurant. It’s a question. She doesn’t particularly want to walk home but a suggestion of romance, a caress of her hips, and she narrows her eyes in hesitant agreement. It’s June. With twilight came a light breeze. The streets are quiet, peaceful. They walk leisurely, hands swinging together, fingers lazily entwined.

He takes his hand away to motion at a bright yellow awning hanging over a nearby deli. He signs to her, his thin fingers elaborating on the color yellow. He’s been noticing it more often – yellow seems to be the new color for the city of Philadelphia. His wife smiles and they stop for a single car to pass. He uses the delay as an excuse to brush aside the thin black strap of her dress and kiss the nape of her neck. She smells pinot noir on his breath.

They don’t kiss but smile, the car long passed.

“You need to take it easier on him,” she signs, bringing up an earlier conversation about their oldest son.

“He can be great,” he signs back, stubborn as always.

Her head turns to check the traffic. Her eyes catch his, look past to see no cars coming, then return. He’s staring at her. It’s a familiar look, sort of a sleepy adoration. She sees it occasionally, mainly in the morning. The old man likes to dress by his side of the bed, quietly watching his beautiful wife breathe in and out, watching the covers rise and fall as she sleeps. He knows some mornings she’s awake since her breathing is less

shallow but he lets her pretend all the same. (She doesn't know why she pretends to sleep some mornings.) It's a routine they've had for nearly three decades. And every morning before he leaves for work, he leans in, gently kissing her cheek with adoration in his early morning eyes.

That's the look she sees on the street corner.

He leans in and pecks her lips – quick, soft – and they begin their walk again. As the old man takes a step, and another, the next step finds only air. His foot reaches out expecting solid ground—it finds nothing except darkness, vicious and abrupt...

...there's a scarlet blade...

...grabbing, yanking, pulling...

...the sound of feet running in the distance.

He wakes on his stomach, gasping, his body crumpled against the pavement. His back feels warm, his nose full of dirt. She's there, too, so close...so close he can almost touch her. She's on her back, her head toward his, her docile eyes toward his. The ambulance...well, he can hear it in the distance but her breathing is shallow – incredibly so – and worse with each passing moment.

With the last of his strength he crawls on his belly toward her, only a foot or two but excruciating. He fights very hard. He just wants to touch her, he needs to, to touch her skin and know that she's there, one more time, to...to feel her again, to just – to lie by the side of his wife.

"Don't, please," he begs, gasping in a short breath, stifling back an angry sob.

Her chest lifts, lowers, and he looks into her eyes. She finds him once more in that last second...and then, well, her eyes become tranquil – so calm – and they look right through him.

The little strength left in his body conjures a mad howl – blood around his lips, down his cheek – and he reaches out expecting her outstretched arm to reach back. Of course, she doesn't reach back, and he sobs until his own breath grows shallow, and his

own pleas are but a whisper. As the old man calms, growing tranquil himself, he wraps his hand around hers, tucks each of his fingers between each of hers.

“You’re pretending,” he murmurs, barely audible.

He’s speaking of the mornings she pretends to sleep while he dresses.

The old man takes a final breath and lays back, exhausted.

His fingers loosen.

His body relaxes.

And then the old man...well, his eyes settle their gaze on the yellow of a dandelion growing through the brick sidewalk.

## the gravedigger tales

### THE COWBOY IN JAKE'S BAR

I haven't slept in days.

The wood bar stretches the length of the place, starting next to the entrance and ending against the back wall. There's a shuffleboard table across from it, a wall of neon beer advertisements above. On a Tuesday night, the place is occupied more by the lingering scent of stale cigarettes than people, though two young men occupy a table near the jukebox. I sit on a stool two seats from the only other patron. He's an older gentleman, salt and pepper hair, a thin, grayish beard, worn, dirty red, flannel shirt, and tight black jeans coated with dirt. He looks grizzled, a face for a hacksaw instead of a razor. His narrow eyes seldom look left or right, his chin low, his brow lower. On his head rests an old-brimmed Australian hat like a crown; it looks as if it had been worn down a hundred years, like he's an old gunslinger, a tired man, a private hero of a private war.

The bartender brings me a 6 oz. draft. I drink the mug, set it down, and motion for another. This continues for several minutes, the only lapse of beer to my lips due to the bartender's two-step and the drip-drizzle of the tap. He grows annoyed that his attention has been occupied solely by me and moves on, passing the cowboy like he doesn't exist. The grizzled man's eyes lift from his drink as the bartender passes in front of him. He looks at the bartender, back at his drink, then over at me.

"If'n you wan' call me some'in, go on an' call me the gravediggah," he announces, returning to hunch over his drink.

I look around.

Apparently he's talking to me.

My eyes blink slow, dazed. The skin around them is purple and bagged, and the skin of my face has taken on the sheen of plastic. It's hard to focus on anything, and in my peripheral are constant glitches of black (like the flickering edges of an old movie on a projector).

"What?" I spit; it's not my intention to be rude, but just holding my head up is a bit of a task. I should be overjoyed that I'm near home, that the job is done, the task carried out to a bloody T, but I'm not. I'm not happy or sad or angry; it's a placid feeling that fills my stomach alongside the beer. It's a...an absence, a void.

Glitch glitch.

"Why's that?" I ask when the old man doesn't respond.

His cold brown eyes narrow at me.

"You special, son?" he asks, grimly. "I berry thuh ded."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I dig 'bout three, fo' hours, an' I set up. An' then I wait. I wait for the nex' grave needed diggin'," the cowboy says, leaning over as he speaks. His voice is low and I can't place it. He could be southern, he could be mildly handicap – I don't know. I'm not ever sure he's real, as I've been hallucinating lately. But he goes on to tell me that he likes to dig graves. It's the only thing he's ever done. The only job he ever had. The "only thin' I bin good at."

"How long have you been doing it?"

"Too long. I don't rightly know."

"What's the worst part?"

I had assumed digging would be the worst part.

“Them...smaller graves. For kids. Knowin’ that, one a’ them young’uns passed on. That an’ that ev’ry shovel full a’ dirt tells me I’m old. Soon I’m a’ be someone’s shovel full a’ dirt. Just don know.”

The bartender serves me another.

“Just passin’ through,” I answer when the Gravedigger asks where I’m from, not realizing it doesn’t answer his question. When the bartender nods at what I say and ignores the Gravedigger a second time, I’m forced to ask:

“Are you real?”

Our conversation trudges in and out of four stories – the caffeine junkie in West Virginia, the porn star in Florida, a brief interlude about Japanese prison guards, and the Gravedigger’s wife in New Orleans (I exclude the tale of the blackjack dealer in North Carolina and omit the end of the caffeine junkie) – and all of it starts with his answer to my question:

“I don’t rightly know.”

Silence.

“Fair enough,” I respond.



## THE CAFFEINE JUNKIE

*A few days earlier, in Huntington, West Virginia, a young man had been walking down the street. He had close-cropped hair was styled and gelled up in typical fashion. His shirt was a boring plaid, the collar up. His jeans had the holes and paint smears already imprinted; an extra twenty dollars for spontaneity. Even his step was lame, stiff. His smile, forgettable.*

*My heart didn't beat faster as I saw him approach.*

*My palms didn't sweat.*

*Breathing remained normal.*

*He disappeared into a coffee shop named The Bohemian Bean. It was mid-day but the street was empty. There was an alleyway to the side but I didn't plan on using it – I didn't want this to be private. I didn't want someone to find him after everything was over – I wanted witnesses. I wanted it to be public.*

*I wanted this to be seen.*

*And so I approached The Bohemian Bean.*

*"I didn't know if he'd remember my face," I tell the Gravedigger. "We'd only met a few times. I remembered his face but I didn't know if he'd remember mine."*

*He walked out and passed me and didn't look up, didn't try to meet my eyes; I had a feeling he wouldn't. And he walked toward me, closer...*

*Closer...*

*It was a familiar feeling, walking the sidewalk toward a man I wanted to murder.*

*Closer...*

*"Fuck," I sigh, "I wanted to. I wanted to smash his face in. He needed to be bloodied up a bit. But it was stupid."*

*"What'd hittin' him 'ave solved?" the Gravedigger responds.*

*"Nothing. But it sure made me feel great."*

*"You hit 'em?"*

*"Yeah, later. Can't have witnesses. I just waited until dark..."*

Three steps and a handrail led to the only red door on the block. It was also the only place that didn't have its porch light on since I had broken the bulb.

It was dark.

He wouldn't see me coming.

*"But it was stupid, ya said so yerself."*

It was trash night, black bags lining the street on either side.

*"Yeah. Stupid to do it in public."*

I didn't feel the need to hide. I waited on the edge of the sidewalk one house down. It wasn't much past ten when he finally appeared. Upturned collar, stiff walk, forgettable smile. I didn't move, patiently waiting.

*"So you beat up an uns'spectin' man?"*

He had another coffee, juggling it between hands as searched for his key. Found it. Up one stair. Two. Three. Stuck the key in the lock. Twisting it must have been the last thing he remembered.

*"Goddamn right I beat him up."*

One quick rap to the back of his head and he began to fall... I didn't want to risk the chance that he was a black belt in Judo. His body hit the door and—the coffee exploded in a cyclone of caramel colors—I pulled him back down his three stairs. The cardboard cup landed on the stoop with a hollow *tink-tink*. The young man fell to the trash bags in front of his house, not quite conscious, disoriented, confused; then I used my hands. I wanted to feel bones crack, blood splatter. I was going to murder him directly in front of his unlit porch and red door. Let him die in those douche bag clothes. Leave him in trash.

When I stopped, a single drop of his blood trickled down my cheek like a tear.

I should have left but I didn't. Three extra minutes I stayed. Three minutes I sat on his stoop and caught my breath. Three minutes I thought about whether or not to kill him, finish him – he wasn't dead, just unconscious. Hurt, but not seriously. Three minutes of pros and cons. The only pro was emotion – one reason, and a thousand ways. I wanted to kill him simply because I wanted him dead—well, more accurately, I didn't want him alive. The cons were all logic, evidence and motive and probability.

Three minutes passed.

He wasn't dead. I didn't like knowing he was alive.

By the end of three minutes I had decided he would live and I left him there and drove for Raleigh, North Carolina to meet a man they called Blackjack.

## A SMALL TABLE

I buy a pitcher and bring it over to the small table. The gravedigger waits, sullen. He always appears sullen and I don't expect he has any other appearance. I fill my glass and take a seat. When I offer him some, he covers the mouth of his mug with a weathered hand. A haze grows in the bar, one like a thin mist rising with my blood-alcohol level. Glitch glitch – the flicks and flashes in my peripheral have developed into static bursts, my eyes the receiver from a poor antennae. I've grown to ignore them, as my days often follow sleepless nights. Sometimes the bits of delirium cause a jolt, an involuntary startle as though waking from a nightmare, but I've learned to manage that, too.

“So why'd ya travel to beat some'un a couple hundred miles from here? Ain't it fine enough he don't live near you?” the gravedigger asks.

“It's a long story. One I'm not fond of telling.”

“Involves a girl, huh.”

“Yeah. It involves a girl.”

We both look to our glass mugs and a moment of silence follows. It's comfortable, familiar. We're mourning, both of us in our own private memories – wisps of women, of love and pain and regret – each memory dissipating like smoke when you reach out to grab it and hold it.

“I didn't travel a couple hundred miles just to beat this guy up,” I say in a defiant tone. “I was on my way elsewhere and this guy happened to be on the way. If he wanted to vanish, he should've gone farther.”

The gravedigger eyes me square, blinks, inhales, and looks off. I get the distinct feeling he's just summed me up in that brief stare, got a bit out of me that I didn't know myself, and now he's ready to move on in the conversation.

"What?" I ask him.

He lets out a grizzled old sigh.

"Feel bettah after doin' it?"

I shrug.

"One thin' about revenge – it ain't got an endin', kid. It's a dirt road with a God'amn dead end. You ain't gonna get there, believe me."

"Okay."

"Yeah, okay," he scoffs, dismissing me for dismissing him. "Know best, do ya? Where were you headed, if'n you weren't just to beat this gentleman?"

"I was going to see my brother in Florida."

"Good? Bad?" he doesn't specify but he's asking about our relationship.

"Strained..."

\* \* \*

"Hello?"

"David?"

"Yeah. Who's this?"

"It's me—it's your brother."

"Lee?"

"Yeah."

"Holy shit... It's uh...it's been a while."

*"Are you still in Florida?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"How long has it been?"*

*"Uh, almost six years. I think."*

*"No, I meant since the last time we talked."*

*"Oh. I don't know – not since the funeral. Almost two years?"*

*"I'm going to be in your area tomorrow..."*

*"Oh yeah? What are you doing down here?"*

*"...visiting you? I don't really have any other reason. Is that..."*

*"Um... Sure? Yeah, I mean, sure. Come up. It's been so long—what am I doing? Of course. I'd love to see my big brother. Get down here. I'll show you around – it'll be awesome. How have you been?"*

*"Good. I'll talk to you tomorrow when I get there."*

*"Oh. That quick, huh?"*

## RAIN & RAINBOW

Lakeland, Florida was incredibly bright – too bright. The sun glared off everything, even surfaces that had no right to reflect. And there were people, a lot of people: walking dogs, jogging, couples holding hands. If ever there were two things I didn't want to deal with, it was an excessive amount of people and sunlight – especially on the day I arrived at my brother's house. (*The night before, I had been standing naked on the side of a deserted road in Raleigh, North Carolina – not two miles from Blackjack's house – while my blood-soaked clothes burned in a pile on the ground, along with the plastic that had covered the interior of my truck. I dressed to a symphony of wet crackling as the blood boiled.*)

I pulled up to my brother's address and waited, bracing myself: I prepared myself to see my brother, whom I hadn't seen in years; I readied myself to stand, as I had been seated for some time and the feeling of being stopped was unique; also, to leave the car was to leave sanctuary, my own private haven. I hadn't had to speak to anyone – not while getting gas, not the Caffeine Junkie, not Blackjack – and I had been satisfied with the disconnection. Two days without sleep and most of that time I had been driving or quietly watching from the car. When I entered Florida, I hadn't even noticed the landscape changing, flora and fauna I had never seen before. I didn't like to leave Philadelphia. Driving, my eyes followed the road and the lines, the lines, the lines; sometimes they were faded near gone, or yellow with those bumps in case you drift, or a dotted white.

Seated, eyes closed, I breathed in air that was softer than I was used to. Bracing myself. The hallucinations had started in my peripheral but they were small for now, just pops and clicks—

“Hey,” came a pleasant voice, and a person leaned next to my car window.

My fist connected with a cheekbone.

I didn't even realize my window was down.

David backed from the car in pain. He had a hand over his face where I had hit him, and he was bent down, recovering.

I opened the door and exited the car slowly.

My first instinct was to stand near him and wait until he was no longer hurt. Seeing as it was my brother, I forced myself to rest a hand on his back, something I did hesitantly.

"I'm sorry. You startled me—"

"Yeah, yeah, I noticed. Ow." He rubbed his cheek a moment and stood to face me. His expression wasn't anger but good humor. The punch hadn't landed square or very hard, as I had been seated. It was a modest blow that left a small red blotch below his eye.

Even staring at him close, I hardly recognized him as my brother. It was hard to acknowledge that this was the last of my blood.

"How have you—" I used my normal, cautious tone but he cut me off with a large hug.

"It's good to see you, you violent fuck," he snorted, half-amused and half-serious. His voice was deeper. He had thin sideburns down to his chin and well-managed, low-trimmed stubble. He had brown hair like mine. His eyes were brown; mine were hazel. There were some physical characteristics that we shared – the shape of our face, the ridge of our eyes, the slope of our nose – but he carried himself in a different manner, so much so that our physical similarities were lost in the differences by which we composed ourselves. He stood slightly hunched, probably from sitting at a computer. He smiled and seemed positive. I, on the other hand, stood perfectly straight, with a solemn face and stern eyes, not so much positive or negative – more neutral, gray, bureaucratic.



"You comin' here after buying this car from the Duke boys?" he asked, looking over my blue Ford pick-up truck.

"No."

I didn't know who the Duke boys were but I was defensive about where I had come from and what I had done.

"Oh...kay," he was taken aback by the seriousness by which I answered him.

He was the rainbow and I, the rain.

## BOMBING TIMOOM

My father and I studied physics at Drexel. He got his PhD and went on to teach there; after my BA I had been ready to start my Masters but never got to the application. Our mother was a biomedical engineer, though she quit the field when David and I were young and took up a position to teach the hearing disabled at a local elementary school. I asked her why, when we were young. Her answer had been simple, and she signed it with a caring look in her eyes:

“Because it feels like what I’m meant to do.”

I always loved sign language. People devote too much focus into their inflection, into the way they speak and how they sound, their words – it all derides meaning. Sign language is simple, ideas. It feels good to give someone thumbs up or a middle finger for a reason. And my mother had a very expressive face. My father, he didn’t show much emotion but my mother made up for it. Her eyes were always on a spectrum of happy or sad (the spectrum, I noticed, was distinguished by a tiny crinkle in the corner of her eye – if it wasn’t there, it was a good sign); and through those two shifts, she conveyed everything – fear, enthusiasm, sorrow, anger and hope and disappointment and delight – and she conveyed it so well that signing wasn’t always needed.

My father and I were most alike. He was a PhD in quantum mechanics and I was headed for a Masters in theoretical physics, with a possible destination in the quantum realm; when I chose theoretical science, it was to separate from my father (and goad him a bit, as it wasn’t exactly in his footsteps that I was following). When I told him, he said one thing:

“Yeah. I guess.”

He said it in his dry tone. My father didn't have to express himself physically but, after years of studying with him, I could determine the meaning within the meaning, hear inflection that wasn't necessarily there. I knew my father well because I identified with him, and where I saw similarities between us I could just bridge the gap of how he was feeling and how I had felt doing the same thing: for example, he had this sigh that was soft, almost inaudible, and mid-way through college I noticed I had adopted it. When I would sigh like him, it was from an odd combination of excitement and being overwhelmed, tired. We even sat in chairs the same way, with a straight back from years of standing looking studious.

And then there was David.

He started different than us and only ever traveled that direction.

I imagine he must have been like my mother before she lost her hearing. He shared qualities of rebellion and passion that my father and I didn't; and – again, these are things I just imagine to be true – but I assume my mother changed when she lost her ability to hear, retreated a bit. David, however, never retreated. At the end of his junior year in high school, he finished a book called *Bombing Timoom* – it was a fictitious novel that included actual teachers and students and lectures and real situations from our school, Northeast High School. David took notes in class, not to study but to ridicule the lessons and satirize or demonize the staff; his goal was to provoke anger over the public education system in Philadelphia. The book ended in violence, which the Department of Homeland Security declared a terrorist threat against the school and David was expelled. Instead of starting senior year at another school, seventeen year old David hired a lawyer and a publishing agent and simultaneously sued the school system he had once sought to improve while starting a bidding war for the rights to the book. *Bombing Timoom* made nationwide news. He sold the book for a low six figures, got his GED in an expedited three-week course, picked a college with beaches and warm

weather, received a full grant as a published author, then left a house where he never fit in and had never been very happy.

He had never been one to return, and I didn't blame him.

The last time I had seen him was at our parents' funeral.

## DAVID AND SARAH AND LIZZY

When I asked David what he had been up to since I last saw him, he informed that it had been mainly smoking weed and having a lot of unprotected sex; that about covered it, apparently.

Though he had settled down lately since he met a girl:

“She asked me to dance and I agreed to dance but, you know, I can’t dance. So I did my little white boy shuffle against her, up on her butt and she... pretty much moved in after that, like, only a few weeks later.”

He motioned around.

From the outside, the house was legitimately indistinguishable from every other house on the block: all of them had single floors, gray shingles, grass-and-sand front yards, and big Goddamn windows glaring the bright-ass sun back in my face. Inside, he led me down a narrow hallway into an open living room. It was Goddamn bright in there, too, all the windows open and the skyline on a slanted roof. There was also a lot of white, and a lot of kids’ toys.

“Sarah took Lizzy to visit her friend’s house in Naples, down near Bonitas Springs, so they won’t be back until much later.”

“Who’s the father?”

Only after hearing myself did I realize how ridiculously out of place the statement was.

“Uh...her ex-boyfriend. I never met him.”

David had entered the kitchen, which has only a counter between it and the living room, and stared at me a moment, sort of dumbfounded. There was a moment where I recognized my brother. His hair was about the same length as it was when we

were younger, enough to comb and manage, style; mine used to be shaggy and now it was close-cropped, and in both stages I never styled it. Even though David's face hadn't aged a day, it was still a little difficult to see *my brother*. He was two years younger (a freshmen at NHS when I was a senior) and we were around each other a fair amount until he left me...us. But it wasn't until I caught that look in his eyes, the one where I could tell he just plain didn't understand me – not the question, not anything else, just me.

"Would you like a beer?" he asks.

"No thanks."

He opens the fridge, cracks a beer, and joins me in the living room. I had remained standing, unsure what to do or where to sit, and he motioned for the couch, taking an adjacent love seat.

"I don't know what you wanna do. We can chill here if you want. Sarah'll be back in tonight. Looks like you could use some sleep." He eyed me a moment while I stared off into space, momentarily dazed. I had been lost in thought but, snapping out of it, I couldn't recall what I had been thinking about. He was right, I did need sleep.

"There was an errand I had to run today but I doubt you'll want to come..."

"What's the errand?" I asked, my attention now present.

"There's this porn star..."

He said it like it was the beginning to a long story but he stopped a moment.

"What?" I asked, caught off-guard.

"There's this porn star that lives about half an hour from here." He looked down, then back up at me. "This—I can't think of a way for this to not sound weird." He drank more of his beer. "She's two counties over. Chrissie Young or something."

"What?" He hadn't seemed to answer my question adequately and I was still a bit surprised. "Why?"

"Sarah had lesbian sex with her."

“What?!”

Now I was plain flabbergasted.

“Please stop saying that. Before I met her, before she had Lizzy, she...doesn’t like to talk about it but she had a few partners—like me—and she told me she slept with a porn star. I only know two details: porn star’s name is Chris Young. Christine. Chrissie. I don’t know. And she sometimes goes by Paradise. I looked her up. C. Young. Got the address. Two towns over.”

I began to ask “What?” once more but nothing came out.

“Look, they filmed it,” he said in a wounded manner. This was the point. “It’s not on the internet – at least not yet. She told me this a while ago but, you know, I don’t want shit on my girl out there. She said she’ll always be worried that one day it’ll be on the internet.”

It was my turn to look dumbfounded, to not understand my brother.

“In a romantic gesture, I was going to make sure it doesn’t get out. Talk to the guy, you know. Or at least ask about it.”

I thought about that a moment.

“So you really care for this girl? The one with the kid?”

He swigged from his beer and answered as if unprepared for the question.

“Yeah. Of course.” He narrowed his eyes, unsure what answer it was I had been looking for. “I’m happy when I see her in the morning – that’s how I knew I wanted her to move in. I didn’t want her to leave in the morning because I’d wake up and she’d be there and I just—I didn’t want her to not be there the next morning. You know?”

“Sure,” I answered.

I had no idea what he was talking.

“Yeah. And Lizzy—”

“That’s the child?”

“Yeah. Her name’s Elizabeth but we call her Lizzy. She’ll be four at the end of summer. I love ‘em. And this place was just starting to be too big for me alone.” Then, to shuck off some doubt, he added, “You’ll love ‘em. They’re awesome. You’ll see.”

“Okay.”

“So come with me to meet this porn star...”



## OH GOOD

The drive was deathly quiet. David was concentrating, thinking through what he was going to say. Before we arrived, he asked me which sounded best:

“You had sex with my girlfriend and videotaped it and I would like to see the videotape.”

“Can I see any sex videos you haven’t posted on the web yet?”

“I’m the biggest fan of the porn you do...”

I asked if he had ever seen the videos from this particular porn star.

“Yeah but it’s weird—not the videos but the girl in the videos was French. Looked like the videos were mostly filmed in Canada, too. But I guess she moved here some time ago. I couldn’t find anything else, really.”

“Turn left,” said the G.P.S., “and drive 100 feet to your destination on the left.”

“Oh fuck.”

I said this on accident.

And then there was a squiggle. That’s the beginning of my insomniac-hallucinations – squiggles in my peripheral. They’ll only get worse. And next I can look forward to the sudden, abrupt feeling that I’m about to be hit in the face with something. It always causes me to startle. From the perspective of an onlooker, it must be quite a marvel watching someone jolt for legitimately no reason, as if being startled awake while already awake.

David pulled the car alongside the curb and we looked at rancher, our supposed destination. Both of us leaned down to look at the face, as most of the place was obscured behind a fence. The property didn’t look especially big, nor was it flashy. It

was plain, with a single window facing the street and the door around the side next to the wood fence. A large fern was growing over the top from the backyard.

“Alright, let’s do it,” David said with more enthusiasm and positivity than I could ever muster.

“Why are you so ready for this?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he asked.

We shared a moment of staring at each other, neither of us understanding the other.

“I’m pretty sure none of this is normal,” I added.

Usually it was me saying or doing something odd.

“Eh what the fuck’s normal anymore...” David said over the opening and closing of his car door.

I stepped out and followed toward the rancher of the porn star.

David had knocked loudly before I caught up and the door was already unlocking to gently open.

“Fuck,” I mumbled under my breath.

And there were more squiggles.

It wasn’t bad...yet.

An elegant woman peered from a crack in the open door. Her eye was blue, I noticed. There was a moment of hesitation and then she opened the door wider. Her other eye was green.

Nothing was said by the woman or my brother.

Her hair was long and dark black, her skin pale. She wore a black shirt with a V-neck that cut down to a massive chest. Her legs were covered in a thin layer of black cloth. A single red stripe went around her thin waist, the only color to her body besides the white nail polish on her long nails. Her face had a hint of makeup, subtle touches of

rouge to the pale skin her cheeks, black eye-liner. Her dark red lips had a slight smile to them.

“Yeeesssss?” she spoke, finally. Her tone was amusing, cutesy.

“Paradise?” my brother’s voice sounded like he was trying to be brave.

“No.”

“You don’t know what she looks like?” I asked, close to his ear.

The woman’s eyes narrowed.

“Shut up,” David told me, pushing me back.

“I was wondering if I could speak to the...porn star...” David said the words as if they might be insulting and by saying them slowly they would be less so, “...Paradise for a moment?”

“You boys are gonna have to wait.”

“That’s fine,” he nodded.

“We can come ba—”

David elbowed me.

The woman had already moved aside to let us in.

“Oh...good. We get to...wait inside...”

My tone was somewhere between curious and put-upon as I followed David inside the porn star’s house.

## THE CORINTHIANS

The rancher was one long, open room without any walls and occupied almost entirely of empty space. The kitchen with its stove and sink and cupboards and dishwasher lined the same wall as the front door. Two large windows on the far wall, their thin white drapes drawn, flooding the one half in ashen light. (This gentler color was a welcome invite to the orange-blasting-red of the Goddamn Florida sun.) Beneath one window was a bed and, under the other, a desk and computer and several laptops. It was obvious that this was a studio more than a domicile, with large lighting lattices unplugged and out of the way against the brown wall between the bed and desk. Filming equipment was folded up next to the stage lighting, tripods and cases presumably full of lens and cameras. There was even a large white sheet strung between two black poles. A part of my brain recognized it as something having to do with lighting, the sheet strung up wide behind the camera and lights to do something or other. Having never been one for anything celluloid, I had no idea where the memory stemmed but there it was, a flash of a photo shoot, maybe from a magazine or something, with a camera on a tripod and the lights blaring and the white sheet behind, intensifying the colors. It wasn't the memory that bothered me so much as the sign my mind was losing some of its grip. That thought, the image, it had no beginning or end or place from which it had come. That was the form thoughts would begin to take from sleeplessness, wandering and listless images without homes, growing more bizarre. I checked my watch:

Fifty-two hours without sleep.

*Marker.*

Longest I had ever lasted was ninety-four hours.

The woman led us to a couch in the living room area, which was against the right wall. A four-foot gothic lamp shed an unnecessary carrot light from behind the blood-colored couch. A red rug covered a small portion of the wood floor underneath the light and couch and an ottoman, with a coffee table just outside the rug and serving to of enclose the “living room” area since there were no walls. All the way across from the couch, over and past the coffee table, stood the only other thing in room: A tall box with a jet of steam and six feet of fogged glass and a towel draped over the top of the door. And there was nothing but an ottoman, a coffee table, and twenty feet of empty space between the shower and the couch.

David sat. I waited a moment, scrutinizing the room harder while the woman wasn't looking. She turned to face us, standing in front of the couch. I sat. My brother and I then began a series of awkward seated positions.

“It'll only be a moment,” she informed us, absentmindedly rearranging magazines on the coffee table. When she was done, the magazines looked exactly the same as they had before. She moved aside and both David and my own eyes began searching, trying to softly brush the details of the shower even as we both did our best not to stare. I did, of course, occasionally get lost staring at the shower. I couldn't make much out other than the silhouette of a human. It was too foggy to make out features like size or weight. Just that someone was showering. It was like a Rube Goldberg invention where several amazingly intricate bits were working together for a simple action. Each wisp of curling steam, drop of condensation crisscrossing its way down the glass...

I was mystified.

My thought process was working tangentially, I could feel it.

*Fifty-two hours. Fifty-two hours. My mind kept saying it. Fifty-two hours. Tifty-foo powers.*

“Do you live in the area?”

It took a moment of disorientation before I could look at the woman. She noticed. And winked at me. My brother didn't notice.

"Yeah," he replied.

"Where do you live?"

"I live near Tampa. He doesn't, though." David, who kept his eyes on the shower and his face with an expression of absurd curiosity (not lust), nodded toward me. "He lives in Pennsylvania."

David was marveling, it looked like, as one might a talented circus.

And the shower stopped.

The door opened.

Steam poured.

And out stepped a man with a giant cock.

"Eww," escaped my brother's lips as a natural reaction.

My train of thought derailed completely. The world went silent for a moment, like the moment that follows a good punch to the belly and all your air's been stolen. My brother shook as if he had been startled. I scoffed. He winced. I cleared my throat.

Neither of us moved.

## A PAIR OF DICE

*The Gravedigger stops me from continuing. He gently sets his beer down and looks as if he's lost in thought. The first thing out of his mouth is:*

*"You queer?"*

*"No."*

*"Yer brothah? He a fag?"*

*"No. An idiot, maybe. His detective work definitely leaves something to be desired. He did find the right porn star, though, which was the one that had slept with his girlfriend. Problem is, he confused himself and thought it was some Canadian porn star with – albeit coincidentally – the name Chris—for Christine—Young. Same stage name or production name, Paradise. Actually, even that wasn't right. The real guy was some fuckin' local, bottom-of-the-barrel porn magnate named Chris Young. His production wasn't called Paradise. It was Pair-a-Dice Productions. Like balls, he always did this stupid hand motion..."*

\* \* \*

"Chris!" the woman had called out.

The gentleman with the generous genitalia had yet to look toward us. Instead, he turned around to pull down the towel and bend at the waist to dry his legs and feet. Then, the man dried the rest of himself and walked from the shower to the bed against the far wall and opened the dresser beside it.

My mind was on the dresser then, and the fact that I hadn't noticed it.

I wasn't noticing things.

I did not like that. I wasn't especially fond of the situation I was in, either, but I did not like knowing I wasn't aware of everything. Details were escaping me.

I did notice the man strap something to his arm, something I couldn't make it out from the distance.

"Chris!" the woman hollered again, this time successfully attracting his attention.

With a towel held over his crotch, the porn star named Chris Young turned and saw us. He approached. His eyes were what I saw. They had blankness to them, an absentee-ballot sort of glaze. In the time it took the man to cross the room, I had sized him up as a none-threat. He was muscular, though, well-built in that pretty way women like, I guess, with defined glamour muscles and such but he wasn't stronger than me and he certainly wasn't faster, by wits or body.

Then I noticed the smile. He was unshaven by two or three days. His smile was wide and confident, his teeth a set of straight, square pearls. It was welcoming, in a way. He was friendly and eager to meet us and he approached with his hand out in greeting. I stared in his eyes but his eyes were on my brother, who was having trouble meeting his gaze.

"Hi. Chris. Nice to meetcha ya," he introduced himself and shook my brother's hand. "Chris. Hi." He shook my hand. His smile remained wide, just spread across his face. "If I'da known you gents were out here waiting I wouldn't've jerked off in the shower."

"Mmhmm," I nodded, unsure how the fuck to respond to that.

It was until he had gotten close that I could see the scars. In the distance I could see the muscles but the light didn't reflect the massive stretches of thin scars dressing his body, years old but each was obviously from a slash or rigid tear. There were maybe fifteen in all, some meeting near the center side of his chest, all of them extending outward like a child's drawing of sunrays, out in all directions, some circling around to



his back. It looked like someone must have tortured him for hours, days, months even. And now, at such a close proximity, I could distinguish the instrument this man had strapped to his left forearm – a 4” knife inside a black holster, the word ROUT written across it in liquid paper.

I began to re-evaluate Chris Young’s threat level.

The porn star never stopped smiling and he never seemed to stop and let the awkward sink in. He was a shark, incapable of stopping. He went from introducing himself to an outstretched arm – he noticed my noticing “the ROUT” – and then on to a stupid, melodramatic dice roll motion.

“Pair-a-Dice Productions, right?” he asked with half-heart in a way of checking our intentions; smiling, continuing smiling, never stopping that face-encompassing smile. His eyes never really lost that soft-minded glaze, either. There was a particular charm to it, likeable. Likeable was a characteristic I didn’t often see...ever, really. I live in Philadelphia.

“Huh—” my brother was confused.

“No!” I started, just being clear up front and immediately that whatever intention he thought we had was absolutely not the intention we really had. There was little doubt he would have any clue as to the reason my brother (dragged me to this) visit.

*Fifty-two finutes. Flowers. Hours. Pif—fif—fifty-two hours.*

Wait.

“Oh?” He looked confused a moment, much like my brother, though the porn star Chris Young carried his confusion in eyes only. Chris looked to the woman behind him. She was bent over, reshuffling the coffee table magazines back to the same, and she acknowledged him with a shrug.

“What’s up? What can I do for you guys?”

“—Dress!” I blurted; then coughed to hide the out-of-place blurt that I didn’t believe to be very out-of-place.

“Good point. Sadie,” Chris said, turning to the woman.

Her name was apparently Sadie.

“Get these gentlemen a beer. Don’t take no for an answer.”

I had already been preparing to shake my head in gentle declination but upon hearing that, I just decided it would be easier to drink the fucking beer.

*Fifty-two hours.*

## SEVERAL REASONS TO LIVE

Chris dressed, finally. Jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, which I thought was odd (as it wasn't cool in the least) until I remembered he had a knife strapped to his wrist.

Sadie brought us beers.

Bud Lite.

Chris returned, standing a moment in search of his own beer and finding none.

"Sorry," she said and it was genuine.

Sadie walked off toward the bed in the back corner while Chris got a beer and, again, returned.

"Only beer we have is Bud Lite," he said, apologetically. "It's what they drink around here." He popped the top to his can and held it up. My brother and I popped our beer tops as well and lifted them in salute. "To...whatever you guys are here for," and we cheers-ed and drank.

"I'm from California, originally," Chris began, trying to start a conversation.

He pushed the ottoman out of the way and laid in its place, stretched out on his side and facing us in an almost pose. He set the beer in front of himself and held his upper half up on his right arm. The fingers of his left hand circled the top of his beer can.

"So..." he urged – God, ever smiling – nudging one of us into telling him who we were and why we were there.

"Well, my name's David. This is my brother Lee—"

"Lee," I said, cutting my brother off.

Chris glanced at me in a sort of amused way.

"You got bags, kid," Chris told me.

He was talking about my eyes.

I nodded, agreeing.

"I'm here 'cause uh..." and my brother, unable to continue for the moment, chugged half his beer.

I was bored of this lingering.

"My brother David here has a girlfriend named—I forget. You may have slept with her. You may have recorded it, if you did. My brother loves the girl and he'd like the tape, if you still have it. He's afraid it might end up on the internet and he's being a gentleman and trying to stop it, if he can. When did this happen?" I asked my brother.

"Um, four years ago. Somewhere around there."

"And what's her name?" I asked.

"Sarah Hartman."

I had only glanced at my brother for his answers, keeping my focus mainly on Chris.

"Oh okay," he responded.

He stood up and walked over toward his computer. He grabbed the laptop and, from what I could see, a handful of thin external hard drives. He returned to his laying pose in front of us and opened the computer and plugged in a hard drive. His eyes narrowed and his smile faded a bit with concentration.

"I separate the years with hard drives," he informed us, plugging in the USB of one hard drive, waiting for it to load, click-click-clicking as he checked its contents, unplugging it, exchanging it for another...

"Does this happen often?" I asked of his nonchalant nature.

"Eh," he said, his eyes determinedly following whatever was on the computer screen, which was pointed away from us, "often enough, I guess."

While Chris checked a hard drive, unplugged it, checked another, returned to his desk for another handful, returned to his laying position, click-click-clicked, checking

one after the other, Sadie came from the bed and got on her knees and slung an arm around Chris.

"I'm gonna rinse." Her voice was a seductive whisper and she looked at David and I as she said it.

Before leaving, she held out a tiny pill just over the computer keyboard. Chris glanced at it, let his jaw hang, and Sadie cupped her hand over his mouth, feeding him the pill. Chris picked up his beer to use it in assisting the pill down his throat when he looked at us, stuck his tongue out – the tiny pill on the end – and nodded to us in an invitational, "would-you-like-one" sort of way.

My brother and I both shook our heads no.

"It's just molly," Sadie answered.

"We're going—" and Chris swigged from his beer, swallowing the pill, "—to a party in a bit. This stuff makes you want to touch everyone."

And he leaned toward the computer screen a bit more intently, finally finding the hard drive he had been searching for.

"Sometimes I record it just for fun. Or habit, maybe. But I only put the ones with the production value up on the site. If Sarah...?" Chris questioned, making sure he had the name right. My brother nodded. "If Sarah was a girl I met and liked and...so on, most likely she's in this pile of videos and she was never gonna make it up on that big ole' w.w.w." Chris turned the computer around to face us. "But if she's still on here, she'll be in one of the videos in this file. Feel free to browse."

David finished his beer; then, he reached for the computer.

In the background, Sadie began undressing.

## THE SECOND BEDROOM

“What beer do they drink in California?”

Chris had gotten up to retrieve more beers. I finally drank from my first as he brought me a second.

“Drink,” he said, noticing I hadn’t had much from my first beer. “And we mostly drank wine, actually. I love white. I miss it. I can’t find a good bottle of wine around here—my kingdom for a good Pinot Blanc.” He lifted his beer to signal that I, too, was to drink with him. “Did you know the Pinot Blanc—you know, Pinot Noir is very popular and it’s red and it’s this specific grape but the grape is ‘genetically unstable.’ You know, I don’t even know what that means really ‘cept that it grows all these vines and vines and vines and vines of red grapes and there, somewhere, somewhere in the middle of those red grapes there’s a vine, just one vine, of white grapes.”

He made a move like he was tasting the beer flavor remaining in his mouth, then looked down at the Bud Lite can. He had resumed swirling the top with his finger while propped up on his right arm, but now he picked it up and twisted it and looked at the logo and stared over its face.

\* \* \*

*I had slept the night before, well and deep and hadn’t woken until it was time to leave. I knew I wouldn’t sleep again for some time. That was what I was thinking about as I picked the front lock. There was a click that meant success, the door was unlocked, and I thought, I will not*

sleep again for some time. *It was odd wording and I remember I didn't – in that specific thought – contract "will" and "not". Normally it would have been I won't sleep for a good while now. This caught my attention for the briefest glint of time before focus returned.*

*8 silver inches of steel blade had a moment to reflect the open moon as I slipped inside Blackjack's house.*

\* \* \*

"Chris was a nice guy," I say.

The Gravedigger's attention is moderately enrapt.

"You don' say."

\* \* \*

Sadie slipped her shirt over her head and removed her bra in one quick movement.

The skin of her body was pale, her nipples nearly opaque because of it.

Her pants had no buckle or button and she pulled them down in another quick, flexible motion. She left on slim panties for an extra second before removing them as well. With a swift turn, rise, and rubber band-like fling of her underwear toward us (it makes it half the distance), Sadie disappears behind the same glass screen that had obscured Chris when we first arrived. The water ran and the steam lifted.

David hadn't noticed.

His eyes were on a laptop playing video after video of hardcore sex.

*What is happening?* I asked myself, rubbing my wide eyes a moment to gain bearing. *Fifty-two hours. Twenty minutes.* That's how much longer I was willing to stay.

Glitch-glitch in the corner caught my attention.

*Ten minutes.*

\* \* \*

*Blackjack owned a two-story townhouse in a long complex of townhouses where each resembled the next. Some had ferns or young sprouting trees near the size of a man in front.*

*I slipped between the slim crack I allowed the front door to open and remained on the landing for an extra moment while my eyes settled. It was dark, ominously so. Any curtains were closed or otherwise facing away from the moon or even a stray streetlamp. It was black much like a theater when the lights go down – there was a moment of complete, floating disorientation.*

*I used this time to remove the 9 millimeter semiautomatic I had tucked under the hoodie. It was a gun I was unfamiliar with but the gun (and, to my surprise, the knife) had been given to me by Ghos just before leaving, along with his strict directions. I had never been into guns when I was young. Even now, my enthusiasm hadn't much grown though they were an instrument I often referred to. I knew it was loaded. With the knife momentarily tucked in my armpit, I pulled the slide back and flicked the safety off. The muzzle had been ground and laced for a custom screw-in silencer, which I quietly screwed in while the dark settled.*

*I always felt at home in the dark.*



\* \* \*

“Can I ask how you got those scars?...or why you strapped a knife to your forearm?”

“This little guy?” he pointed to his forearm, “It was a gift. Never take it off.”

“What about the scars?”

The carpet had begun to move in a kaleidoscopic twirl.

“If we meet again. That’ll mean there’s a reason.”

...

“What?”

“A reason for us to like be here, man. For us to know each other.”

“Oh.”

“I only tell that story to people I know and I don’t know you much, captain. So if I see you again, there’s reason. A reason we’re here together, you’n I.”

“What if the reason we’re here now, meeting, is for you to tell me the story and it changes my life forever and affects the world?”

“Well then the world’ll just have to wait until we meet again.”

\* \* \*

*The knife was in my right hand – palmed against the black clothe of my forearm and held behind my back – while the gun was in my left and at my side, my finger on the trigger*

*My wardrobe was standard: black hoodie, two pairs of gloves (one latex and one leather), slippers bought in another state, hair in a cap, hood up, thin kevlar vest...*

*A tacky tan carpet led me up the stairs to the second floor. There was a bedroom at the end and I moved toward it without a making a sound. Step-step-step, each footfall absent any signifier. Another step, another, down the hallway, passed the dark bathroom, past the first bedroom. His was the second bedroom.*

\* \* \*

From the speakers of the computer next to me, a girl was moaning in an annoying, repeating, “Oh Gaawd! Oh Gaaaaaawd! Oh Gaaaaaaaaw—” and David hit the button and the sound abruptly ended.

“You doin’ alright there, chief?” Chris asked.

At first I thought he was talking to my brother but he wasn’t.

I nodded.

Chris stood, walked to the cabinet, pulled out a bottle, and brought it over with three rocks glasses. He displayed the front of the bottle. David glanced and nodded and returned to clicking. The bottle was Johnny Walker Blue Label.

“Producer gave me this a while back.” He cleared his throat, pinning the glasses by their lips in one hand and pouring a finger or two in each, sloppily spilling dribbles. The drops fell to the kaleidoscope carpet. “You put it away for a special occasion and

then occasion is quite special enough so the bottle stays in a shelf for some years." He passed out each of the glasses. David momentarily paused what he was doing.

"To the things people need," Chris cheered.

We drank.

\* \* \*

*I brought the gun the gun forward as I approached the half-open door to the second bedroom.*

*I nudged the door open a bit more.*

*Clothes strewn on the floor. The foot of the bed. Dresser against the far wall, an old oak with a large mirror. A little more...more. Something was missing in the reflection.*

*The bed sheets were unsettled, disoriented, chaotic; they were bunched up, kicked aside.*

*There was no one in the bed.*

\* \* \*

"What do you do, man?" Chris asked, returning to his laid-out position on the floor.

"I'm in finance," I answered.

"How'd you end up there?"

"What do you mean?"

"How'd you end up in finance?"

“Math. I’m good at math and didn’t want to teach. Started investing independently. ”

“I was never good at math. I did like science, though.”

“Ever do anything in the field?”

He chuckles.

“No, that stuff waved me bye-bye long time ago. Plus, you ain’t gonna swim an ocean just ‘cause you sorta like water. Do you like it? Investing or...” he looked to me for a better description but there wasn’t one.

“Yeah. It’s fine. Quiet, easy. Peaceful. As my mother once told me, ‘It’s what I was supposed to do.’”

\* \* \*

*“HYUH!” came the grunt from the darkness of the bathroom as something thin and tight and plastic wrapped across my throat and pulled back hard, lifting me off my feet.*

*Everything FLASHED twice, bright FLASHES of LIGHT.*

*There was a scream in my ear, and another FLASH of LIGHT. The scream’s final syllable came out rasping from the back of the attacker’s throat.*

*I was choking, gagging, dying. Once more, he pulled tighter. My life was slipping, my eyes seeing a spreading, static-like darkness.*

*Another FLASH of LIGHT.*

\* \* \*

“Do you like what you do?” I asked him.

“Yeah. Definitely what I was supposed to do. Lately, though, man, I’ve been feeling like there may be a greater purpose out there for me, somewhere. Not sure where to look, though. But I got everything I need. Love, happiness, doin’ what you love, etc.”

“That all it takes to be happy?”

“Pretty Goddamn hard to hate life sittin’ healthy in sunshine with beautiful women and margaritas.”

“Fair enough.”

\* \* \*

*The knife – pinned between us, behind my back, as it had been – slid farther up into his belly. He made a guttural noise. I pulled my arm down as far as I could, the knife out of his stomach for the moment, and with the last inch and ounce of strength I had left in my bones, I lifted my legs into the air and kicked the hallway wall with both feet. The back of my head caught his face between his chin straight up to his nose and knocked both of us backwards. He fell and, as I landed on top of him, the knife stuck square in his ribs. His grip loosened. The wire slipped off. I gasped air deep into my lungs, finally able to breathe.*

*There was blood, so much blood. Everywhere.*

\* \* \*

David found the video he had been searching for.

"Can I delete it?" he asked Chris, politely.

"Sure."

A few clicks.

The shower had stopped and my eyes drifted up to watch Sadie emerge dripping to dry herself with a nearby towel.

"We need to head out, babygirl," he called out to Sadie, "and not a moment too soon. I need to fuckin' touch someone." Then, to me, "If she hadn't finished I was a few short-hairs shy of rubbing my face on yer skin," and he chuckled. For the first time, he blinked in an inebriated manner, slowly and lazy and half-open.

"We gon' meet again, bro?" he asked me.

"I can say with some certainty that we will not."

He acknowledged what I said with a fair nod.

\* \* \*

*The tan carpet was flooded red. He was shaking. It could have been from the pain. It could have been from the anger. It could have been from the fear of dying.*

*He shook under the knife looming above his head.*

*In that last second, he shut his eyes.*



## THE GRAVEDIGGER'S TALE

A'right, young'un, I got me a story fo' ya.

There'uz thiz woman I loved. Name wuz Peaches, yo' story reminded me uh her. Loved 'er. Name wuz Peaches. She lived in the bayous a' New Orhins way before Katrina. Met 'er when I wuz five, married 'er when I wuz seventeen, loved 'er till she died. Beautiful, beautiful woman. Loved ev'ry inch a' 'er. Died a' Polio, that sicknissss. I watched 'er die, she died on my brothah's birthday. Hez dead now, too—she died right in my ahms. Loved 'er, always will. Always have, since I'z five. She ain't comin' back, neither. I dug her grave the dawn aftah her death, in the bayouz and the marshuz near 'er house. I did it alone, and I did by. My. Self. Did the same for my brother three yeahz latah.

Anyway, this is thuh story. 'Bout a yeah fo' she died, we had a dinnah for 'er. It wuz her, and my brothah, and two 'a my cousins who were dear friends a' Peaches. Now she had this big ole' house, big ole' dinin' room with a big ole' table. Now, her family didn't like me much but they knew we wuz in love and they let it go on. Her fathah wuz there and so wuz 'er mothah. We were eatin' roast pork, I 'member cause it wuz one of thuh best meals 'a my life. Peaches wuz startin' to worsen, startin' to...have trouble movin', eatin', doin' thins for 'er's self. I loved 'er and it was hard to watch 'er try and get that fork up to 'er mouth. But she tried, and she tried, and she ate ev'ry bite a' that meal.

Now, 'er parents didn't like me much on account a' my profession, which was gravediggin'. They said it was horrid, a horrid job. They said I wuz a ghouh for doin' it, and doin' it for so long. And it wuz one that didn't pay much, so how wuz I gonna



support my ailin' wife. Well, that night they didn't say anythin' to me. They ain't hate me, they ain't even dislike me after that evenin'. They forgot all 'bout me...

Her fathah tried to send 'er away to one a' them clinics, so that someone could watch her ev'ry second a' the day and make sure she wuz okay. I thought long an' hard 'bout what I was gonna to say to him and the only words that came to my mind repeatedly was that I would kill him if he tried to take 'er from me. An' I watched her for ev'ry second she had left. I watched 'er struggle and I watched her try with all her might to live. I knew she wuz 'a fighter, that she would try. I 'membered the meal, tryin' her best to finish ev'ry bite. There wuzn't a thang I could do to save 'er. I just helped.

Anyway, my point is this. Sometimes you just need to know your place, whether it be watchin' or helpin' or bein' patient an' lettin' thin's work 'emselves out. Sometimes you wanna intervene but you shouldn't and you can't. Sometimes you should an' you do. Sometimes you wanna save someone. Sometimes you wanna murdah someone. Too many people out there need savin' and too many more need worse. Sad but it's true. My wife Peaches would'a died in a clinic just as easily as she died with me in my ahms. It's difficult to watch somethin' that horrible happen to someone you love but it happens all the time. Just know it works itself out, young man. People live, people die, people suffah, people thrive, people hate, people love, people fight an' murdah, an' people gonna do it 'till people ain't around no more.

Two thin's I learn'd in my life. Nevah regret death. And do ev'rythin' you should an' ev'rythin' you can. As long as you know the difference 'tween should an' shouldn't, an' can an' can't. I never moved on aftah my wife died 'cause I didn't need to. I felt love, the best kind that stays with you forevah and just thinkin' 'bout it fills you up with it. I

can cherish that 'till the day I die – it's beautiful. But don't let yo'self struggle when you ain't need to. Don't let yo'self get confused.

Sometimes a fire needs to burn and a plane needs to crash just so you and I understand that ev'rythin' has purpose, even if it ain't appear to got no reason.

## THE SHADOW CONVERSATION

In talking with the Gravedigger, I told him about the time after we left Chris "Pair-a-Dice" Young's apartment, where David and I went back to his house and, while waiting for his girlfriend and her daughter to return, I laid in the guest room in an attempt to sleep. I couldn't, and usually can't after I murder someone. I didn't tell the Gravedigger that, just that I laid in the bed and still couldn't sleep. I tried but it was the period between tired and lucid hallucination. After no sleep, and time passes, and more no sleep, I often see the dead.

I still had hours before I would sleep.

While laying in that back room, though, I heard the girl of my brother's affection. Shortly after dusk she walked in through the front door, which was on the other side of the wall in the back room. There was the noise of an exuberant child, a young girl. A brief exchange. I heard every word of it:

"My brother's sleeping in the back room," David had said.

"Your brother? You have a brother?" the woman said in a solid tone.

The surprise was distinct.

David had never told her about me, that I exist.

Good for him.

Because of this, I pretended to sleep until I was sure everyone was asleep and I snuck out the back room window and left, silent as a branch in the forest. I take the form of Shadow and reach my car and pull off from the curb and drive off. Had I not I left silent, I'm mathematically certain the following conversation would have taken place:

"I'm not going to stay."

“Bullshit—I noticed back there that you look like you haven’t slept this week.”

“I’ll be ok. If I can’t make it home, I’ll get a hotel.”

“Fuck you. What, you came to visit me for five hours? At least get a good night’s sleep and leave in the morning.”

“The truth?”

“Yeah, what’s the truth?”

“I cannot sleep lately. I appreciate it, seeing me, offering me a place to sleep. But I cannot sleep. And you do not want me in your life.”

“Wha—oh my God, that is complete— why you gotta pull this bullshit?”

“Answer me this – why haven’t you written another book?”

“You’re just like dad was. You think a diploma or another book will solve everything. I’ll tell you the same thing I told him – fuck off. You and mom and dad, you were all the same—”

“Mom and dad are dead, brother.”

“I think I know that better than you do.”

“I very much doubt that.”

“Yeah, well, my life is fine.”

“You’re starting a family. What— what are you doing? Where are you going?”

“You come out of nowhere, after years, and you still don’t understand it – who gives a shit? Who gives a shit where I’m going – you’re right, mom and dad are dead. But that was where you were headed, not me. Was I ever one to worry? Did I ever *fret*? If I’m happy now, what the fuck does it matter?”

“Because – like mom especially – I feel like you’re just wasting it. You just live off of money you made a long time ago. It’s great you’re starting a family but what are you doing? You could do anything. You could teach.”

“Teach? That was mom and dad – and *you!* – not me. I’m no teacher. I’m pretty sure I made that point blatant in the book. And so what? I write another book that

doesn't sell nearly as well as the last one since it's not steeped in controversy. And then I'm good? Then I'm fine? By your standards."

"Hey, look at me. What happened? Since when do you doubt yourself—your book, that you wrote when you were *seventeen*, showed promise. I don't need to see numbers or see dollar signs when I read it to know that. Your parents knew it—they didn't want to admit it but mom and dad always acknowledged it. You just weren't around to hear them—"

"—oh don't put that bullshit 'you left' guilt trip on—"

"You did leave! Your accomplishments were a bit hampered by public shame. You realize that, right? Blaze of glory. And our father – a genuine Nobel Prize nominee, a mathematical laureate, published theoretical scholar – what's he get recognized for? A son that wrote a four hundred page terrorist threat mocking the education in Philadelphia, where our parents are teachers— were."

"One, it was a satire of public schools. And dad should have supported me—I don't care, I was right. It was a book. A fucking *book*. First amendment. I wasn't threatening anyone – it was supposed to make violence look stupid...and no matter what, I was still his son."

"You left him. Remember?"

"Pfft. I got that *look*, that angry fucking disappointed look every day—you think if that motherfucker supported me, gave me a 'good job,' I would have left after six months?"

"Okay, look – forget all that shit. Forget everything. Forget the destination, and forget where you came from. My point is this – you come from geniuses. People with genius I.Q. You are also a genius, with a genius I.Q. But you don't—"

"Stop-stop-stop, this genius bullshit always annoyed—"

"What I'm trying to say is that you have great in you. Unlike me and mom and dad, you're not limited to math or-or science. You always had something we didn't.

You could be great at anything. I'll never write a book or act in a theater group...you're boundless. Family – yeah, that's great. But why stop there?"

And on and on.

The moment he saw me gone, he had that same conversation in his head, too.

It's the way we've always been, the way we'll always be.

## THE GRAVEDIGGER SAYS GOODBYE

The bar is closing.

The Gravedigger is leaving.

Our stories are told.

I ask once more, as the Gravedigger stands to leave, "Are you real?"

He answers different than before.

"Are you?"

"Fair enough," I respond.

And then he's gone.

## THE END OF THE CAFFEINE JUNKIE

"Wake up," I spoke stiff, like a prison guard.

He jolted out of bed, straight up, frantic, grabbing at covers. I pulled the covers down from where I stood at the foot of the bed. He moved—and a quick, fluid FLASH of LIGHT stopped him. The ceramic lamp next to his head blew apart in shards.

"—who are *you*?" he asked, terrified.

There was the faint scent of urine.

"I want you to apologize."

"I'm sorry. I apologize God please I'm so sorry," he cried.

"Not to me."

"Who? I'm sorry I am I truly am for whatever I did—"

"You don't know why I want you to apologize. You don't know who you want to apologize to. So stop apologizing."

"Okay sorry sorry I will please don't kill me please I beg you God oh God please don't kill me please I'm so sorry," he sobbed.

"Calm down. I need you to calm down, Clay. You're going to make a call from the cell phone next to your bed."

He looked to his left, next to the shattered lamp. I had bought a prepaid cell phone, and it was already opened with a number dialed.

"Clay, you're going to send that call. When the answering machine picks up, you are going to apologize. Do you understand me?"

He shook his head yes and slowly reached for the phone—another FLASH of LIGHT, a showering of fluff and feathers from the pillow. He pulled his arm back in terror.



“If you try anything, I will kill you. Do you understand?”

“Yea—please yes I’ll do whatever you say please don’t kill me please.”

“Pick up the phone, hit send, apologize.”

Cautiously he moved his arm toward the phone. I let him take it, watching him from the foot of the bed. He brought the cell in front of his face, slowly, and hit the send button. The phone lit up with color and I could see his face in the white light. His expression was mortified and tears gleaned his cheeks. He was still swollen from the beating I had given him before. He hit another button and the ringing on the other line became audible.

One ring. Two. Three. Four. Five.

“Hello, this is Matilda. I’m unable to take your call right now but if you’d like to leave a message with your number, I might get back to you.”

The voice was youthful, happy, with a gentleness of tongue.

Clay the Caffeine Junkie lost all color in his face as soon as the voice spoke the name.

A FLASH of LIGHT, an explosion of plaster from the wall next to his head.

“Apologize!”

BEEP.

“Uh, hello, Maddie, this is Clay and I, uh, I’m very, very sorry.”

From the foot of the bed, I moved to his side and placed the muzzle against his temple, calming myself a bit.

“You got reasons to be sorry? Tell her you’re sorry, tell her why.”

He started to bawl, crying out to me, “I’m sorry but uh I don’t have—”

I couldn’t wait.

FLASH of LIGHT.

And then Silence.

**OUTLAND-  
ISH NEW  
WAYS TO  
PUNISH  
STRANGERS**



*The Shadowland Wolf*

## a brief interlude

### POOR EDWARD

In the months after their death, I spent afternoons in the cemetery where my parents were buried. It was quiet and I was looking for quiet. It was also the gravestones, I found them interesting: they'd remember us for centuries with no more information than a couple of dates and a name. Some were lucky enough to carry over a few words, brother or daughter or uncle, parent lover friend, someone sweet and caring and generous and stoic, a humorous saint, a bedfellow martyr, and so on ad infinitum. This will be how it is until our species is gone or the granite has run out or the ritual becomes obsolete. In the end, once everything is said and done, it is but a few words and a crinkled photograph for great-great-grandchildren to find.

This the way the world ends.

*There will be no children of mine, I had thought, and my grave will be unmarked.*

This was a dark time for me. I felt left, betrayed. They may not have meant to get murdered but did they for one second consider what might happen to me if they were. I followed them heart and soul and the trail of breadcrumbs was gone. Gone pfffft gone—nothing, smoke rising. I could fill out the paperwork for the master's program in the fall—nay, I had them filled out long ago. I could file them, ship them off to my personal friend who heads the department, spend the money, and it would be guaranteed. I was all but in the system. However, there was only one question, the most important anymore:

Why?

Why would I do it? Follow in whose footprints now, because what was the goal? I could see the future I had wanted but what I wanted once no longer felt satisfying. It was much the same way I felt about the engraving on my mother's tombstone, some fifteen feet from where I would sit at Mt. Zion Cemetery. I had picked the words on the gravestone as David wasn't around:

*Beloved Father.*

*Enchanting Mother.*

Etched just above their names.

I hated the term *Enchanting Mother* but it was eventually picked from the stock words the engraver had listed on a weathered, yellow sheet of parchment. My father was *Beloved* – I was certain about the word for a reason I couldn't outright determine – but my mother took me time. Many of the words felt right. *Luminescent* had been the first choice but the engraver told me it would change the shape of the gravestone (because of space) and vetoed it. *Incandescent* had the same issue and he limited the words to ten letters or less. Thus, *Enchanting* – the only word on the list that was the maximum amount of letters, as picked by the engraver when I couldn't make up my mind.

This was the thought I was reliving when I met Matilda.

CLICK CLICK CLICK

The noise scared me in a way that embarrassed me, where something startles your whole body and your face distorts real ugly. She was snapping photos of a gravestone.

It's funny how beginnings are a fine Swiss cheese, retaining a distinct flavor even though it's full of holes. Her flirting was brief, my conversation awkward, and it ended with my saying:

"It was nice to meet you, Matilda."

To which she responded:

“Take me to lunch. You don’t have anything you can’t cancel.”

It’s the end that’s distinct. Those middling words, the hidden flirt before the outright – I mean, hours after this exchange took place we were having sex in an alleyway – it is that beginning that holes, that fades, that flounders in lesser experiences and grows grand in the life-setting ones. If I were to recount, it would be magical...

The sun shed a ray on the strands of black hair covering the right side of her face.

Her skin was pale and soft, and fairies danced on her shoulder.

Bullshit.

I was awkward and she was confused.

The conversation started brief and she, as she always was, came out of the gate running. Within a few minutes I knew she was a recovering heroin addict (her body was thin, exquisitely so); that her job had recently fired her for smoking too much (she was smoking while taking photos, sometimes holding the cigarette under the lens as she snapped photos for a “surreal take,” as she called it); and that photography was replacing the job from which she had been fired as well as the friends that only served to enable her drug habit.

I spoke little about myself, as I always did.

There was a specific moment where the situation changed:

“What do you do with your photos?” I asked her.

“Develop them,” she answered, matter-of-factly.

I wasn’t sure if she was joking (I’d later understand that she absolutely was) and there was a moment of silence while she stared at me, watching my expression. Then her lips curled in a slight smile. There was less tension after that. It was easier, the air had been lifted. The words that followed, though I cannot now recall, were simple, calmer, with less anticipation. We ended up at some bar around Locust and 14<sup>th</sup>. Again, I am not unsure how we settled on that specific place, nor do I remember how Matilda got me to order shots and beers in the early afternoon. (I do remember that I was a bit

excited for the four cheese grilled cheese with apple, signs of an appetite for the first time in weeks if not months.) When the drinks arrived, Matilda explained the rules and we began to play a game:

“You tell me a story and I’ll take a shot. Then I’ll tell you a story and you can do a shot. It’ll be a game.”

She had made it up on the spot, from what I could tell.

Her eyes were always hostile, soft but aggressive and unbelieving. Her dark bangs would hang over the right side of her face when she leaned in, looking into my face as if a lie detector. She was curious but cautious. Something about her stood out as a spark against the darkness of everything else, something I couldn’t explain. Her scent was vaguely familiar, lavender and peach, and her voice, the way her body moved, all of her...it was as though she had been on the sidelines of my dreams, slipping when I woke but there nonetheless for years. She had always been with me, was the feeling I couldn’t escape. My eyes stared back – also intently, also curious – but moreso to imbibe her features, soaking in as much detail as I could. There was no reason for this, for us, for that encounter. It was random and accidental but it had such purpose. I had been alone so long before her, even before my parents had died. Alone, always alone.

No obstacle I couldn’t overcome alone except loneliness.

\* \* \*

I barely remember the stories we told each other, only two...

You told me about poor Edward:

“When I was a kid,” and your eyes lifted, searching for something, anything, and then you found this story tucked away in the back, just waiting for you to tell me...

“My father worked with a man named Edward. They worked in the same office and they were friends and he would come over to family dinners and stuff and I met him a bunch of times when I was really young. Poor Edward, he was always alone and he was kind of a sad guy, you know, and eventually poor Edward, he jumped off the Ben Franklin Bridge. He’s buried at that cemetery. I was taking photos of his grave.”

“Why?”

“Lately I’ve been wondering what the last thing he was thinking when poor Edward jumped. Did he name an unborn son or, you know, what was his last thought? Was it peace or mourning or regret or faith or what? It kind of helps me with my own...you know, situation.”

There were bits of stories. I told you I could use sign language and proved it by signing that you were beautiful and that I wanted to kiss your lips. You told me about your little brother, Walter. He was a habitual masturbator, pothead, and high school junior. And you told me, “I was in rehab for two months, which is twice as long as normal. But uh, it was court ordered that I stay until I was better and, for the first month, I fought and struggled and I was such a friggin’ idiot. It was hard for me to give it up. It was comfortable. It was a warm bed. And my friends, I mean, they did it and they sold it and they were a bad...you know, bad influence, bad crowd. But they were family and it’s hard to give up on family. It was harder to give them up than fucking H. But I’ve been clean and sober almost a year now...”

There was one more moment: you reached over and set your soft hand on top of mine, preventing my fidget; and looked into my eyes and said, "Even as love ascends to your height and caresses your tenderest branches that quiver in the sun, so shall it descend to your roots and shake them in their clinging to the Earth..."; then your chin lowered, and your eyes narrowed with a touch of seduction, and your lips mouthed a single word.

"Bang."



## the shadowland wolf

### GHOSTOWN HOBBIES

The elevator opens to a desolate office on the seventh floor of the Bourse building in Old City. Papers float on the current of a nearby air conditioner. Rows of vacant cubicles, their desks organized but absent quirky posters or family photos. A phone rings in a distant office but no one's going to answer it – not now, not tomorrow, not any time soon – and it ceases its clamor as I reach the largest office on the floor. I set my messenger bag on the obscenely large mahogany desk and open the blinds to look out over Independence Hall.

At this point it's not even research, more like confirmation.

This is just one of those rare opportunities to actually visit an investment.

There is still a desk chair and I slide in. It's comfy, the corner office tranquil. It reminds me of when I used to visit graveyards. I pull out my laptop from the messenger bag, boot it up, steal a local wireless connection, open an internet browser, and check my investments – the liquidation of Heron Matters Publishing, Inc. has increased the stock in its parent company by 4%.

Investment banking—er, capitalism at its best.

Something about finance, numbers, graphs and charts and the comfort in knowing everything has an order to it. Economies drop, countries suffer, but it's foreseeable, predictable even; the only error to throw me off is human (you always bet on greed but every now and then there's a good person). Sometimes governments shut prospects down or take them over, often because of corruption, which is again human,

inherently human. But I'm good at finance, at finding investments, at projecting a business' future success or failure, at calculating gains and losses within a small margin of error – it's simple, transitive even: I'm good at math; finance is complicated math-based projections; therefore, I'm good at finance. There isn't much use for the money once I acquire it, except to invest more, so there is a level of objectivity – like a video game, entertainment, something to do alone. And I don't have to interact with people, which up until lately had been a fact I was quite fond of.

The summer had started and I found myself more bored than usual. Not that that was a bad thing, I usually liked boring – there didn't need to be surprises and suspense every day since I had enough of it from my bloodlust hobby to fill the days in-between. (Now that Blackjack had been stabbed in the fucking heart, there was nothing on the roster in the foreseeable future, at least not for me.) But time had been especially slow lately. My every day feels like the weaving of an afghan. The only new point of interest lately had come from a brief relationship with my neighbor but, even then, we formed a routine that dulled instantly. I would let her in, sit on the couch next to her. We'd have the television on. She'd drink a few beers and ask the occasional question, like how my day was or if I wanted to go to the bar. Then silence. Sometimes we'd have sex but it was usually odd, unnatural. Both of us would try and we wanted to enjoy it but our grinding hips never found unison. Our kissing never matched or felt right. We were on different frequencies and every rhythm met a bump, stop, and restart. She tried to compensate by moaning and grunting loudly but it was exaggerated and annoying. After a while, our time together wasn't just awkward but plain unpleasant. It wasn't my intention, more just the person I was; unnaturally quiet and boring just as much as I was bored. Eventually, neither of us could feign interest in the other; there was no interest to be had, not by either of us, and a time came when she stopped knocking.

It was usually fine that my life was as meticulous and uneventful as a Swiss wristwatch on a widower. And there was the occasional surprise, like the time I washed

my whites, put them in the drier. An hour passed, the drier finished and I removed my clothes. Each sock, undershirt, pair of underwear and tan khaki had a random spot of blue. Everything wasn't dyed a light blue; everything just had tiny blue splotches. There had been two blue-ink pens in a pocket that had fallen out in the cycle and stained everything.

Tiny islands of color, blue, on all of my whites.

A surprise like that could be considered monumental.

*Eh, maybe it's all a bit tedious lately.*

Swinging the chair around, I look out the corner office window. Spring is apparent in the trees surrounding the rectangular block of Independence Hall, with its open grass down and across Market to the building with the actual bell in it. I miss winter already, with its sunless days and blistering, recluse-encouraging cold. I turn back to the desk and look out the open door to the empty corridors of cubicles following the outside line along the windows.

*This is my life.*

Maybe it's time to add something, like a pet. Maybe another job. At year's end it would draw less attention to the real income if I had an easily taxable part-time job. And Ghos had always recommended I get one, even if just to fit in. He said I was an alien and that one of the harder goals after training would be to assimilate, adapt to the environment of normal citizens. To act human. He recommended a simple job, something taxable and social; maybe it would "coax a personality out of me," he'd laugh in that shrill, gruff voice.

This empty office, as an embodiment of my life, grows depressing.

I decide a trip to the Russian might cheer me up.

**“Hello, good friend,”**

the Russian welcomes me with a gleeful, heavy voice and thick accent.

He’s found in front of an open van parked in the tight lot tucked behind a gun-shop in North Philadelphia.

I greet him causally.

Over time, we’ve become acquaintances.

Neither of us knows the others name, as I like it, and we refer to each other as “the Russian” or “good friend.”

I only visit him once a month, maybe. There’s a question to the legitimacy and legality of his operation, as he sells ridiculous weaponry from the back of a van. I first began courting his van-hub out of morbid curiosity, never buying anything. (All my weapons are bought and registered legally; none have ever been fired outside a range. Except a revolver kept bedside, the rest of my arsenal is kept in a 6’ by 6’ storage facility thirty minutes outside Philadelphia, in Conshohocken.) Over time, I budged to the charismatic salesman. The Russian had recently talked me into buying a tranquilizer rifle for big-game hunting in Africa. He offered it at a good price and it looked neat. Long, silver barrel, dark oak finish; even the trigger glistened black. It was beautiful – useless, as I’m no big game hunter (my game is small and corrupt) but the gun was beautiful and I couldn’t let it fall into disrepair in another’s hands.

The Russian does offer many things, some of which are certainly curious.

He once had a rocket sans the launcher.

Just a pointed three foot rocket.

Today, it’s Incendiary Grenades he’s trying to pawn off.

“Three times as powerful as American grennads,” he tells me, holding a silver, oblong canister. Behind him is a black trunk full of them, full of what he describes as “incendiary grennads.” He hands one to me and I turn it over – there’s an incredibly well-crafted red fire design and black-skull danger signature on the back. It looks dangerous and neat, shiny, and I’m a sucker for neat, shiny weapons.

“Not a chance, good friend. These aren’t legal to own,” I tell him about the grenades.

“No no no, that not true, good friend,” he says, excitedly explaining through his absurd accent that he’s able to sell American citizens (without a permit) his Russian property because of a loophole in Russian-American trade laws. Since his weapons aren’t high priority in Russia (similar to the American laws differentiating handguns from assault rifles or explosives), they were therefore within legal standard to sell when brought to America. He also likened them to Cuban cigars and how American embargo only allow two boxes per person when leaving the country to return home; I don’t understand the reference but, as always, he’s a hell of a good salesman and, when he gives a good price and throws in the large trunk as a bonus, I leave for Conshohocken with a trunk-full of Russian incendiary grenades in my backseat.

In retrospect, I realize he was completely full of shit.

## MISSING

The evening is spent cleaning an already spotless house: washing the sparse few dishes from lunch, wiping the wood dining room table (it's big enough to comfortably seat six though it's never sat more than two), fluffing the pillows on the couch in the living room, organizing the magazines on the coffee table, straightening the rug between the dining room and living room, returning a copy of Homer's *Iliad* to the bookcase in the den, checking my desk (pen in the cup with its friends, roll the desk chair in), picking fuzzies off the stairs, making-and-remaking my bed, inching each of my bedside items to their designated spot (lamp, clean glass for water, clock, wallet, keys), and dabbing a bit of the hair from the bathroom sink. I don't check the guest room as I haven't had a guest in the many times I've cleaned it. While preparing my dinner of Tilapia, pan-fried green beans and garlic, and smashed roasted red bliss potatoes, I sweep the kitchen floor. The back door is open and I fling the dirt out into the empty backyard. There's always a tinge of regret when I look out into my backyard as I've wanted to plant a garden for some time but never have. The tilapia is part of my diet, which consists of eggs, fish, milk, chicken, tuna, cottage cheese, potatoes, green vegetables, two gallons of water a day, an occasional glass of Pinot Noir, and no sweets or caffeine. Dinner takes about an hour and a half to prepare, including time I spend setting my place with a French, embroidered cloth as the placemat, genuine silver fork left, spoon and knife to the right, a glass of wine above the knife (the bottle next to it), and a gently folded napkin on the empty plate in the center. When everything is done, I bring the meal out course by course and dish adequate portions. I sit, squeeze a slice of lemon over the fish, swirl my wine, take a sip, and the phone rings.

It's my brother, David.

"Hello?" I answer, wiping my mouth with a napkin even as I have yet to take a bite.

The voice is crying.

"Hello?" I ask and recheck the Caller ID.

It's still David.

"Uhhhh . . ."

I'm not good with crying...or any other human emotion, for that matter.

Choking on his sobs, he manages to finally get out a single word:

"Sarah."

## POKER AT THE END OF THE UNIVERSE

“Are you ready?”

Ghos’ voice is startling, as always – that grizzled, haunted Goddamn voice of his.

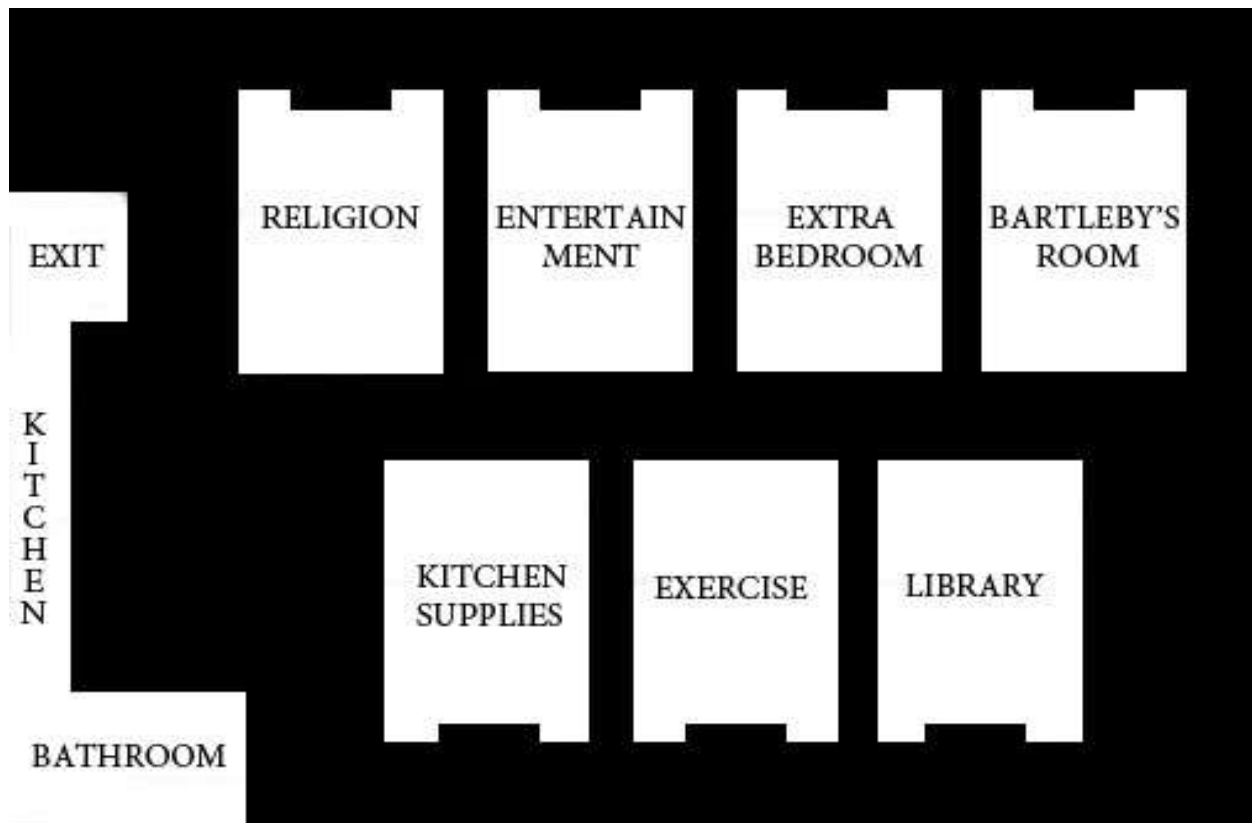
He’s standing at the far end of the corridor nearest the stairway; none of us had heard him come up the stairwell. Cass and I are standing outside the library while Lionel finishes removing and stacking five equal piles of poker chips. There’s a green felt poker table set-up in the center of the tiny room, three folding chairs around two red leather throne chairs – these are the chairs for the previous game’s first and second place winners.

The Library Room is usually reserved for chess and reading quietly, just as each of the seven rooms on the “fifth floor prison” were designated for something specific: The Television Room had a large flat-screen television with state-of-the-art surround sound, black leather couch, and more movies and television shows than I’ve seen in my life; The Exercise Room had all the weight equipment and accoutrement for anyone to become hyper-athletic; The Library Room had a full wall of books and a chess table always set in the center, except during poker; The Kitchen Room had utensils, pantry, and freezer filled with as much food as you’d need for six months; The Religion Room had three walls covered in hand-painted, sloppy, dripped and smeared writing, a creepy shrine in the corner with little figurines and dozens of melted-away, red and blue and green and white candles burned down to nubs; there was a bathroom with no door, a bedroom with no current occupant (prisoner), and Bartleby’s Room – though I had yet to meet Bartleby. The rooms have no doors, only openings, thresholds, corridors; 8 foot walls that don’t connect, a 3 foot gap between the top of the wall and the ceiling.



The whole floor resembles a New York art gallery, or at least what I imagine a New York art gallery must look like. The open doorway to each room faces the floor-to-ceiling windows that wrap all the way around, like a penthouse apartment with a very large, very detailed 360 panorama of Philadelphia – except the panorama and white noise ambiance are off now for poker. Outside the window appears infinite darkness.

Someone had actually painted a picture of The Fifth Floor Prison on the wall of The Religion Room:



I didn't know who painted it or why – in case they got lost, I guess.

On the other hand, it can get quite monotonous being locked up here for months during training so I understand it. During my training, I carved a face into the plaster of

the wall in The Religion Room, one of two additions I made. The face was supposed to be my mother and I used a key to make my scratches precise but, when I was finished, it looked like hell and had very little detail, as my shaping and reshaping and reshaping shed most definition by the time I was finished. We covered it with spackle and painted over it when I finally left, after all those months.

Ghos joins us outside The Library Room. As always, he's in his black suede pajamas. In the year and a half I've known him, his face has grown more weathered (I peg him at about 62 years old) and his shoulder-length white hair has thinned and receded a bit, and his sandpaper voice is now pure gravel and broken glass, unpleasant to the ear worse than a lifetime smoker of unfiltered Pall Malls; no matter the changes his body makes, though, he has always been attired – head-to-toe – in loose fitting black suede pajamas, with a silver .38 in the right pocket of his long-sleeve suede shirt.

"We ready?" he asks again. "Where is Kevin?"

We shrug.

Even his disapproving sigh is audibly disagreeable but, on cue, Kevin's frail body emerges from the stairwell. It's only been a week since the last game but he looks like he's lost weight, and this is a young man that was thin to begin with – he's becoming emaciated now. All of us notice the details instantly. His skin is sallow, cheek bones protruding through unkempt, patchy facial hair. Baggy eyes.

"Sorry sorry sorry," he says in response to an immediate dagger-eyed glance from Ghos, moving past us with his head down. Ghos doesn't take his eyes off him until Kevin's seated in a folding chair – then he looks to Cass, then to me; then Cass and I look at each other.

We don't need to say anything but it's obvious we're all disappointed in young Kevin.

"No Alex?" I ask, hopeful that I'm right.

"Not this week."

I take this as good news and smile.

I cannot emphasize how much I do not like Alex.

“Comin’ in, guys?” Lionel asks, confused as to why we’re all still standing outside the room.

We file in and take our seats.

Cass joins Lionel in the adjunct throne chair. It’s funny to see them sitting next to each other, as both are very large men – though Cass is enormous, 6’6 and at least 300 lbs. of not muscle but straight, blubbery fat like a tire around his waist. (Though I don’t like to say it, Cass has a duck body from sitting on his ass most days, wide hips and long ass.) Cass and Lionel had gone heads up last time with Lionel the victor, a disappointing outcome since I usually win. Lionel’s a worthy adversary, though; in fact, Lionel’s a worthy adversary at everything. For someone that acts like they have a simple streak, Lionel’s aggravatingly good at chess, dangerously accurate at darts, ridiculously fast at crossword puzzles and sodoku and any other game he plays – so much so he sucks the fun out of playing him in anything other than poker, since he does lose to my spectacular mathematical abilities and “chance”. Kevin was out first last game so he’s the night’s beer wench, something Cass reminds him immediately with a, “Get us beers.”

Ghos and I sit, Lionel and Cass shuffle a red and blue deck, respectively, Kevin returns with an open beer for all of us and Cass gives a toast to signify the start of the game:

“No matter how strong you are, get hit enough – it hurts, mo’fuckers.”

All of us sip our beers.

Kevin dribbles the slightest amount on his stained tee, and every one of us notices.

Lionel finishes shuffling and deals.

First hand, second hand, third hand, and not much action.

"I was thinking about getting a part-time job," I tell them in an early attempt to distract before I bluff my way to the pot of antes.

There's a round of guffaws and questions.

"I've just been bored and thought it might help to try something new." I was beginning to realize there was more to it than boredom... I was beginning to realize I wasn't much impressed with my own company, being alone with my thoughts. It wasn't time I needed to fill, it was time alone. I mention none of this.

I raise pre-flop and win the pot.

Cass deals.

I get pocket Kings and don't raise pre-flop. Ghos checks. Cass raises 100. Lionel calls.

"You still go to Ted on Chestnut?" Cass asks.

He's talking about a sensei at a local dojo he had recommended.

Kevin gently folds his big blind, a timid move from an often outspoken player. He's been fidgety and dead-silent, his eyes half-open, brushing his greasy, thin brown hair from his face when his hand wasn't occupying itself by rubbing his arm and shoulder.

This behavior is disappointing.

Very disappointing.

And yet, none of us says a word of it.

"Yeah—I call," and I put in the 200, "—I still go to Ted sometimes."

"Get a dog," Ghos says as he then folds.

"Really?" I ask.

"Got a girlfriend?"

"You already know I don't."

"Yeah," he responds, "get a dog."

“You got a soft spot for dogs?” Cass jokingly prods while leaning to the center of the table: One card face-down, then he flops a four of hearts, nine of diamonds, eight of spades.

I put myself at about 70% to win.

“Disgusting,” Lionel says. We look at him curiously. He looks up from the table. “I’m talking about the flop. Not dogs. I-I love doggies. Blackjack, though.”

There’s a moment’s pause.

“What in the fuck are you talking about?” Ghos growls.

He’s agitated, because of Kevin.

“Four plus nine plus eight,” I answer for Lionel.

Even with a BA in Physics, it took a second for me to realize what Lionel was talking about. It’s not that he’s stupid or autistic, just a little soft and a little odd; Lionel’s shadow is a shade lighter than everyone around him. He’s also large, like Cass, but his weight tends to be strength. His frame and stature is immense, like a wall – which is quite succinct because he’s the wall between Ghos and everyone else, like a body guard. Over the years, though, Ghos treats him less like a bodyguard and more like an annoyed parent would constantly scold a silly child.

Lionel checks.

“You said I should get a part-time job,” I goad Ghos into an explanation.

“Yeah but you got yer investments now, you ain’t need some shit-heel public job. Now it’s okay for you to hide, like you do. You make yer money, you hide in the back. Silence with a capitol S.”

Silence is Ghos’ nickname for me.

He is legitimately the only person that ever calls me that, and he always adds the last bit about the “capitol S.” It comes from the fact that all of us are constantly bugged, tracked, and surveilled; partially for our safety, partially to ensure no one goes turncoat. (Not that it would matter much, as you’d be long dead before testifying in front of a

grand jury.) Anyway, they thought their many listening devices on me and around my house were broken several times in those first few months after I was released from The Fifth Floor Prison. As it turns out, I'm just dead silence 90% of the time. Silence, with a capital S.

"What kinda job you gonna get?" Cass asks, looking at the cards a moment, popping a piece of rock candy into his mouth. If there's one thing about Cass, it is that he constantly eats hard candy as a nervous habit. He sucks it around his mouth and sometimes sucks air through his teeth. It becomes distracting and quite annoying over time, especially driving with him. He works on the nursing staff of a Philadelphia ICU but, because of the countless complaints about his clacking candy mouth during rounds, he had recently been moved to the night shift only.

"I was thinking of a waiter at a country club. They tend to have staff my age. Plus I could meet some of the wealthy in the area. You guys are always telling me to interact with other people—"

"Check," he says, the candy bulging in his cheek.

I don't think anyone heard a word I just spoke so I give up.

"Bringing out the rock candy, huh?" I say, looking at him chomping on his candy.

He's got a pair.

I raise two hundred.

Cass calls.

Lionel folds.

"I forget, why'd we call him Blackjack?" Lionel asks. Again, his comment is non-linear, picking back up the conversation now that the distraction of poker is over.

*Blackjack was dealing blackjack at one of Ghos' Kensington properties. Someone there – a guy named Brown Stu (a name with an origin I don't remember) – told him to deal an ace ten. Blackjack actually dealt ace ten so, to prove he wasn't cheating, he stabbed Brown Stu in the eye. After that we called him Ace Ten, then Twenty-one, then just Blackjack. Ghos warned him, told him if he did anything stupid to bring unnecessary attention to the property again that "it'd bring the end of it." Blackjack did something outrageously violent again, this time drawing serious attention, and then he disappeared.*

*He was found in Raleigh, North Carolina.*

*And I was sent to bring the end of it.*

The turn is a king of hearts.

I raise 200.

"Why was he called Brown Stu?" I ask.

No one remembers.

Cass raises another 400, jawing loudly at the rock candy.

He has two pair, maybe 8s and 9s – he knows I have a king. Before the turn, he was at 74.55%.

I call, beginning a new conversation:

"So, my brother's girlfriend...recently..."

Cass burns a card, then slows...

We all notice Kevin dozing off.

"Motherfucker," Ghos spits.

I brace myself.

Cass covers his beer with his hand.

Lionel plugs his ears from the thunderous gunshot.

Blood spreads and brain matter splatters all over the bookcase. Kevin's head jolts back, his body spinning off the chair and onto the floor. Ghos returns his silver .38 to the front pocket of his pajama top; he carries that gun with him every second of the day, fondling it much to the same effect as Cass and his rock candy.

There's a moment of silence.

"Who's gonna get us beers now?" Cass asks.

He's being facetious to hide the melancholy, just as we're all a little sad to see Kevin go – no one wanted this but there are strict rules and there are severe consequences for disobedience.

We quietly finish the hand.



**FRANCIS DUPONT**

*Have you ever been to prison?*

Yeah, in shit-hole Jersey when I was nineteen.

*Why?*

Petty crimes. Theft. Little over a year. I met Angelo Bruno there.

*Who's that?*

Gino? You don't know the Gentle Don? [*waits for answer*] Philly history?

No.

Shame. Maybe I'll tell you later.

[*silence*]

That's the most I heard you speak since you been up here.

*later...*

Guy ran Philly and South Jersey for near-on twenty years and he was...he was a good man. Didn't give in to the drug trade...[*shakes his head*] Wasn't violent unless he had to be, you know. [*looks at me*] That's important. I met him when he was serving two years for refusin' to testify in front of a grand jury. Mo'fucker was tough. I got out before him and he put me up in this apartment building in Philly and he helped me get a job, straightened me out a bit, told me, "Work hard."

[*towards the chess board*]

That's your move?

*Yeah.*

Still tryin' to jerk off stead'a have sex. [*moves his pawn*] Check. Calm it, son. You need to make love. This ain't no fuckin' alleyway fuck. This is slow, passionate. Careful. Notice the nuance.

*later...*

Gino'd come by, play me in chess, move on. Like waterin' a plant daily, spendin' enough time and energy to let it grow by itself. Sometimes he'd give me advice. Man was very...polite. And he was interested. Curious...it was new. I didn't have many people like him. My pop wasn't around since forever and mama worked in Trenton all the time and I didn't see her. He'as prolly the only person to actually listen to my words 'sides a fuckin' cop or judge.

Ma'fucker, his only pet peev—ma'fucker always called me a nigger. Don't think he knew better, that black folk didn't like bein' called nigga. But whatever, I didn't care and I was used to it, anyway.

Always used to say [*mock italian accent; philly dialect*], "Gotta stay up on your chess. Best decisions are ahead'a every'ne else. Best offense is an even better fuckin' offense. You find yourself in danger, look for the move that puts your enemy worse – always one. And if you can't find it, you ain't smart enough, nigger."

He was right, though. Always that one sneaky fuckin' move your opponent don't see comin', they ain't anticipate it – shit, their brain don't even think that way. Part'a it's from that the fact that you always gotta be willin' to sacrifice. That's only part, though.

Lets yer opponent know you gonna hurt him so much worse than he could ever hurt you.

*later...*

*What happened to Gino?*

*[clears his throat in the only moment of sadness i would ever see in the man]*

Gino had a right hand man, his consiglieri, represented him with the families in New York.

Gino had a seat at the counsel, only don in Philly to have that.

His consiglieri, Tony Bananas. Caponigro...*[says the last name with a moments pause]* this motherfucker, this "friend"...so he orders the hit on his boss. *[paraphrasing in a contemptuous voice:]* Gino's old, he's missin' out on the money for drugs, was losing ground in Atlantic City – something he helped fucking build with steel from Pittsburg...and fuckin'...they shot him in front of his house in South, on Synder. 934 Synder Ave, I still remember it. Back of the head—*[loud; mock holding a shotgun, loading]* click-click *[firing]* BAM—back of the head while he was in his car. He was in the passenger seat and Johnny Stanfa was wounded, that was his driver – Stanfa became don later.

And that was the end of his reign. Gentle Don was dead.

And so came the most violent period in Philly history.

Fuckin'...City of Brotherly Love...

*later...*

Tony Bananas was the first person I kilt.

“Mad Dog” Sullivan from New York took the credit but it was me.

I was quiet and I waited for him – I knew where that motherfucker ate and I just waited and when he came out I hit that motherfucker in the back of the head and put him in a trunk. Drove out to the middle of nowhere, shot him fourteen motherfuckin’ times, stabbed him – I would have murdered him thirty times if I could—fuck, I’d love to murder that cunt-fuck thirty more times. [*spits at the ground*] Left his body in a trunk in the Bronx, stuffed some fuckin’ bills in his mouth, let everyone know, “This ma’fucker died ‘cause he was greedy, not playin’ the game right.”

—nobody ever played the game right again, either.

I had never killed nobody before him but I came to peace with it—shit, I didn’t even think twice about it. I didn’t struggle, my conscience ain’t suffer none. I thought it needed to be done and did it and it did need to be done. I was a maggot eatin’ dead skin, a-a-a fuckin’ surgeon cuttin’ out cancer cells. You know what I’m talkin’ about. You remorse over murderin’ the man that kilt your parents?

No.

Check.

[*eyes the board a moment*]

You ain’t getting’ as good as I want.

[*i move*]

Waste of a fuckin’—look, checkmate.

[*i quietly reset the board*]

*later...*

Know they used to take pictures of dead people back in the 1800s? Mostly chill'uns, kids. Parents wasn't always wealthy enough to get a portrait. Kid mortality was high so they'd take a picture and it'd be the only proof the kid existed. And the technology came out to make copies from the same print so the picture'd be sent out to let relatives know – this kid didn't make it. Open a letter, find a pic of a dead niece or nephew you never met.

*[shakes head; chuckles]*

There just ain't no dealin' with it, with death, losing someone important.

Just not possible.

*later...*

After Bruno came a man named Testa, the “chicken man” ‘cause he worked with poultry and people used to say, “Who ‘dat guy?” and they'd always go, “That? That's the chicken man.” Guy was fucking ugly, face was all pockmarked ‘cause of scars from the chicken pox when he was a kid. Rough, fuckin' mean. Got into the drug trade instantly, starting ruining neighborhoods. I mean, decline was instant.

Philly crime family fell into such fuckin'... shameful drivel, it wouldn't recoup for twenty years.

Testa got fuckin' nail-bombed a year after becomin' don – shortest don in history. Blew pieces of him blocks around Girard Park. I didn't have anything to do with that one.

Testa was a shit don anyway but after, chaos. More murder.

Testa's son Salvie came in, fighting for Scarfo – they called him the crown prince. Riccobene started fighting for territory. The families killed everyone involved in Gino's death. Salvie killed everyone involved in his father's death. Everyone was killin' everyone. Bloodshed, bloodshed, fifty murders, four years— police still ain't found all the bodies. Shit, the turf war ended because Salvie knocked on the window of a jewelry shop where Ruccobene's son was workin' and Ruccobene's son saw Salvie smilin' out the window of his shop – and Salvie was a guy that had himself murder many of Ruccobene's family and his uncles – so Ruccobene's son went in to the back of the shop and shot himself right then and there.

[*contemplative*] Gino would have been ashamed.

It was a fucking disgrace.

Salvie did say something that stuck with me: “I don't even gotta murder these guys...I just show up and they do it themselves.” That stayed with me.

*later...*

I heard it from people on the street, that I should check this guy out, so I was followin' this man that liked to...[*clears throat to say something unsavory*] he-hem, hang around playgrounds. And I was watchin' him and he was watchin' these kids and when he was ready one day, he finally grabbed one. I followed him, shit, I knew where he was goin'

but I couldn't do nothin' at that point. I had to just watch him take this four year old kid that had wandered too far from a parent not worth, and just let this fuck-piece-of-shit take this poor girl, let him take her and traumatize the young thing. Not like I could make an arrest or anything, I ain't CCPD. I'm underground—shit, I ain't there. Can't stop someone if you ain't there. Can't give testimonies in court if you wasn't there, neither. Didn't you know, I was somewhere else. Far away. I don't live here, I don't watch these-these people. [*short pause, long sip*] Got that kid back alive, though. 'Cause there's other ways of fixin' problems if you ain't there.

Led to what we are now.

As the sayin' goes:

Same shit...

Same day, even...

*later...*

You make rabbits disappear, you become a magician. Why? Hah. You got emotion— [*reaches and points into my chest*] deep in there. But you gotta find it and cling. Remember it. You do math, it don't stir up passion no more, fine. But you got dead parents – find that pain in there, embrace it, keep it. Let it fuel the car but never let it drive. Do whatever you can to help it, serve it. Stay with it. 'Cause you losin' your emotion, son. It's in there but you borderline – you're gonna have to work to save it. Heartless makes a dangerous breed and I ain't got no room on board for a sociopath who don't care 'bout shit. Life fucked you up, kid. Yer cross'd. You ain't gonna go home to no cozy bed no more and ain't nothin' on this end welcomin' you with open arms. But if you got pain...hold it, then. Keep it. A man of no pain is a liability.

So's a man of too much.

*later...*

I'm gonna tell you something—no, no chess tonight. Just sit down. [*i sit, look, listen*] When I met Gino, his world didn't much matter to me. He was a nice guy and shit but what the fuck did I care, and he got hisself blasted from the neck up and shit changed, got worse. Got so much worse here. I had a girlfriend. I liked her, and maybe she was sweet on me—I don't really remember—and one night I got recognized as someone affiliated with Gino, which was only half-true and he was dead so I didn't much understand but Harry the Hunchback assumed since I wasn't with the Ruccobenes then I must've been with Scarfo and that motherfucker had one of his guys shoot at me when my lady and I were walking home one night. [*clears throat*] This guy, I knew it was odd, walking straight at us down the sidewalk and I saw him coming, saw him – I knew, I just fucking *knew* – and he was only that [*shows an inch between his index and thumb*] only that fuckin' much quicker. Guy hit me, guy hit her. I hit back, though. Got me in the lung, nicked it, gave me this wonder voice – this gravedigger's voice...hit her in the chest. I got that motherfucker in the face – BOOM, back of his head out straight. I was a better shot—ma'fucker realized it last in his life. She fell and I picked her up. Coughing blood. We were only two blocks from here and I carried her, somehow. Got her to my apartment. She was dead already...I sit next to her, look at her. I mean, I liked her but I was young, I liked many girls. She was dead and I was covered in her blood and my blood, coughing blood, just sitting with her dead body. [*clears throat*] Everyone thought I was dead after that cause I never left the apartment building again. They called me Ghost but this fuckin'—in Philly we don't pronounce the T so it's just Ghos. From then



on I swore I'd kill every one of them motherfuckers. [*a moment of silence*] Look, that girl you was seeing. Matilda, you was seein' her before you came here...? [*i nod*] Shit ended bad between you two, I know only whatcha told me. They found her naked body stuffed behind a dumpster on Passyunk. Overdose.

[*silence*]

I don't ask this often to people up here but...you can make a request. Anything you want right now?

*A guitar.*

*[that night, overlooking the fake panorama of the Philadelphia skyline, i pull up a chair and seeing the tiny artificial lights of the tiny artificial cars, lights move on tiny repetitive tracks to give the illusion of movement, of authenticity, and with the guitar rested over my knee and a foot slightly against the window pane, i sing:*

*SO THERE GOES MY LIFE*

*PASSING BY WITHEVERY EXIT SIGN*

*NO SLEEP TONIGHT*

*I'LL KEEP ON DRIVING THESE DARK HIGHWAY LINES*

*BUT I WILL SEE YOU AGAIN*

*I WILL SEE YOU AGAIN A LONG TIME FROM NOW*

*MY BODY ACHES, AND IT HURTS TO SING  
AND NO ONE IS MOVING  
AND I WISH THAT I WEREN'T HERE TONIGHT,  
BUT THIS IS MY LIFE  
  
AND I WILL SEE YOU AGAIN  
I WILL SEE YOU AGAIN A LONG TIME FROM NOW]*

*later...*

Before I owned this place there was a Chinese or maybe he was Korean, I don't know – an Asian guy, he lived on the third floor and I used to play chess with him sometimes. His English was shit but he used to try and he told me once, said he had a pet...uh, "We have pet, long time ago."

You know, that's how he sounded.

"In my village, we fight wolf," but by wolf, he meant something like a wild dog, vicious dog. Like an offspring of the dingo or some-fuckin'-thing.

"They come, five, six. Attack in packs, Pita-san."

He called me Pita or some shit 'cause I reminded him of a little boy from his childhood named Beeta, something like that. I don't remember. Or he never explained it more than that.

Just sounded like... fuckin'... "Pita" when he said it.

Check.

Anyway, Asian man went on:

“We catch one. Small one. Baby wolf. We raise wolf. But when wolf get older, he begin disappear long time.” [*gets into the story; raises a finger as a point*] “We no find. But he return. Leave again and again but he always return.”

*[focus shifts back to chess]*

Took me a few questions to understand what the fuck he was talking about. He was trying to say that, when the dog—or wolf, whatever, when it disappeared, it returned to the place from which it had come before being domesticated. He kept using some word I didn’t understand to describe where the animal went. I got help and had him spell it out for me and went and eventually translated and it meant something similar to, like...a dark place. Ethereal existence without light was the exact definition – I took it to mean a Shadowland.

His point:

Those taken from the Shadowland always return to the Shadowland.

## THE CLEANERS

The cleaners remove Kevin's body and all the chunks of brain matter and skull from the books and the bookshelf while Cass and Ghos and I move downstairs to discuss upcoming business. The only exit to The Fifth Floor Prison is a narrow stairwell leading to a heavy door at the bottom, one impossible to open from the inside, and beyond that is the apartment #404 which is empty but for a few chairs and a table. Normally we conduct business on the fifth floor but, as there is a dead body in The Library Room, we opt for the floor below.

Ghos pulls out a pair of tiny spectacles and begins reading from a file flecked with Kevin's blood, as it had been beside him when he fired his gun:

"You got two right up. A brother and sister in Chester County for the next two weeks, ain't no different than usual. Kaboni and Kidada Savage, them motherfuckers that firebombed that family of six near Allegheny." He turns to look for Lionel. "Lionel ain't here but he's been waiting for this one. Kidada's the sister, newly arrested. Kaboni was that jack-off we never got to 'cause he got hisself arrested a while back. He planned the firebombing that killed six...including a fifteen month old..." reading, "an elderly woman, a parent, and three other kids..." then back to us, "as well several other murders over the past couple years. State's got an eye-witness testifying against him now, aiming for the death penalty..." Closes the one photo he cracks his knuckles, adding, "What d'you say we hurry up due process. You only got two weeks so..." eyes me, "...move soon."

I nod.

He opens a second tan file, looks over it.

“Second up, we got a long run. Massachusetts. Man we call the Banker. ‘Pharmaceutical consultant.’ This one man has led to a 31% increase in the trafficking of heroin over the past four years. Smart guy, doctorate in biological engineering, worked as a ‘compounder’ for some big name pharmaceutical companies – whatever tha’ fuck that means. The opium he’s been using was legally obtained by federal grants for ‘medical research in the creation of designer drugs.’ Initially his research was supposed to create a new forms of a less addictive pain management medicine for cancer treatment but instead he created an incredibly dangerous, exponentially more addictive and powerful new form of heroin...street name, *Bank*. You’ve heard of it; I’ve heard of it. Now the man works for himself.”

Ghos looks up from the papers he had been reading.

“Caused a lot of overdosing, especially in its early days a few years back.” And he looks to me with a quick glance, then back down. “This one is gonna take time, gonna take the perfect window to get to him, to do it right. When we do...I want all blood and hell in Massachusetts.”

Again, I nod.

## TOBY

Philadelphia Animal Welfare Society on Grays Ferry, all the way across the city. There may have been a closer animal shelter to the house but I chose the place because its name is shortened to PAWS, which is clever.

I like clever.

The isles are filled with animal stink and cage after cage of sympathetic eyes, all of them except one black Labrador that doesn't much seem to care about my presence.

"You sure you want that one?" the tech asks when I head out to leave. "He's prolly gonna die soon. He's real old and I think he's gotta buncha fuckin' tumors in his head."

My brow furrows at the tech's bedside manner.

"He have a name?"

"Toby, I think."

The tech leaves and returns with the old, tumor-filled black Labrador named Toby. His dark eyes give me a fleeting glance as he approaches. My eyes narrow at the dog's indifference, his vague interest and unhurried pace—the tech sees it.

"You sure you want this one?" he asks again. "He doesn't bark or run or play fetch or do anything, really."

Toby gets close and sniffs my hand.

I pet the top of his head.

"Sounds perfect."

## THE WHITE MANOR

"You'll be waiting on the rich," the manager says, "and some of them are women."

I give him a quizzical look, searching for some sort of response. Part of my confusion is in the way he speaks – his voice sounds a bit like a woman pretending to sound like a man, abnormally deep like he's trying to speak from the back of his throat. The rest of him isn't as noteworthy; short, stout, early thirties, buzzed head, round nose with some sort of lump on it.

"See, the staff's mostly girls. That's what the members want. Kind of an unwritten rule of country clubs. But I also need a competent, attractive man. We got lonely women here, too. You know?"

I nod.

The manager can tell I'm not sure what he's talking about but instead of changing the subject he forges on more forcefully.

"I mean to say you're handsome. Or, fine-tuned. Ah-hem. You know, you work out? What d'you bench?" he catches himself sounding odd. "Just...you have any waiting experience?"

"No."

"None? Not even a little?"

"No."

"...you're hired anyway. It's not very hard work. And I could use a buddy, eh." He nudges an elbow toward me but I move my arm so it won't touch me. "Not that that's a bad thing but, more that—camaraderie, you know, between men, when it gets boring, not, wait—not—I... I have to make the schedule. I usually work evenings so it should be up tomorrow night. When can you start?"

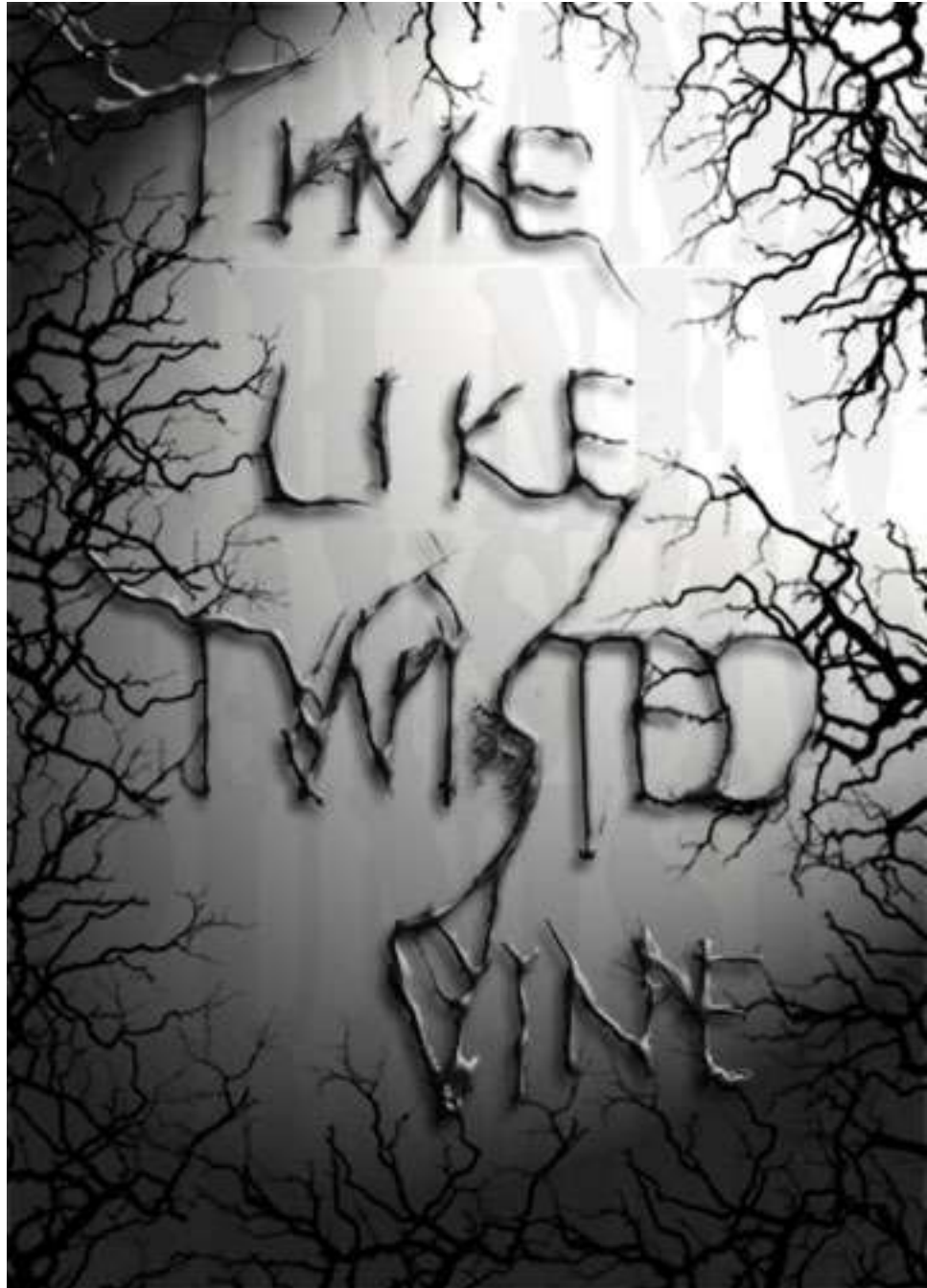
For a brief moment, I contemplate leaving; an experience flashes, the time there had been two blue-ink pens in a pocket that had fallen out in the drier and stained everything. Tiny islands of color, blue, on all of my whites. A surprise like was monumental.

“Um, soon. Any time soon.”

Then, I remember my brother’s call.

“Actually, I can’t start until next week. I have to go to a funeral.”





[a brief interlude](#)  
THE UPSTREAM SOUNDS

I told Matilda about my parents, I said:

“My mother and father got together as kids. They actually lived in the same house.” My voice changed. Lower, softer. “It’s one of the few stories my father ever told me of his life. His stories always involved science. He got me into math and science when I was young when he explained the beginning of geometry to me, that it was the birth of math and that it came from using knotted rope to re-draw lines of plots after the Nile would flood in Egypt. Created right angles and triangles. Greeks called it Geo for Earth and metros for measure. Plato said was a geometer. He had a million stories that like—ha, how could you not love it? That’s what would tell me, stories of scientists and theories and the birth,” I extended my hands out, cupping, “of big, huge developments in physics and yadda yadda. Never his life, though. Except about my mother. I got to hear about her. My mother’s parents left when she was young and my dad’s family took her in. This wasn’t Philadelphia, either; this was Chattanooga, Tennessee.” I always pronounced the name of that town proudly, even though I had never been there. “My father was there the night my mother woke up screaming. He was twelve and she was nine, I think, and he came into her room and my dad said she just, she just kept screaming louder, louder and louder and louder, changing pitch. He told me it was the craziest scream he ever heard. She’d try to speak but it would sound weird and she’d scream again. Different tone. Look of terror in her ‘wild, rambling eyes,’ my dad said in a rare moment of description. He thought she was having a psychotic episode.

Later they tracked down some of my mother's family's medical history and they found that her grandmother had had a rare hearing disorder and that she had been completely deaf as a child. It was congenital. So my mom began the process of losing her hearing. Imagine being nine and knowing you would never hear again, that it was fading – she still had periods where her hearing was fine, it took about two years before it was gone completely – but just imagine knowing you only had a limited time to hear everything in the world. This was also when they moved to Philadelphia, and my mom and dad used to run around Philly trying to hear anything unique, you know, like traffic horns and squealing brakes, sirens. Animals at the zoo. Get close enough, Aardvarks make this strange snorting noise and it always made her laugh. They saw every concert that came to the Spectrum and the Tower and the Electric Factory. Philadelphia Philharmonic at the Mann Center. Books on tape – my dad never understood that one. Must've been the different voices, enunciation, something. Benches at the playgrounds listening to babies crying, children playing." It just so happens that we were near a playground, where a child's crying over a scraped knee drowned out the previous laughter. "She— they tried to fit a lifetime of sound into a few years. And before she lost her hearing completely, my dad made sure she heard him – actually heard him – when he told her, 'I'll never leave you.' And he never did. They died together holding hands."

The anger inside me wasn't prevalent; it was just beneath the surface and festering. She knew, she knew it was there, waiting. I had told her many times that I would end the man or men responsible for the death of my parents. I'm just not sure she believed me. I had begun actively walking the streets at night, looking. Hoping. Waiting. It had been pointless, fruitless entirely, a different world, but I had no other option, no other way to accomplish what was one of the only two reasons why I was still alive, one of the only two purposes to continue.

The other was Matilda, to love Matilda.

Though my nights were spent as a low-rent superhero hulking the streets, waiting to be robbed and killed by an actual criminal (most likely unrelated to the crime of which I was so upset), my days were spent with her. I was pale, anemic. I lived in a small apartment near my parent's house because I couldn't stand being there. Everything existed in that house just the way it did when they left for a night out. It wouldn't be until I got out of the fifth floor prison that I would re-do, return, embrace. Until then, though, I hung on by a thin, loose thread, and that thread was Matilda. She was beautiful. My memories of her are in sunshine. My memories of her are happy, where I was happy even during such a rough transition. Her overdose would be before my transition would end, so she wouldn't see me better, stable, ready.

I murdered the men I felt most responsible for her death, just two loser drug-dealers and an ex-boyfriend. The first dealer I shot in the side of the head on a corner of South Street. I wore a hood and left false evidence in what looked like a random crime. The other dealer fled the state and it would take me some time to track him to West Virginia, so I went after the ex-boyfriend first. He woke as I entered his small studio apartment, either from the door closing or the lights turning on. His eyes opened wide in a panic and I dashed the length of the small efficiency, grabbed his wrist with one hand and repeatedly hit his face with the other. It hurt my knuckles, even with two layers of gloves. He slumped back into bed, his nose bleeding and his lip split. I still had his arm, twisting it behind his back and holding it in place with my knee, leaning most of my body weight on him, keeping his face in his pillow as he cried out. With the rope, I tied one hand tight and reached for the other; he fought, thinking himself tough, trying to keep the arm from me, but a pull on the rope around his other hand and he squealed into his pillow, submitting. My knee on his back, I pulled out the duct tape and grabbed a fistful of hair and yanked his head back, wrapping a piece over his mouth.

I used a second piece of rope to tie his legs together.

My adrenalin was raging, my breath short. He had a foldout chair beside his bed and I fell into it, catching my breath. His floor was covered in dirty clothes, his thin bed sheets stained yellow in spots, an overhead, lingering stench of B.O. and old food. He was wearing only boxers, rolling his hairy body back and forth until he was on his side so he could face me. His eyes were wide but only a little scared, more angry. I tsk at the disappointment of this opponent; he was pathetic. My face was partially covered by my hood but he knew me, knew who I was, and he should have been more scared.

It didn't really matter.

I had no weapons, no threats, and only a question.

My mouth opened, a breath in ready to talk, then a pause...

"Did you give her the heroin that killed her?" I asked him, sure to keep my voice low.

He lifted his head and said something angrily through the tape, obviously not an answer; then he said a muffled, "Fuck you!" over and over until he was out of breath and laid his head back on the bed, continuing to say something angry but this time much more exasperated.

"Tell you the truth, it really doesn't matter," I whispered, "—You were her boyfriend. You should've . . ." and a hint of sadness entered my eyes, my voice, "...you should have taken care of her."

His face fell into the pillow; with one hand, I dialed a number into the pre-paid cell phone and set it next to his head, then start a ream of duct tape, pushing it against the hair at the back of his head. I grab another handful of hair from the top, yank his head back again, and wrap the duct tape continuously around his head – over and over and over and over, pulling tight, over and over and over again – until his entire head was covered, until his head looked like the silver tip to a match, no air escaping.

"Hello, this is Matilda. I'm unable to take your call right now but if you'd like to leave a message with your number, I might get back to you."

The voice was youthful, happy, with a gentleness of tongue.

I had gotten her a phone and paid the bill since the week we started dating. I had wanted the ability to reach her whenever I wanted. When she died, I continued paying the bill thinking it might help me continue to reach her.

I never stopped.

He was frantic, trying to flail or reach his face. I heard the beep of the voicemail and it captured the noises of the man as he struggled to breathe, his muffled gasping, his silence.

## time like twisted vine

### LIZZY

Elizabeth Marie Dawson is dressed in all black, her back to me. She's standing alone under a white Cherry tree whose lowest branch is just above her drooping head. My brother watches from the porch of the funeral parlor in-between polite greetings to those arriving.

She's three-and-a-half years old.

My brother always specifies the "and-a-half."

I walk up beside her tiny frame and look toward the ascending sun. I don't know what to say without frightening her. She doesn't say anything either, instead twisting the tip of her shiny black dress shoe into the soft ground, her dark, curly blonde hair swishing against her shoulders. She glances up with exquisite, curious blue eyes and questioning brow. I force a smile and it's as though she can tell I'm not genuine. Her eyes return to the ground, a slight look of disappointment in them, her foot continuing to twist into the soil.

The rising sun looks still as we stand there in silent introduction.

David approaches and whispers gently that the funeral is starting. He had been having a hard time finding his voice – it comes out frail, visibly distraught, broken at the core. He picks Lizzy up into his arms, her head snuggled against his neck, and they head toward the front door. They have a palpable warmth together, a comfort prevalent in just the few moments I see him handling her.

“The word random,” my brother says in his eulogy, “means ‘not completely predetermined.’ I looked—I had to look it up yesterday.” He cries the entire time he talks but continues to speak succinctly, eloquently. His girlfriend Sarah had no family and David has only me; friends and coworkers fill out the rest of the seats. She had been grocery shopping when she fell to the floor, dead. Blood clot to her brain, something assumed to be the delayed result of a car accident from a few months earlier. There was nothing anyone could have done, no way to have seen it coming.

Just a freak, random incident.

“Not. Completely. Predetermined.”

After the funeral, as the guests leave, David asks to move in with me.

I stare at him.

“With Lizzy?”

“Yeah. I just don’t want to be al—it would only be for a little bit. I just...”

He had called me one night as I was sitting to eat, and when I answered the line he had been sobbing uncontrollably. We hadn’t gotten along well in many years but he said I was the only person he had to call and begged me to come to the funeral. I had wanted to refuse, to not show up, to ditch him from my life completely but...alas, I could not rid myself of my brother, and so from Philly to Florida I flew, and to the funeral I went, and into this ambush I fell.

“Oh, um—” I say, and his eyes sink so fast.

“Please?” he asks, staring at me, begging. “Please.”

“Uh...of course. Just uh give me a few weeks.”



## TAMPA TARMAC

Sometimes I see dead people.

It always feels random when they show up but the delusion is triggered by a lack of sleep. Lately it's been hard for me to sleep when I travel outside the city of Philadelphia. I have no real explanation why but on the few times I've left the city in the past couple years it's gotten worse. When I take my seat on the flight back from the funeral, it's been over a day since I last slept. I fasten the gray belt into the shiny buckle and recline my first class seat a little ways back so that I might rest on the short flight. A stewardess has me sit up for take-off. After a few minutes, the half-rotted corpse of Dr. Kermit Gosnell takes the seat between the window and I.

"Ugh," I moan in disappointment.

"Oh don't give me that shit," he responds, his voice a croak.

Dr. Kermit Gosnell ran a house of horrors "family clinic" for women in need of an abortion. Among his many atrocities, he performed late-term abortions, severed the spinal cords of living babies at the neck, occasionally failed to keep his female patients alive or ruptured their internal organs, and so on. It was something I had to witness firsthand because the account relayed to us by one of the unqualified staff sounded too grisly, too embellished; as it turned out, they hadn't said enough. The West Philadelphia office was an unsanitary nightmare with blood stains and cat excrement and pieces of fetuses in jars. It was like walking off the street and into hell. The office felt dark, even in light, like shadows lingered in the rays of the sun and a feeling followed me every step I was in there, something moist and warm against the back of my neck like something was breathing up against me. Of the many horrors I have witnessed, that place joins a select few on the highest plateau. We didn't get Gosnell

before his arrest and highly not-publicized court hearings where he was sentenced to life in prison. That motherfucker smiled most of the time. We may not have gotten him before his arrest but we sure as shit got him after his sentencing.

“I just...I-want-to-fucking-sleep,” I moan.

“You are,” he says, looking over his shoulder for a stewardess. “Think I can get peanuts—”

“Fuck off,” I say, curling harder against the aisle.

He pinches my arm and it hurts.

“Fuck. Off.” I push his hand away.

“Even dreaming that shit hurts? ‘Cause your mind feels what you tell it to feel,” he tells me like some scientist testing a hypothesis, even pointing to his head; but then he turns back to find the stewardess. “Where the fuck is the peanuts?”

“You don’t—you’re not real. You aren’t going to . . .”

A stewardess passes and the deceased Dr. Kermit Gosnell gets her attention.

“Can I get some peanuts?” he asks.

She tosses him a small packet of airline peanuts.

This only serves as an annoying feature to my delusions.

“Yeah, well, you’re still not real,” I say, practically pouting.

He opens the packet with a snide, “You’re not real,” back at me and pours them all into his mouth at once. “These’re—” he says, half-chewed peanuts falling from his mouth. He stops to finish chewing, swallowing half, the rest across his teeth and mushed up on his tongue. “These’re good.”

“I’m glad I killed you.”

“Yeah, well...some part of me haunts you.”

“You aren’t special, motherfucker.”

“Nigga, you ain’t listenin’—”

A video begins explaining precautions in case of a crash.

“And what am I not hearing?” I ask.

“I ain’t here to explain it. I’m just gonna enjoy my peanuts and—”

His mouth twists agape and his eyes become hollow, black, and an immediate screaming howl escapes his lips as his face fades to bone and the putrefied skin of his hand grabs my arm.

There’s alarm amongst the nearby passengers as I wake violently.

And that is why I don’t sleep outside my city.

## HOUSEGUEST

I return home.

Toby's not at the door. He doesn't respond when I open the front door. He doesn't come down the stairs from the space I made him in my den. He's laying upstairs, sad – or, more accurately, content. He just always looks said, with big droopy eyes, and he gives me a brief nod when I walk in and bend down to his side, rub the black scruff of his belly like a normal animal owner should. “No?” I ask him, as we both find it odd, unnatural, and I stop rubbing his belly. I had laid out a pee pad near him while I was gone for the last 30 hours but he didn't seem to use it or go to the bathroom once while I was gone. It seems he just laid, waiting...not certain that he's waiting for me, though.

I change my clothes before taking him out around the neighborhood to do his business. It's a hot August evening, not scolding but humid enough, sticky. Toby does his business as we walk toward Cobb's Creek Park but, even before reaching the destination, he seems tired and we head back. I don't think I've ever seen that park through and through.

That night, after Toby and I enjoy a brief dinner, we find ourselves back in the den, the black lab by my side as I sit in an old rocking chair, staring out the window. When I was 10, my parents moved us from a townhouse in Northeast Philly to this place, a three-story home in University City. I never visit the old house, haven't in many years.

I think of poem I read once:

Time like twisted vine

Like shattered glass  
I am yours  
You are mine  
But this too shall pass

It was stenciled in black spray paint on the bedroom wall of my dead ex-girlfriend Matilda. She was an artist – she would have loved the Religion Room in the Fifth Floor Prison. Her eyes always saw things the way they could be. Though I don't pass the house from my childhood, I do pass the row house of my dead ex-girlfriend Matilda from time to time. I sometimes stand and stare at the front door. The row house is rather unexceptional and quite common looking except it has always had the brightest red door of any house I've ever seen, almost a glistening neon. Bright, very, very bright red. And I stand there and there aren't any grand memories, no weepy sentimentality, just me staring at a red door – it's a reminder, a sting. Of all the things I own, the front door of her house feels the most tangible, even as it's completely immaterial. Someone else owns the place now, just like the house from when I was 10; they're just houses, and homes had doors, and hers was red. If anything, when I pass her old house it stands before me as an apparition: the living room I can sparsely recreate in my mind; the hallway photos that are out of focus when I try to think of the faces; the dressers and dishes and life inside, all of it is gone.

Gone from the house, fading from my memory, gone.

It is similar to how I remember a great many things from my past, in pieces out of order, shifting, faceless.

Time like twisted vine...

Like shattered glass...

## WAITERING

It takes half an evening of training with Jill the tall, blonde-haired waitress before I understand serving as a series of task and lapse in the form of mathematical formulas. Greeting a table is  $K - g \geq (g+b)+d^2(c+T)$ , with  $K$  as kitchen backlog wait-time and  $g$  as greeting,  $b$  is bread,  $d$  is drinks with an exponential variable dependent on customers,  $C$  is computer wait-time, and  $T$  is bartender wait-time. Food preparation:  $F_i = K+p$ , where  $F$  is food preparation with individual table subscript, and  $p$  is food preparation. New table while stationed with other tables would be  $F_i \geq [K - g \geq (g+b)+d^2(c+T)]/2$  with variables including  $R$  for helping coworkers ahead of my work and  $q$  for conversations that draw my attention – the latter I factor in when the female wait staff sporadically stop working to huddle around the front entrance podium and have conversations such as, “I’m so hung over, I seriously just pooped green,” or, “Ugh, when will I stop bleeding?–it’s like a torrential, like, tropical hurricane down there,” or, “I’m like a cat. I jump or scurry out. But then he tries to get it in my hair anyway or my belly button which sucks ‘cause I got a deepinnie so it’s like, ‘Couldn’t you aim it somewhere else or something, like, hit a lamp or something, right?’”

I’ve never heard such talk before.

The rest of the job is a compendium of menial tasks – make ice tea and coffee, fill coffee creamers and salad dressings and sugar caddies and salt and pepper, stack dwindling supplies, and so on.

At the end of the shift, Jill the tall, blonde-haired waitress takes me to a computer in the front of the bar area near the entrance to the kitchen. As she starts to show me something, the manager appears for the first time all evening to ask if I’m catching on.

“Yeah,” Jill the waitress dismissively answers.

He turns his attention to me.

He is a man made up of details, not really much of a man defined.

Short, stout, early thirties, buzzed head, round nose with some sort of lump on it.

And awkward.

"I hit the gym pretty hard yesterday," he tells me as if I asked, "You ever see *Over the Top*? Dude, Stallone was fuckin' shredded. Like, awesome ripped. And strong hands. You got strong hands?" He looks at my hands. "Looks like you got NBA hands. Those NBA hands? Eh, I'm just messin'. You got a clean spirit."

"Alright, go away," Jill the waitress brushes him off, "I have to show him how to end the shift."

The manager saunters over to the bar and strikes up a conversation with a member while the bartender puts ice into an unassuming Styrofoam cup, then four fingers of vodka, a splash of club soda, a twist of lime, a packet of Sweet & Low, and a cherry. The manager takes the cup and heads back to his office.

"Did he just come on to me?" I ask Jill the waitress.

"No, the Fisher lives with his girlfriend."

"The Fisher?"

"Yeah, we call him the Fisher 'cause the grounds crew sometimes finds him sleeping next to the pond near the green on the 8<sup>th</sup> hole surrounded by crushed beer cans, hugging a fishing pole like a teddy bear. No fish in sight." She points to the computer screen. "End of the night we do a server checkout," and she hits keys on the Point of Service computer system marked CLOSE CHECK and SERVER CHECKOUT, "and that's it."

Jill looks out over the bar and finds a woman sitting alone at a table in the back.

"Shit, I forgot about Mrs. Logothetis. Can you—go over there and ask her if she wants another drink. She's waiting for her husband but he doesn't usually show."

I approach the lonely woman at the table.

“Cosmo, with a cherry,” she says before I have the chance to speak. Her mouth has the twist of a smile but her eyes hint irony, a grin to prevent a tear. She looks to be the most common type in the country club – proud of accomplishment, yearning for the past, saddened by the future, and caught with a look of purgatory.

“You’re new,” she says as I approach once more with her drink. She still has a sip left from her first cosmo, the engorged cherry stuck in the bottom of the martini glass.

“You still in college?”

“No.”

“Are you passionate?” she asks.

I look at her, unsure what she means.

She’s a pretty woman. Dark roots of a dark blonde, short. Librarian glasses, teacher glasses. Soft skin, light wrinkles. The onset of aging but just at the door, too old to be a trophy wife but still younger than most of those around her.

“Don’t say much, do you?”

“Not really.”

“How old are you? Nineteen?” she isn’t looking at me – she’s watching me.

“Twenty-six.”

“Did you already go to college?”

“Yeah.”

She gulps the little bit left of her first Cosmo, pulling the cherry (stem and all) into her mouth.

“Well, I hope you paid attention to your teachers. You can learn...a lot . . .” Mrs. Logothetis pulls the cherry stem from between her lips, tied in a knot, “...from your elders.”



## ALEX & 50 BURNED OUT NEWPORTS & I

It's approaching evening when there's a knock at the door.

Alex – the short, red-haired, ill-tempered Center City police officer – stands outside my front door wearing a weird combination of cargo pants, a bright red-and-blue Hawaiian shirt, and white fedora. He's got to be 5'5, exquisitely short, and I look down to meet his menacing gaze beneath the weird white hat.

"Ghos wants you to come with me," he says, obviously displeased with that decision.

"Where are we going, Cuba? Why are you dressed like that?" I ask, hesitant.

The last place I want to go is anywhere with him. I downright despise Alex.

"Come the fuck on. I don't like it any more than you do."

"Hold on," I tell him, then shut the door without giving him a chance to come inside.

I run up to my bedroom and pull on a baggier white shirt to hide the small Makarov revolver I stuff into the back of my blue jeans; it's the only gun I keep in the house, a black-with-silver-trim .380 Bersa Thunderstorm lightweight – legally obtained and exquisitely tiny. I have permits.

It's my favorite gun.

I leave Toby extra food though I doubt he'll eat more than a mouthful. The food is near his bed in the den, where he spends 95% of his time. I feel like a hospice nurse. It's an odd yet gratifying relationship. When I open the front door again, I find Alex isn't there and hope he had been so disconcerted with the fact I wouldn't let him in that he left...

I'm disheartened when the smoke from a car window catches my attention and I find him in a two-door, gaudy neon blue Corvette parked against the curb. As I approach, he revs the Chevy engine to further get my attention. He honks the car as I walk past the glistening rims, successfully startling me. I take a seat and it's low to the ground. It's a low rider with the windows massively tinted.

"Used to be a spic drug dealer's. Got it at auction. Now it's fuckin' mine."

That's all he tells me about the car, obviously proud of it.

Cigarette ash is scattered around the dashboard, the center panel, around the stick shift, everywhere. The ashtray is open and stuffed with fifty burned-out Newports, the ash spilled over and lifting into the air as Alex speeds off my block at an obscene speed.

"Where are we going?" I ask, one hand and both feet bracing myself.

He shoves the lighter in on the car center panel and pulls a cigarette from the breast pocket of his hideous Hawaiian shirt.

"We're going to take care of the Savages."

## THE SAVAGES (W/ MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY ALT-J)

A man walks into a UPS with a brown box. The box is already labeled, ready to ship. The man is wearing a hat, sunglasses, and has no distinguishing marks. He leaves the package at the desktop while the teen employee is mid-conversation with another customer about pricing. The man exits the store and steps out into the warm August evening. He then walks along Market and disappears in the crowd.

In another part of the city, on the same night, Cass begins his 6-to-6 shift in the hospital ER with a piece of rock candy already shuffling its way around his large mouth. His beginning duties usually include inventory for the night so he heads into the back storage area. He has two lists in his hands; one blank, for the dwindling supplies; and, one full of supplies for the custom pharmacist working in another department. Cass pulls what he needs before writing a few items of short supply, crunching a bite into the purple-color, sugar-rock in his mouth.

*Bite chunks out of me  
You're a shark and I'm swimming  
My heart still thumps as I bleed  
And all your friends come sniffing*

The UPS package ships to the local home-base UPS warehouse around the same time the fourth floor custom pharmacist mixes ingredients like atomoxetine hydrochloride and diloxanide furoate with gum paste. When finished, he has an oblong

tube filled with an opaque blue gel. The tube is sealed inside a tiny cardboard box for shipping and set aside.

My associate and I go to a grocery store and buy a mixing bowl, a spatula, a pastry bag with several attachable nozzles, tinfoil (“Seems like a waste to buy a whole role of tinfoil,” my associate says), superglue, and spearmint Crest toothpaste.

Cass picks up the tube in the box from the custom pharmacist around 9 p.m. and walks it down the stairs, out the side door, and into the parking lot where a gaudy Corvette sits waiting, two men inside. Cass hands the box through the open window to the redheaded driver and returns to the hospital.

The UPS package is scanned on the belt as it moves toward the truck loaders...

In a gas station bathroom, I lock the door behind me and rest my bag on the toilet. The lights are fluorescent and bright and it feels surprisingly appropriate, very lab-like. I slip on latex gloves and open the bag, removing a mixing bowl and a spatula and an empty pastry bag with long, thin nozzle, and a tube of freshly bought spearmint Crest toothpaste, and a small cardboard box with a 6 oz. tube inside. There’s a tiny piece of silver foil over the mouth of the Crest toothpaste and I use a pocket knife to shave it off; then, I empty the tube of toothpaste into the mixing bowl...

*Triangles are my favorite shape*

*Three points where two lines meet*

*Toe to toe, back to back, let’s go, my love; it’s very late*

*’Til morning comes, let’s tessellate*

The UPS package is received by the loader, who scans the package (it is one of many going to this location) and places the light square box on the top of his most recent box stack.

...I open the box and removed the second tube. It's in a similar, cylindrical tube as the toothpaste on it is unmarked. As I did with the toothpaste, I pour the entire contents into the mixing bowl. They're both a sort of gooey-looking blue, quite similar. I stir it using the spatula, mixing them together well, then use the spatula to fill the pastry bag. With the long, thin attachment stuck firmly inside the toothpaste tube, I refill it with the contents from the pastry bag until it's filled to the brim and the plastic tube again feels smooth. I dump everything but the toothpaste container back in the bag. Shuffling under the mess in the bag, I open and pull a small tab of tinfoil from the roll; from my pocket I pull the small marker-shaped roll of superglue; I lightly dab the top, shinier side of the tinfoil with the glue; place the tab of tinfoil dull-side-up on the mouth of the toothpaste container; tuck the glue away; shave the tab of tinfoil using my pocket knife until it's perfectly round, looking similar (not identical) to the way it had before I opened it; toss the gloves back in the bag; and then I open the door using the bottom cuff of my shirt (as I had when I got there) and I exit the store, tossing the bag in the dumpster before returning to the Corvette with a seemingly new, unopened tube of spearmint Crest toothpaste.

*Go alone my flower*

*And keep my whole lovely you*

*Wild green stones alone my lover*

*And keep us on my heart*

Kaboni Savage is 39 years old on the day he dies. He wakes up in prison. Federally indicted and charged with 12 murders, he was just one shy of the Philadelphia record. It's 5:00 a.m. when he wakes up. It was just before 5 a.m. when one of his enforcers doused the house of a federal witness in gasoline. Before tossing in a lit gas can, there were shotgun rounds fired up the stairs. The fire killed the witness' 54 year old mother, and his 15 month old son, his 34 year old cousin and her 10 year old daughter, and two more children ages 12 and 15. This was done as part of pact to kill the mothers of any man turned rat, under one of the most violent drug kingpins in Philadelphia history. Kaboni Savage orchestrated this while in federal custody, and his sister Kidada saw it through.

Kidada Savage wakes up on her final day. She slept later than her brother, until 6:15 ante meridian. She is 31 on this last day. Her once beautiful hair has worn down from the poor quality of the shampoo. Her nails are brittle and chipped from nervous biting. Her breath is awful, as she has run out of toothpaste. This woman had once been attractive but the world has worn her down to an ugly nub.

UPS arrives at the state Philadelphia Industrial Correction Center around mid-afternoon. The delivery man enters through the steel red door and into the front cage, where three guards stand behind bulletproof glass and interact with any incoming prisoners or deliveries. The delivery man slides the electronic scanner through a slot so that one of the guards can sign for the 6 packages he's dropping off. Receiving his device back, with a signature, the delivery man leaves. The packages are divvied up, most heading toward the mess hall but one small, square cardboard box is set aside for the night-shift supervisor, on his desk.

Chester County Prison receives its orders for canteen, which is the prison system for inmates to order daily items. Among the many items, there is a brown paper bag with a tube of Crest toothpaste, shampoo, and a thick-bristled comb. Canteen is handed

off to the prisoners after lunch. Kidada receives her toothpaste and shampoo and comb and goes to work redeeming her hair and breath. She brushes her teeth rigorously and enjoys the taste of spearmint, as everything in prison seems to carry with it the same taste.

When the night-shift supervisor for Philadelphia Industrial Correction Center gets to work at 8:45 p.m. Alone in his office, he finds a package and opens it on his desk. He snickers at the package contents. It also explains why it was so light. There's a note he reads before handing the package contents to the shift-guard of K block.

Kidada brushes her teeth even more thoroughly just before bed.

A small electronic car, no bigger than a foot, revs to life with a bag of crunchy Cheetos strapped to its top. The car buzzes gently down a narrow air duct leading down the prison corridor of K Block. People may not fit in there but the car is perfectly sized, fitting even with the .99 cent bag of Cheetos on top. The lights are already out for the night but the prisoners are still awake. The remote control car reaches the end of the duct and hits against the aluminum siding. The controller of the car – the K Block shift guard – hears the faint echo of the crash (as do the inmates, as the long air duct leads into each cell), and he backs the remote control car ever so slightly and he turns it right. The inmate in cell 34B uses his tiny flashlight while he opens the grate (that had been generously opened by the shift guard quite some time ago for the distribution of contraband), removes the car, pulls off the bag of Cheetos, replaces the remote controlled car, closes the vent, and reads the post-it on the bag for its final destination.

*Three guns and one goes off*

*One's empty, one's not quick enough*

*One burn, one red, one grin*

*Search the graves while the camera spins*

## PAT'S OR GINO'S

"I recently started a fake account on a dating site," Alex starts.

"Why?" I ask, completely disinterested.

After dropping off the Crest toothpaste tube, Alex and I had driven to a house owned by a man nicknamed The Banker. The Banker is to be the next high profile target we go after, something we seldom ever did. High profile is bad news; however, this man, The Banker, has been a high supplier of quality heroin in our city for years and there doesn't seem to be anything working to stop him. He usually stays in Boston, where he lives, but we had received news that he might have come back to the city recently. Alex and I sit in his Corvette watching the dark windows of a large house on the outskirts of Philadelphia. There hasn't been the single sign of life.

"Cause I knew my ex was on there. Got a picture of some attractive dude and made up a story about how he comes to Philly sometimes and contacted her, started up a relationship over the internet. We start texting – had Bartleby give me a new number to text her under. So I'd text her and e-mail her and kept it up for some time, got her to send me dirty photos."

"Why?" I ask again.

"Bitch dumped me after a month. Said I was too fuckin' much or some shit. Fuck her, put those pics all over the internet with her full name—how's that for mean, *bitch*. Let's see someone google her name now." The red of his hair reflects in the darkness of the car, especially as he gets mad. He's sunken in the seat, as we're trying to be hidden, but he's tiny and already well hidden. "Fuckin' girl was a starfish, you know. Just a lay-in-bed-spread. Fuckin' bitch, goddamn negative fuckin' Nancy. Shit though, we do what we do."



I remain silent, time passes.

"I need a cheesesteak. Let's get the fuck outta here. Somethin' must've spooked this douche-cunt outta town if he was even here to begin with. Pat's or Geno's?" he asks, leaving the neighborhood and heading toward Southeast Passyunk.

"Just drop me off, I got plans," I lie.

"Fuck off. Little late for plans," he says, disbelieving. "I'm driving, you're coming. Ain't many meals I get to eat with other people. Not like you're good company anyway."

I check my watch – 10:47 p.m.

We park facing the red picnic tables and neon lights of Pat's Cheesesteaks.

"You want here or Geno's?" he asks.

"I don't give a shit."

I am hungry and I step out to get food. The scent of grilled meat and onion is appealing and I grow hungrier as I wait in the short line to order. There are a few younger people hanging around, as there always seems to be – high school kids from the neighborhood lingering about, sitting on tables, often carrying a slightly ominous look. Alex is several steps behind me, pulling up his pants, throwing his hat back into the car and brushing his fingers through his thin, short-cropped red hair. Someone gets in line behind me as Alex approaches but he walks past and gets in line next to me.

"Yo, there's a line, man," the guy behind us says.

Both of us turn to look at the man. He's bald and tattooed, taller than I am, thick but not especially muscular, wearing a black tank-top and track pants. I glance and look away whereas Alex glares an extra moment longer; then he turns forward and prepares to order as the person in front finishes paying. The man behind us extends his forearm and aggressively taps Alex twice on the shoulder. I can see an ugly, faded ace of hearts on his wrist, the words DO NOT RESUSCITATE underneath.

Alex lowers his head in disappointment.

“Short faggot—this your date?” he says, snapping his hairy fingers to get our attention like we’re dogs.

Alex and I look at each other. His eyes are full of rage.

“Fuck,” I mumble.

What follows is a flurry of Alex’s movements and the man’s grunts and groans. There’s a sickening SNAP in there somewhere, I think the man’s jaw. Alex gets the man on the pavement and continues beating him.

As I walk away, thuds and groans continue.

Onlookers panic.

And I hear Alex scream, “DO NOT RESUSITATE, MOTHERFUCKER!”

## TRYING TO BE HUMAN

The next night at the country club is especially slow, adding to the uselessness of such obvious training. Put orders in a computer and bring the order out when the kitchen is finished. I still follow Jill the tall, blonde haired waitress all night.

A few tables come in.

Supplies were stocked during the lunch shift as it had also been slow.

At 8:00 p.m., a 20 person board-meeting starts in the large ballroom across from the main dining area.

Mrs. Logothetis comes into the bar area, sits alone, has a few drinks. Once again, Jill somehow forces me to be the one to entertain her as her waiter – I'm the person to make sure she has what she needs, gets whatever keeps her happy. And, of course, she asks to take my picture on her camera phone. When questioned, she gives no response – only a bit of persuasion – and I very, very reluctantly agree. She has another drink, keeps the conversation light, then leaves.

Once everything's done, tables gone, bar's empty, server checkouts completed, the staff gathers around the empty bar until the Fisher comes from his office, red-eyed and intoxicated, so he can proclaim, "No'un's goin' home 'till the meeting ends and we clean the ballroom."

There's a series of exasperated groans and complaints as we all take a seat at the empty bar counter. The Fisher moves behind the bar, presumably to make himself another drink.

"Make us some drinks?" one of the waitresses asks.

"Whatcha drinkin'?" the Fisher asks.

The waitresses – Shauna, Shannon, Sharon, and Jill – all ask for Yeungling drafts.

"Johnny Walker Blue, rocks, splash of water," I ask.

I had grown a taste for it since the last time I had had it.

"Whoa," the Fisher laughs, "takin' it up a notch. My man!"

He tops off the last of the drafts, lumbers over to the wall of bottles at the back of the bar, pulls the Johnny Walker Blue, two rocks glasses, and makes us both the same drink; then he pulls out five shot glasses.

"And a round of red headed sluts," he chuckles, mixing peach schnapps, Jagermeister, and cranberry juice, shaking it up with some crushed ice before pouring them into the tiny little glasses.

I pass as I'm the only one that has to drive home.

Most don't even own a car since everyone lives in the city.

"Nope," the Fisher says, pushing the shot closer to me. "Sobriety's the biggest downer at a party. Go drunk or go home, bud. And I need you here when that party clears out."

There's no room for designated drivers in a city without cars.

*This is the reason I wanted to work at a country club,* I remind myself. *I need to act my age, drink, have fun.* I breath in deep and take the shot, which is fruity and terrible, and the Fisher pours another, as he mixed too much the first time around.

"Say a toast, new guy," one of the waitresses tells me.

"Uh," we all lift our glasses, "get it hit enough – it hurts, mo'fuckers."

"That sucks," one girl says but we drink the shots anyway.

More beers, more whiskey, more shots, and the night moves faster...

Someone falls off something and someone spills a drink and someone accidentally burns a cushion and someone breaks a bar glass. The Fisher corners me and goes on and on about stuffed-animals with the likeness of late-80's WWF wrestlers. Also, he secretly turns the heat up too high in an attempt to get everyone in their underwear. Someone comments that Sharon is the only one not sweating.

“I have undeveloped sweat glands,” she responds. “My body has trouble hydrating itself.”

This causes everyone but me to laugh, hard, one of the girls doubling over with tears in her eyes. As she slows her laughing, she admits to having “peed a little.”

I ask – no one knows why it was funny.

More beer, more whiskey, more shots...

“Shauna, she’s into you,” the Fisher tells me in a moment when we’re pissing side-by-side in the bathroom. I had gone to the men’s room alone and started. He followed soon after but, since the stream had already begun, I was trapped with my penis out while standing next to him. Shauna’s the slender one, tan skin and long, highlighted hair; her features are doe-like, petite in the best kind of way – thin lips and beautiful, soft eyes.

“Into me?” I ask.

“Yeah—are you an alien? Yeah. She’s diggin’ your shit, man. Throwin’ you vibes.”

He says this eyeing me and I see the odd growth on his nose close up.

“Really?” I ask, still uncertain if he’s joking.

“Uh. Yeah. Take her in the coatroom.”

He shakes his head, smirking.

I take his word for it.

I’m definitely drunk.

When we come back to the bar:

“Shauna, come to the coatroom with me,” I say, my voice loud so as to be heard over everyone else.

This causes everyone to stop and look at me.

“Why?” she asks, curious.

“Um,” and I look to the Fisher.

He melodramatically mouths two words.

"You'll...see," I speak the words he mouths as he mouths them.

A round of boisterous laughter from the females (and the Fisher) and they continue with their conversation, undeterred.

"Hey, watch this," the Fisher says, excitedly.

Like a child that needs attention, he runs into the lobby to try something acrobatic, flipping (or, more accurately, rolling) over the couch. It's sloppy and he shatters an expensive mahogany coffee table on his landing.

More beers, more whiskey, more shots...

## RAFTS

*I'm not alone, which is an unusual feeling – the sensation of someone with me. I'm always alone, it feels. Even if other people are with me, they're never with me. This time, though, I have the very distinct feeling that someone is with me, beside me, and it's so real that I can feel it against my skin.*

*There's an empty pool behind a hotel, a green cover overtop to keep out the cold winter debris. A lamppost overhead cries yellow, filtering through the tarp, illuminating the empty pool in navy-blue. There are no edges down here in the deep end, just curves. A woman is next to me. I don't know her but she's so close that I can smell the sweat of her skin.*

*A palpable lust is in my blood – desire on a primal level, an affliction, the taste of a craving. A flu for the heart. Her naked body presses against mine but I can't see her face. No matter how hard I try, I can't see her face. My arms are around her, holding her tight, keeping her against me. Her body trembles as we kiss, and I still can't see her face, inches from mine.*

*The space around us is wide, vacant, and it makes us together feel that much more alone. And the more I try to hold onto her, the more my hands slip from her body. She floats back as if underwater, her soft black hair waving up and out in all directions.*

*Then she's gone.*

*When I climb out to find her, it's no longer a hotel pool with the tarp over it but the embankment of a coal black river. Makeshift rafts float downstream, cracked logs tied together by blonde reams, some of them covered in moss, and all of them carry people I recognize but cannot place.*

## 8<sup>th</sup> HOLE

I wake, my arms reaching out for no one, nothing but emptiness.

There's a large, decrepit hand of bone and rotted flesh reaching for me over a pit of black. I sit up, bewildered. Sleep leaves my eyes and to my left I see a flag dancing on the early morning wind. Triangular and outlined in red, it's unmistakable:

Hole 8.

In front of me, on the opposite side of the black pond, there's a single tree, thick in the center, it's sparse, thin branches outright and twisting; it had looked like the hand of a skeleton.

There are crushed beer cans all around.

I sigh deeply, recognizing the deep burn of a hellacious hangover.

"What the fuck," I mutter, checking myself over. My button-up work shirt is still on, my pants zipped and closed. My hands rub from my chest to my thighs to my ass and everything feels normal.

With my eyes shut, I use a hand to lightly reach back and feel the ground behind me. A sad moan escapes my lips at the touch of a fishing poll handle. Coiled around it is a human leg, clothed. There's a mumble. Movement, rolling over. Snoring. In carefully paced inches, I turn my head with one eye half-open.

The Fisher's out cold, his fishing poll between his legs.

"What the fuck," I mutter again, leaving the Fisher to sleep it off.

In the distance, I can see the grounds crew laughing.



## A FIGHT AT THE END OF THE UNIVERSE

“Is the ambiance down?” I ask.

The Fifth Floor Prison has low-broadcasted white noise to prevent prisoners from going insane – horns, hint of traffic, a heavy breeze, an airplane in the overhead distance – the sounds close but with the feeling of rehearsal, fake like stock television sound effects. It helps with the solitude of being lock on the top floor of an apartment building without exit.

Cass, Alex, and I are selecting our weapons from the large arsenal in the closet of apartment #404, the only apartment with access to The Fifth Floor Prison. The bed is pulled out and, behind it, a section of detachable drywall is swung open next to the large, make-shift doorway. (With the door open, you can see that the drywall is the face to a sturdy door.) Inside the passage way is too dark to make anything out but, to the right, there are stairs leading up to the only door of The Fifth Floor Prison. Once locked up on the top floor, there is a steel-reinforced door top and bottom. Once the dry-wall is pushed swung closed, it locks automatically with a small sliver carved out for a long metallic key to unlock. Even with such precaution, no one has ever tried to escape, from what I’m told. The thought crossed my mind more as an exercise, while I was a prisoner of The Fifth Floor Prison; truthfully, I felt at home there more than anywhere. Silence and chess, exercise and peace. My house now is modeled much the same as what I most enjoyed about The Fifth Floor Prison.

“Yeah, lights are out. Sounds are off. He’s asleep on the couch,” Lionel answers my question about the state of top floor. When everything is off, from overhead lights to the ambiance to the fake Philadelphia panorama past the floor to ceiling windows, The

Fifth Floor Prison feels like outer space, like floating, a complete absence of light. It is quite a feeling, especially when you're attacked in it.

Lionel and Ghos are there while we pick our guns but they never participate.

"He a movie fan?" Alex asks, as the upstairs occupant fell asleep on the only couch on the floor, which is in The Television Room.

I am already eyeing Alex. The short man is in yet another bright Hawaiian shirt. The man likes attention. He takes these things more serious than Ghos intends them. This is preparation from the impossible, to overcome the nervousness of attack, to be ready to die. Any of us can attack the occupant whenever we want, to varying degrees, but the point is not to hurt them but prepare them. Sometimes Alex loses sight of this, the redheaded fuck – he blacked two of my eyes the first time I met him, during his first attack when I was blind to the darkness and only trying to defend against much better equipped threats.

"Yeah, he's always watching movies when he's got free time."

"I thought you wanted the next one to be a girl?" I ask Ghos.

Ghos had, on several occasions, talked about the next occupant of The Fifth Floor Prison being a young girl so that it would open different doors that we, now, could not due to the fact we were a sausage fest. I had met females that passed information or did little deeds, like the prison guards (and inmates) or local workers that we used for this and that, but none in the inner circle – as of now, it was just Cass, Lionel, Alex, myself, Bartleby (whom I had still yet to meet), and Ghos.

"It's harder to find a girl, get her up here and lock her up without no one noticin'," he answers. "But I'm still lookin'. I do have some ideas..."

There follows an odd silence that I notice.

"What're you gonna put on the speakers?" Cass asks.

"Johnny Cash," Ghos spits, in his disgruntled, sandpaper tone.

Once we've made our selections – Alex with a Desert Eagle, Cass and I with automatics – we turn out the lights, pull on the night vision goggles, and head up the stairs, while Lionel and Ghos wait.

Before we go in, Alex asks:

“What's his name again?”

\* \* \*

Benjiman Dentist is the new recruit and he's sleeping on the couch in The Television Room when something – someone – wakes him, a scraping sound followed by a short thud against a wall. The room is a shade of pitch-black that he has never encountered. The whole floor is black – city panorama is off, lights, sounds, everything – only an absolute darkness like a limitless abyss, like the end of the universe.

It feels a little like floating.

And Benjiman Dentist can hear several people maneuvering in the blackness.

This is new to the young man. He had only agreed one day earlier to this “training” or “internship” or whatever the hell it was called, and he had not been prepared for what it might involve. That man with the rasp voice hadn't accurately described what would happen, though he had specified that he wouldn't until he, 17 year old Benjiman Dentist, had agreed to give five months to The Fifth Floor Prison; what that could entail, he could only guess. The money that was promised, however, would talk anyone into anything, so he agreed...to give five months...to train, for what he was unsure...in a place called The Fifth Floor Prison.

As Benjiman Dentist realizes the lights are out, that other people are with him on the fifth floor, so also begins a litany of stings all over his body – quick, very individual,

like bee stings. He's up, frantic, and jumps himself over the couch, under attack, very awake, and trying to gain composure, gain awareness. Someone's in the threshold of the room, a rapid SNICK-SNICK-SNICK noise giving away their position.

He lays on the floor behind the couch, on his back, dazed.

Shuffling from the threshold.

More SNICK-SNICK-SNICK.

More stings, only on the top half of his body.

A male chuckles in the darkness.

And then Johnny Cash begins blaring on the radio, disorienting and masking most of the sound.

*I do my best to hide this lowdown feelin'  
I try to make believe there's nothing wrong  
But they're always asking me about you darling  
And it hurts me so to tell 'em that you're gone  
If they ask me I guess I'd be denyin'  
that I've been unhappy all alone  
But if they heard my heart they'd hear it cryin'  
Where's my darling, when's she coming home*

Benjiman Dentist stands and rushes the doorway, head down like a line-backer, pushing out past the threshold until he hits face-first into the window.

More SNICK-SNICK-SNICK.

His back, the back of his thighs, the whole back of his body – top-to-bottom – lights up with red-hot stings.

More chuckling.

From against the window, he kicks out and back toward the noise, making contact with what he hopes to be an arm pointed towards him but feels more like the top-end of a thigh—

More SNICK-SNICK-SNICK, this time from another source.

The right side of his body gets stung – opposite the person whom he kicks – from deep in his neck to his chest.

The word “motherfucker” comes from behind him, a reaction to the kick.

Benjiman Dentist brings his hands up close to his chest as if he’s hugging himself, then spins back toward the voice behind him to get in for close combat. Only as he reaches them does he realize how large they are, and duck-shaped; his head doesn’t even reach their chin, which is what he’s aiming for as he sloppily hits at them – instead, he hits somewhere around their fat-covered sternum.

“He’s a fighter,” a voice says in the background.

SNICK-SNICK-SNICK, from the other source farther away.

The tiny bee stings, the little pellets, ceramic B.B.s, they hit all across his body as he spins, the SNICK-SNICK-SNICK unceasing as he punches the large fellow behind him, the sound of little pings on the ground as whatever’s being shot hits their target and lands bouncing on the hardwood floor.

“Mo’ fucker, ya hittin’ me,” says the big fellow as he attacks.

*I chuckle and stop firing, well aware that I was also hitting Cass.*

Benjiman Dentist knows the talk isn’t for him as his punch had landed with a resounding chuckle. He aims a punch into – *what he assumes to be* – the belly of the big guy, and again his attack is met with a deep chuckle.

“Let me get a shot in,” says a third entity, down the hall behind the big guy.

“Fuck!” Benjiman Dentist desperately mumbles, overwhelmed.

“Do it – he hit like a bitch,” the big voice says.

Benjiman Dentist tries to shove the big guy.

A quick CRACK comes from somewhere near the big guy, also in the corridor.

It sounds different from the other shots, hits his arm, and easily hurts the worst.

“Ow, motherfuck—” and Benjiman Dentist rushes at the new sound.

The big guy backs against the wall – he gets out of Benjiman Dentist’s way and lets him pass. Benjiman Dentist reaches the new sound, attached to a growling, stocky third person.

“Don’t,” Cass calls out – to Alex or Benjiman Dentist I’m unsure – but it’s too late. Benjiman Dentist goes for Alex’s body, his throat, his face, just trying to defend himself. Alex drops the Desert Eagle, grabs Benjiman Dentist by the wrist, twists his arm, spins him around and upside down until Benjiman Dentist’s flipped onto his head and unconscious on the ground.

We scream the word “Lights!” until Lionel and Ghos stop the music and turn on the lights.

“Alex, you motherfucker,” Ghos scolds him.

“Fucker shouldn’t have come at me,” Alex says, unremorseful.

“That’s the whole fuckin’ point of the exercise.”

I remain quiet but continue a mounting dislike for Alex the Officer.

## BENJIMAN DENTIST

When Benjiman Dentist comes to, I'm standing in the doorway, looking out the floor-to-ceiling windows, studying the lighted landscape that is, in fact, not real. The view is much higher than the fifth floor, probably closer to a thirtieth floor perspective. It's also a view from the center of Center City, where we aren't. When realizing this for the first time, the entire floor begins to feel like a different planet, like an alien recreated their perception of the human city Philadelphia in order to trap and sustain a person. The whole floor is unnaturally pristine, immaculate from the polished wood parquet to the ordinary overhead lighting. There's a lingering smell like disinfectant and some inoffensive potpourri, very calculated in a way. And the eerie, unmoving panorama, unmoving sky, unmoving life on the ground, the cars in their place, lights still and unflattering, without any spark – there's a beauty to it, like admiring the finished product of someone's hard work. I like its comfort of reality, the stillness – it reinforces the fact that this isn't my planet, that these aren't real people, that none of it matters.

“Who—the fuck?” he mumbles, barely conscious.

Benjiman Dentist sits up, startled by my presence. He's young and skinny, frightened; he curls into a scared little ball. I turn and face him. He's lying on the couch in The Television Room, an ice pack already positioned under his head.

“Hello.”

I walk over to him.

“Why're you here?” he asks, the fear of God in him. He probably expects to die any second, a fear Ghos works very hard (and successfully) to sustain – it's one of the four main functions of the fifth floor prison:

Accept the possibility you could die at any second, and move on.

Live and sleep like you could be attacked at any second because, while on the fifth floor, you probably will be.

Adhere to a healthy routine– i.e. exercise, diet, reading, chess, etc.

And form a healthy, Stockholm Syndrome-induced relationship with Ghos.

“Calm it, I’m not going to kill you,” I inform the young Benjiman Dentist. “I just got knocked out early...sort of like you.” I think it’s funny but he doesn’t get it; I’m talking about poker, which Cass, Alex, Lionel, and Ghos are still playing in The Library Room. (I got knocked out on a bogus hand where I was 89% to win, but that 11% dogged me as it sometimes does. I loved probability.) “We play poker once a week. You would’ve known that if,” I raise my voice, “Alex wasn’t such a douchebag.”

A “Fuck you, loser” comes from The Library Room.

“How’s your head?” I ask him.

“It fuckin’ hurts.”

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“You’re hairy for a seventeen year old,” I tell him.

His face has the start of a beard, his black hair past his shoulders and very straight. He looks like he would be wearing a black heavy metal tee-shirt if he didn’t have to wear The Fifth Floor Prison uniform – white, long-sleeved shirt and loose fitting white pants, pretty much a karate gi, with no underwear or undershirt. It’s the only clothes ever found in the bedroom drawers of The Extra Bedroom, the only choice.

“It’s okay. This is new, I get it.” He scrunches his legs even closer and I sit next to him but look forward, not at him. “We all went through it. Don’t worry. Everything gets, uh, easier, I guess. In some ways.”

“What’s your name?” he asks me.

“We don’t use our real names up here, as I’m sure Ghos has told you. Lionel always called me Wee Blaze.” He looks confused. “It’s something Lionel came up with,



came up with it the first moment he met me. And it fucking stuck somehow. So call me Wee Blaze, I guess. Or sometimes Ghos calls me Silence with a Capitol S but he's the only one."

Benjiman Dentist continues looking disoriented, confused.

"Why did you pick the name Benjiman?" I ask him.

"I had an uncle named Ben, died fighting a fire."

"And you admire him?"

"He died saving people."

"I can see why Ghos picked you, then."

Someone angrily cusses from The Library Room. They stand, shove in a chair, and walk down the corridor.

Alex the Officer appears in the doorway, looks in at the kid.

"Lucky I didn't break your fucking neck," he growls, then leaves.

"That's Alex," Benjiman Dentist looks at me and I glance over, "but, seriously, fuck him. He's an angry little man and you won't have to spend much time with him."

Ghos will eventually give young Benjiman Dentist a job.

We all have our jobs.

Some are dirtier than others.

## TEACHING

Toby's in the same position when I get home the next morning. He seldom moves without encouragement. I take him for a walk – no farther than four blocks – he does his business and we return home.

I spend the day making sure my house is clean.

Sometime around 4 p.m. I head to the country club. Again, it's a slow night. They assume I'm capable of performing the menial tasks alone so they take me off training and give me a small section, just the bar tables. There's maybe three tables all night, and Mrs. Logothetis comes in around the end of the shift. She sits alone at a bar table, as always, and drinks.

Again, I am her waiter.

Thus far, I have been her waiter every time I've worked.

First up, she orders something different – gin martini, extra dirty.

When I bring it back, she has what looks like a pile of typed essays in front of her; she also has a pair of thick, wide nerdy school teacher glasses pushed to the end of her nose. I set her drink down and remove her menu since she never orders food. A glance up at me, a smile, and she drags me into her life briefly.

"Don't become an English teacher," she tells me as if I asked.

"Where do you teach?"

"Roosevelt Middle."

"My father used to teach at Drexel."

"Oh yeah? What'd he teach?"

"Physics."

"Oh? Does he still teach?" she asks.

“No. He passed away.”

“Sorry.”

I don’t respond.

She goes back to grading for another two drinks, a cosmo and another gin martini, extra dirty; her order of a third (“An appletini?” I have to double-check) is more than usual (from the past two times, at least) and she begins to slur halfway through her third drink.

“So ddd’you read?” she asked.

“Uh, not in a while.”

“I have a book you should read. It’s at my house but I,” Mrs. Logothetis tsks, “I don’t think I should drive after this. Unless,” she speaks in a practiced tone, “you think you can drive me home?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I answer a bit quicker than I should.

What can I say, I’m intrigued by her. She’s older and, with a sweep of her dark blonde hair, she moves her head up to look at me, a bit unsure. She has almost no wrinkles, just the beginnings of them at the corners of her dark eyes. Though I feel I can read her, she carries a poker face when we interact. Solid—never staring, watching. Her outfit is much the same, without much bared. Tan blouse with short neckline. Black skirt to the knees.

“Give me a ride. You can borrow the book,” she finally nods.

I go find the Fisher, tell him Mrs. Logothetis is too drunk to drive home and has asked me to do it; by this point, the shift’s about over anyway.

“Do it, squirt,” he says, and I wince a little at his choice in nicknames.

We meet in front of the country club without a word. She follows me to my car, I open the door for her, and she gets into my red Ford Escort station wagon, as opposed to the new model Benz she had driven to the club. The engine turns, I reverse, and we drive toward her house in a silence broken only by her occasional directions:

"Left here."

"Straight at the stop sign."

"Left here."

"Left here."

"At the bottom of the hill's a dirt road on the right."

"Follow the road to its end."

We're on a desolate dirt "road" in the middle of a dark forest, fast approaching a dead end.

And then I run out of road.

"Park. Turn off your car."

I do as she says.

Once my headlights are off, I can see out over several acres of open land, a few scattered trees, all of them in bloom under an open, cloudless sky. The stars are bright, the crescent moon large on the horizon; it's serene, quiet. There's a moment while we remain in the car, in the silence. Her outline is still, her chin up. I can smell her, liquor and sweat and peaches. Her lips part, just a shadow beside me.

"Come on, out. Les go," she says, opening the door.

"Where?"

"You'll see," she says, briefly crossing the tips of her fingers over the top of my hand as it rests on the wheel.

And, with just that hint of touch, I do as I'm told.

## HOUSE IN THE CLOUDS

Mrs. Logothetis stumbles a bit as she leads me out into an open field. She doesn't speak for the first ninety yards as we traverse soft ground a moist, long grass. She steers us toward a lonely oak tree, one very wide and especially tall risen up in the middle of an otherwise flat field. As we reach the tree, she says:

"Climb."

"Climb?"

"Yeah. Climb. Thereer's a house in the clouds."

My eyes focus a bit more on the upper branches of the trees. Through the twenty feet of thick, twisting limbs, there appears to be the flooring of a wooden loft, high up. It's a tree house. There's no ladder leading up, only a path of dense, winding branches.

"What type of tree is this?" I ask.

"Who gives a shit, climb."

As I climb, hand over hand, I find the branches to be the perfect width for climbing, large enough to be sturdy, hard enough to grab yet oddly soft bark, and the perfect space to maneuver upward without hitting your head. It is as if the tree grew a passageway up. It's dark and, for the first time in a while, I'm the only one making noise as I climb. Mrs. Logothetis, as I look down, is moving nimbly like a cat. The blondest streaks in her hair shine amidst the dark roots. There is a moment where I swoon, watching her move. Each arm is sure of itself, her hand grabbing and pulling herself with confidence, even through the drunk. Her hair, the blonde amongst the dark, and her arms, lissome and apt, like twisted vine...

And then she grumbles, waiting on me to ascend.

The loft, as I pull myself in, is maybe the size of a dorm room. Mrs. Logothetis follows, strikes a hidden match, and lights a lantern. There's a mattress on the wood floor, clean and already made in (what at least appears to be) satin sheets. A small bookcase, dolls, blue cooler, window overlooking the open field. There's a poster of Bobby Sherman and Corey Haim.

It's old, used, and smells like sawdust.

She's breaths in deep and it sounds drunk. Her eyes are open but I can see she's not really staring at anything, and she turns to stick her head out the window. I sit on the bed, waiting. There's a moment of dry heaving from Mrs. Logothetis with her head out the window before she's turned back and sitting slumped against the thin wood planks of the wall.

"Book's over there. The Prophet. Khalil Gibran. Isss yours," she says and wipes her mouth with her sleeve.

I find it, pull it out, and set it aside.

And then we have this conversation:

"Are you going to be alright when I leave?"

She thinks, then answers:

"I wasn't alright to begin with."

"Ok. But, I mean, if I leave now, are you going to be okay?"

"You ever been in a bad situation?" And, before I can answer, "Not just a bad situation butta hollow one. Something you've known so long...become accustomed to the misery—you down even know what you't do if you'er happy."

"Yes. I do."

"You've been married?"

"I've been in love."

"And it ended badly?"

"Is there any other way?"

"My marriage is disin'egratin'," she says. "I doun know what...I lift here my whole life. This is my treehouse from when I wuza lil' girl, and now I got a shit husband now, and . . ."

"And, what do you do now?"

"Yesssssss. What's...what's the next step?—I feel like a coward. Isssss like the end but the beginnin' that hasn't start'it yet."

"There's no guarantee of happiness."

"Exactleeee...is it always this sour?"

"I don't know."

"Read page fifty."

Crouched and leaned closer to the fire-light lantern, I open the book to page 50.

"On Passion and Reason?"

"Yeah."

"Your soul is oftentimes a battlefield, upon which your reason and your judgment wage war against your passion and your appetite. Would that I could be the peacemaker in your soul, that I might turn the discord and the rivalry of your elements into oneness and melody."

Her eyes are closed when I finish.

A moment later, she's asleep.

## GHOSTS WELCOME

After I leave Mrs. Logothetis peacefully sleeping, tucked in to her makeshift bed, I return home.

There is a ghost waiting for me.

This was an occasion that seemed to be growing in frequency as time moved forward – it had started with seeing them in the distance. Out of focus. Waving, maybe. Or signaling. Then, they got closer. Little by little, the ghosts got closer. Then they were close enough to talk, which they, at length sometimes. They may not have been real – and I was never sure if I was awake when I would talk to them, as it was always in a real place at a seemingly infinite time. Waving on the side of the road, and then closer, and then I was speaking to the murderers and rapists and drug dealers I had myself murdered, or seen to their death. I wasn't surprised or scared. It had seemed to only take place when I hadn't sleep in days...

And it didn't start until after my parents had died...

Until after Matilda had died...

But before I had killed anyone, which was odd.

There was a ghost standing at my window.

"My baby," I hear her voice call to me, "what have you been doing?"

"Am I...?" but I don't finish.

I'm not sleep deprived, not this time.

The woman turns.

"No—not you," I moan.

My eyes darken, wince.



She's in a thin, light cerulean robe with a tee-shirt underneath, both blood-soaked from wounds in her back. Her black hair sparkles in the darkness. Her smooth skin in the moonlight lacks color, lacks blood beneath the surface, pale as the moon.

"Your pain shall be eased, your burdens relieved," she coos, her silk voice stinging like a thorn.

Even when she was alive, I never heard my mother's full voice.

She's taller than me by an inch. The details of her face elude me, even as I stare into her familiar eyes. Her cold arms wrap around me, bringing me against her still warm, still wet, blood-soaked breast. I can smell a faint perfume, hints of jasmine. Her hand finds its way to my hair, each finger covered in still-warm blood, each finger spreading out, each finger caressing the back of my head.

It feels so good to be embraced.

"It's okay," she keeps saying.

When she backs away, her blood covers my cheek, my hands, hair, chest.

She looks down at me calmly and signs with hands blood-soaked and dripping:

*You need to hold on,* she signs.

*Everything is going to be okay,* she signs.

*Soon, your pain will be eased, your burdens relieved.*

*Hold on.*

And, in the end, my mother signs two words to me:

*Philadelphia.*

*And burn.*

## A STRANGER DIES

The next morning, I wake early. Make breakfast, eggs and milk and a few slices of bacon. Coffee. I tidy up the downstairs, which is far from untidy. Add water and food to Toby's bowl in the den. He watches me with sad eyes, his head on the cusp of his paws. Return to my den, check investments. Not much has been happening lately and I find neither progress nor failure in any standing investments. There were some new prospects but I had yet to do research. My brother calls while I'm at the computer. I check the caller ID and hit ignore – I'm hoping if I ignore him long enough, he won't want to come around or move in, whatever it is he wants. Maybe he'll forget or just stop calling.

Boredom sets in so I head over to visit the Russian arms dealer.

He talks me into buying a non-lethal bear trap.

While on the way to my Conshohocken storage unit (where I leave all of my weapons except the single gun I have in my house), the Fisher calls me from the country club and asks for me to work a lunch shift. There's a party in the ballroom in addition to the grille and two staff members called out, both due to alcohol poisoning.

So I work a lunch shift at the club.

By sheer coincidence, the only table I have all lunch shift is Mrs. Logothetis and her daughter. We both catch each other with a surprised look when she enters the grille seating area. I nod and she nods, smiling. Her daughter doesn't notice. I seat them near a window in the desolate dining hall and return with menus and water. They're both quiet, polite. Mrs. Logothetis orders a Garden salad with Thai dressing and her daughter eats a cheeseburger. We don't say anything non-dining related. I notice the

rouge nail polish on the ring finger of Mrs. Logothetis as I set the check down. When I leave the dining area and return to stock the bread plates, they're gone.

That day, on that check, she had written:

*Tonight. Midnight. Tree house.*

It's in response to the note I wrote on the check.

"Hey," the Fisher calls me over to the podium as the Logotheti have left, and as I approach I see he's writing something on a legal pad in black ink, lines scribbled out in editing. "I'm writing a song."

"Esh," I grumble.

Last thing I want to hear is a song written by the Fisher.

"No-no-no, it's good. It's called 'Dig That Ass Up.' Chorus is something like," and he sings in a paltry, unpracticed voice, "*All you motherfuckers bettah dig that ass up. Hey you girlie better dig that ass up. Bring it to the floor and dig that ass up.*" He smiles, pleased. "It ain't sophisticated but, you know, I think that's why I like it. That's why it works."

"Uh modern masterpiece," I say to him, which is half-true as modern music is all shit.

"Can you help hand out for the Baldwin party? It's a sit-down lunch. His wife, she died a week ago. You can head home after the dessert is out. I got bussers, et al. Just want the food out asap. Filet mignon, no temp. Red bliss potatoes. Green beans. First course goes out in," he checks his watch, "actually, you can go check. Caesar salad should be goin' out in five."

Two servers – Jill and Shuana – and I tray up the first course. They become silent when I enter the kitchen and giggle lightly as we circle the glass plates around the oblong black trays. We each carry out to the ballroom past the grille. There are four tables and a lot of open space, a party of twenty in a room meant for a hundred and

fifty. When the time comes, we clear the salads and bring out the main course. A few are unimpressed. Most are satisfied.

I look over shoulders for empty plates to clear.

Something brings my attention from off the nearest table. I notice a man. Most everyone else is seated except him. He's standing and I'm standing and we stare at each other a moment. His expression looks like he wants to say something important, or scream, or laugh, or punch the air...but he doesn't.

He just stands there, frozen, unblinking.

Others begin to notice something's wrong. A silence falls across the table in front of him. His becomes the only blue face in a crowd of fake tans, stretched wrinkles, and platinum hair. People nearby think he's choking but still no one moves. There's a moment when I swear a smirk crosses his increasingly blue face.

But the moment is brief, and then it's gone.

His body goes limp and he drops, the crook of his neck catching against the spine of a nearby chair. His head remains stuck awkwardly against the green plastic of the seat. More people notice that something's happening but no one knows what, no one knows why.

I stand. Staring. Witnessing.

I, too, do nothing.

The man's head slips from the chair and smashes against the floor. His glasses hit the polished wood and shatter, spinning as they slide toward my shoe. My brain doesn't react to what my eyes see. A pool of blood forms around the fallen man's head.

The busgirl behind me lets out a loud cry and runs out of the ballroom.

Silence besets.

The Fisher rushes in after a few minutes with the portable defibrillator. They try to revive the man but nothing happens and I know when someone is gone. The members gather against the edges of the ballroom. They ignore each employee's brief

plea for them to wait in the lobby. They speak disdainful words under their tired old breaths.

Eventually, the paramedics arrive and remove his body.

Eventually, the situation is over and they return to their seats.

The host positions himself behind the podium at the head of the ballroom.

“Let us have a moment of silence. Let us each say a prayer for the health of our good friend.”

I stand, bow my head, and cross both hands in front of my waist only to realize that I have the fallen man’s glasses clutched in my right hand. I had picked them up without realizing it. The broken glass had cut into my palm and a bead of blood slips through my fingers but I keep my head bowed all the same. I can hear his wife in the lobby, her mourning loud and hysterical. Over her cries of mercy, past her moans and loud suffering, I try to say a prayer for the recently deceased...

And find I have no words.

## THE JUMP THAT'LL GET YOU KILLED

No one is in apartment #404 and I pull a handgun from the closet.

The television is on in The Television Room when I reach the Fifth Floor Prison. I move down the middle corridor, past the individual paintings hung up on the wall. The panorama is on and the evening-life world outside the floor-to-ceiling windows is beautiful. I loved the fake dusk better than the fake dawn in the Fifth Floor Prison. Something about it always reminds me of fall. Around the corner, and I near the threshold to The Television Room. I peak my head around and find the room to be empty.

“Fuck,” I whisper.

A gun cocks behind me.

I turn and face him, his little BB gun pointed at my chest.

Benjiman Dentist gets the jump on me but Benjiman Dentist doesn't fire.

“Rule of thumb—” SNICK—take the shot when you get the chance.”

And I shoot him in the leg, nonchalantly.

“Oh, fuck,” he groans, “but I had you there for a moment,” and he smiles, proud.

His face is clean shaven, his hair trimmed down to about an inch. Without the hair, he looks very young.

I motion toward The Library Room.

“Game of chess, let's go.”

He follows behind me to The Library Room where a game of chess is always set up in the center, on a small table over the rug. Both red leather throne chairs are on either side. We sit and face each other.

“So how's it coming along?” I ask.

“Well, not far in two days,” he says, his eyes carefully watching the game.

“How’d you end up here?”

“I lived in North. Dad’s been gone, maybe forever. Mom...she was, uh, around, I guess, but would’a prolly been better if she wuddn’t. We lived with seven Mexicans and . . .” he moves very judiciously, “and, I dunno. Stopped goin’ to school ‘bout a year ago. My neighbor, he used to pay me to stand outside a chicken joint on the end of the block. Said people’d be comin’ to me to ‘ask for directions’ and I was to tell ‘em he was back a block. One day he ain’t come by to pay me and I went to see him and he was dead. I went home but Lionel pickt me up and told me he’d pay me and he brought me here.”

“Ghos tell you what he wants you to do yet?”

“What d’you mean?”

“We all sort of do something different, we all have our own trade.”

“What do you do?”

“I do whatever I can, kid.”

“No, he ain’t tell me yet. He keeps tellin’ me that he wants me to go to college but I tell ‘em, I say, ‘I ain’t smart like that’ and he gets kinda pissed. But I ain’t – it’s cool. But he says I’m goin’ to Drexel and I’m a super genius or somethin’.”

“Good,” I say. “Just do what he says. Ghos will take care of you. It’s simple – follow his rules, do what he says, and you’ll be set. Hey, look at me.” He looks up from the chess board to meet my eyes. “Seriously. Don’t fuck around. Do what he says. If he says you can be a super genius then you go be a super genius. But don’t fuck around.”

“Fuck around how?”

“Making mistakes, bringing attention to yourself. Not listening. The last one, Kevin...he used to work corners. Smart little fuck. Young but a good guy. He was a source of information. Make enough connections with the addicts, there isn’t anything you can’t find out when you put the word out. But Kevin got himself shot in his fucking

face because we all knew he was doing heroin. Ghos took him out in a split second because there's almost no liability as big as a fucking drug addict. They get caught, face ten years, start withdraw – there isn't a soul they won't sell out."

"Naw, I'm cool... what about weed?"

"Weed's okay. Rules are simple: Keep it smart. Keep it professional. Sky's the limit."

"So what *do* you do?"

"I burn the trash, kid. And I also win in chess. Checkmate."



## THE TREE HOUSE

When I climb up the rungs to the tree house, it's ten past midnight.

There's a light at the top, flickering from inside.

And I climb up over the side and in through the front to find Mrs. Logothetis lying in the bed. She's leaning on her elbow, nerdy school teacher glasses still on – but I can tell that's the only thing she's wearing. Her round breasts are uncovered. The blanket is draped over her waist.

I grab at the sides of the doorway so I don't fall out from the surprise.

She takes her glasses off and I pull the rest of my body into the tree house.

She climbs out from under the covers and I watch her naked body like a panther crossing its prey, closing in on me, and her hands touch my chest. She doesn't let me go. She gently tears away my clothes and I lay back on the cold wood to pull off my jeans. We rest on our knees, both naked (my socks are still on) and our bodies close in together. Our skin touches all over, our arms wrapped around each other. Her lips move in awkwardly for a kiss. I meet her halfway and it feels...right. Once we connect, it feels right. She kisses lightly, sucks in my upper lip softly – she doesn't try to eat my face or kiss meagerly. She pushes me to the bed and straddles my midsection without a smile. Neither of us say anything, not once the entire time except one thing she whispers. "Close your eyes." Her pardoning murmur beside my ear as she moves her face against mine and lightly kisses my neck, my cheek, my temple, her hands caressing my arms, bringing our arms spread out against the floor, her fingers running back down over my forearms to my chest.

She leans in and I lift up and our lips connect and everything else . . .

Well, it disappears.

Afterward, I find myself tired but trying to stay awake nonetheless, watching her eyes—shimmering diamonds—as they open and close, sometimes quickly, sometimes for several minutes. Her breath deepens, her chest moves, and I can tell when she’s drifting to sleep and when she’s awake.

She drifts in, out.

In...out...in...out...

\* \* \*

*and we are on the arching straightaway of the ben franklin bridge heading toward camden when a car in the opposing lane swerves skids stops blocking traffic cars stop in our lane some are rear-ended but no one cares everyones eyes are back toward philly the echo of the boom takes an extra second then shakes the bridge doors open and people step from their cars in a daze philadelphia is a city on fire a black gray mushroom cloud rising overhead I wake slowly to a world thick with grief first I see her and relief washes over me but she gets out of the car and I notice we are parked amidst abandoned cars in the middle of the ben franklin bridge everyones gathered against the guardrail and looking toward their dying city I get out of the car and follow the explosion is immense the damage vast a large portion of philly gone a nearby empty car blares paul mccartney’s dance tonight while we watch our city burn some sob and some stand frozen mouths open and some collapse in agony I want to fall to the ground and sleep just sleep forever but I can do nothing nothing except lock my fingers between hers and we hold hands staring out into the burning horizon*

\* \* \*

I wake up expecting to be alone...

She's asleep, her body curled against mine, her bare back against my chest.

I'm startled and I lean up on one arm. I half expected Matilda to be the one cuddling against me, my arm wrapped around *her* waist. Mrs. Logothetis' blonde hair, with its dark roots, wavers over her face and her eyes. With a slight bit of movement, I brush it from her face, bring it back against her ears. She's breathing deep. The outside blue dawn morning moves in wind-gust currents through the window and it's a little chilly beyond the comforter. The bed is thin, no box spring, only a small, single mattress. Her shoulder slips above the blanket when I move my arm from around her, and I gently caress the skin, watching her, watching her reaction and her movements. Her hand lifts up, pulls the blanket back over her skin, and she slowly wakes with the realization that I'm beside her.

Her eyes stare into mine, confused.

I wait for the next reaction which is, luckily, a smile. She leans up and kisses my lips, just a peck; then she closes her eyes, pushes her ass closer to my pelvis, and returns her head to the single pillow we've been sharing. Our bodies are naked and I can feel her skin against mine, head to toe. My left leg is scrunched between hers.

I lay my head back down.

It takes a moment but I acknowledge that I feel content.

Then I drift easily back into a sleep.

It feels right, certain.

## RIDLEY IN SUMMER

At home, I sit in my den checking my investments when Toby's wheezing stops me. I turn and find that he's moved from his little bed to go lie in the bathroom, obviously pained. I kneel beside him, rub the coarse black fur from his back to the sparse patches of his stomach; he doesn't react. I continue while his mid-section heaves in jagged movements, speak in a soft, affectionate tone. His head brushes against the porcelain floor, his sad eyes lazily looking up. A thin, white line of saliva slips from his mouth as his head lifts, dips, and finally drops to the floor.

In one exquisite motion, he's dead.

I understand it, feel it coming in that half-second – that feeling of silence, of subtraction, of gloom coupled with something finite. As he dies, drifting away, the sadness in his eyes drifts, too. But I continue petting his stomach as a way of wishing him luck, of expressing a hint of hope, something I seldom ever do.

"That was quick," I mumble to myself of my relationship with Toby.

I bury him in the barren, isolated forests of Ridley Creek State Park.

I pull to the side on Gradyville Road, park, and step out. He's under a scratchy blue quilt. I made a special trip to Good Will to buy a quilt, leaving Toby's body alone in my apartment. It was odd, looking for a garment to cover the dead, to be buried with my dog. There was a feeling to pick something appropriately somber but all I could find was a blue quilt, old with holes and abrasive to the touch.

I push through the woods, a shovel in one hand and Toby across my arms. I stop when I find myself away from the telephone poles and paths and streets and people and everything else. Toby earned himself the right to a peaceful grave, somewhere

uncommon, somewhere calm. I dig my shovelhead into the hard soil behind a tree stump, one with black holes on the inside edges that looks like a tooth full of cavities.

As he lies in the shallow grave, I try to think of words to say in memoriam and find myself unsuccessful.

So I just say *goodbye*.

## ANOTHER FUNERAL

The member that died on the floor of the country club ballroom was named Finnegan. His funeral is only three days after his death and the Fisher made it mandatory that we attend his funeral. I arrive late and stand in the back of the open service. Almost everyone at the funeral is an employee or a member of the country club. The priest stands to the side of the black casket and speaks of God's love, the afterlife, the rebirth. He ends with a quote that strikes right to the heart of the moment.

And blah blah blah.

Fifteen minutes after the service and half a Wawa 16 oz. French vanilla coffee later (I give in to caffeine for the day), I'm swerving the back roads that wrap past west Philly. I send myself outward, away from the human race. I want somewhere calm, somewhere peaceful, somewhere quiet. The outskirts of the city, down Echo Valley and out past Darby, there are desolate, swerving roads through trees in bloom for the summer. Further away, the Brandywine River flows black against the light breeze. The terrain grows unrecognizable until it's apparent that I'm lost.

I just want quiet.

Off Rt. 52, I pass the Chester County Prison and head into the surrounding stretch of beautiful, long empty hills, a white and pink, green and brown forest in the distance – it's such a serene landscape to surround such murderous creatures, such contemptible acts, such dreadfulness. Near Marlboro County, I come upon a road. It isn't much different than the ones from which I had come and it lays unassuming before me. I turn onto it, drive for nearly five minutes. I'm not much paying attention – sipping coffee, cursing the lack of a cup-holder in that model Ford Escort station wagon – when a brown blur ahead causes me to break suddenly.

The car comes to an obnoxious halt and I spill my coffee.

A stranded young doe stands dead-center of the road. Her terrified eyes are still somehow soothing. A moment, so brief. A stop in time, a second stretched. A doe with the eyes of a dying man.

Directly behind me, there's a loud screech like an infant's scream.

A brief FLASH so vivid that it's the first thing I recall in the hospital.

## EX NIHILO

From out of the darkness, I wake with my arms reaching out for no one.

There is a stranger in my room.

My eyes burn when I try and open them. Bright light reflecting off white sheets. Confused and groggy, I recognize the inside of a hospital room. There's someone else in the room, I can sense it. As my eyes focus, the man puts down the magazine he's been reading, stands from his chair, and walks closer to me.

"I wanted to be the first person to talk to you."

His tone is gentle but ominous.

He's beside the bed, looking down at me.

*Better not be a Goddamn dead person*, I scold myself.

"My name is Louis, and I am the man that hit your car. I was . . ." he trails off, distant, sad, like a man that's lost the world and feels guilty for it. "I was just trying to talk to you because I wanted...it's the only thing I can think about, and my wife—she won't talk to me so I-I-I was following you...I found a-a check. And you were the server and you wrote something on it. I just...I just want to know what happened between you and my wife."

When I arrived at Finnegan's funeral, I noticed that I was late, and I noticed that a familiar gravedigger was standing off in the background, watching. What I didn't notice was that Mr. Logothetis was in attendance, even occasionally looking across the grave at me. I was distracted. Maybe if my mind had been a bit more focused I would have noticed Mr. Logothetis following me from Mt. Zion cemetery to Wawa, then into the withered trees and along the black rivers of west Philly.



## *When can I see you again?*

The words written by an unfamiliar hand. They had aroused Mr. Logothetis' interest when he stumbled on the carbon copy of the country club receipt – followed by his wife's note about midnight.

He followed me in his black S.U.V. from the cemetery.

When I slammed on my breaks to avoid a doe, I imagine that he sped up. At the last second – his car right up on me – he must have had a moment of regret because he slammed on his breaks.

He couldn't kill me.

He wasn't a killer.

In the end, he reacted like a normal human being.

"You—" my throat's dry and causes me to cough. My voice is hoarse but I do my best, speaking calmly: "You ever come near me again, I'll stick a knife in your throat. And I know where you live," I tell him, rolling over to sleep, "your wife showed me after I came inside her. Now leave me the fuck alone."

He stands there, crying wide-eyed, unnerved, and shaking.

*Fuck trying to act normal*, I tell myself before go back to sleep.



## a brief interlude

not sure

It was November. Short days, the evenings long and dark and cold. It was night when I arrived. The directions led me to Sanson and I parked alongside the thin, over-crowded street. Steam from a manhole in the distance, an orange-red shine of light over the back entrance to a deli. Nothing specific, nothing particular. Once I was sure the old brick building in front of me was the right one, I climbed the fire escape, the metal of the handrail painted black and peeling in my hand. The first floor was abandoned, stains from a fire covering most of the floor and wall. Another flight up and I found a window painted white, a note written in red marker on the outside glass:

SLOWLY TURN AROUND AND COME BACK DOWN

“Do as it says,” a voice called up.

At the bottom of the fire escape was the build of a large man in an oversized, billowy jacket, and he was pointing a gun up at me.

The big guy had nicknames when I reached the bottom.

“You look a little like Pee-Wee Herman,” Lionel said in his loud, jovial voice, standing over me at twice my size – I had thought he was large until I met Cass, who was even larger.

The weather was cold and my ears had frozen to a solid red.

“Big red ears. Alright, Pee-Wee Blaze, strip naked.”

He made sure I wasn't followed and then led me to the center of the alleyway, near a green dumpster and some cardboard boxes. There was a young homeless man sleeping in the rubble.

“Strip, please,” he asked politely.

I left my socks on but took off my leather jacket and the long-sleeved white shirt I had underneath. I kicked off my shoes, pulled off my jeans, and left my boxers on. I twisted and turned for Lionel. He tilted the gun downward and I pulled down my underwear as well. The cardboard boxes behind me shifted as a homeless person woke to find a naked man standing in the middle of the alleyway.

He seemed satisfied with the results.

I dressed.

Lionel stayed quiet as he led me across the street and into an apartment building. We pushed past the double front doors of the disgusting lobby: the floor was covered in patches of a mysterious dark brown, crusted yellow mailboxes lining the wall, a ripped and shredded red couch to the right, in front of which was an obviously broken television set. Oversaturated lighting, one stairwell, and one elevator which opened as we arrive, releasing the pent up stench of urine.

We stepped into the elevator and Lionel hit a button. He continued his silence as the elevator opened on the immaculate, refinished fourth floor. The apartment doors were solid and almost glistening. The hardwood floors were recently polished. There were paintings along the hallway that looked to be originals, none I recognized off-hand. Color the overwhelming shade of reddish mahogany. An expensive-looking vase with a bouquet of yellow tulips and pink lilies sat atop an old oak stand just outside the elevator. It felt detailed, homely and comfortable, high class and expensive, the complete opposite of the impression I got from the lobby.

Lionel was silent until we stood in front of apartment #404, when he finally said:

"You done sold your soul to the devil, young'un."

Inside apartment #404, there was a man sitting on a couch with his feet on a coffee table. He was in black suede pajamas, gray/white hair. Older. On his lap, in his right hand, he fondled a silver .38. Lionel took a seat next to him, joining his stare up at me.

I remained standing in front of them, looking down.

"So," the man in the suede pajamas said first, "here you are."

"Leon gave me your number," I told him.

"I know where you got my number. Leon said you lived in the same building. Came askin' him for something he didn't know, pointed you in my direction. Also said you wasn't much for talkin'," the man spoke in a gravelly, peculiar voice, like there had been irreparable damage done to his vocal chords.

I nodded.

"Alright, Mr. Silence. My name is Ghos," he pronounced his name like Ghost without a T, "and this is my building you're in. I know every one of the fourteen tenants that live here. For all intents and purposes, imagine this is a military base and I," he laughed, looking over to Lionel, "well, I'm the General. And in e'ry direction, you got my army. Big guys, tough like Lionel here. Fast guys. Quiet guys," he whispered. "D'you know why I'm telling you all this?"

I shook my head no.

"Cause this is my home. You ain't bugged. I know that. But I've invited you into my home. So if you bring me troubles, I'ma take my time. I'm a patient man, you see. I ain't left this building in a long, loooooong time. Heh, shit. You don't need me to tell you this 'cause you ain't gonna cause me no troubles, are you?"

I shook my head.

"Answer me!" he rumbled.

"No."

“Good! Glad to hear it, son. You don’t look much like the trouble-makin’ type. And since that’s the case, you can consider yourself protected by my army for your time here. And don’t you worry, we’re friendly,” his jagged voice was always a bit menacing, especially with the word “friend”: it was as if there was a double-meaning, some inside joke I wasn’t a part of. “That is, unless you bring me troubles. But as you said, you won’t. Right?” He stares at me, making sure I acknowledge him again. “Nah, of course not. So welcome.”

Ghos let out an unfavorable sigh. His teeth vanished behind his lips, his face blank like a poker player with the best hand; he wasn’t ready to show his cards yet because he was content knowing he had me beat. It was a sucker move and I was a chump to fall into whatever he was doing.

“So...what is it that you would like from me?”

“I...I’m not sure, Leon said you could help me—”

“Go on.”

“I don’t know what I’m asking.”

“So you came all this way to say you got no questions?” Ghos’ face was blank, if a little sullen.

I paused a moment and came back more confident.

This was something new, engaging in illicit activities.

“He said you could help me find the man that murdered my parents.”

“Yes, your parents. Stabbed on Arch last year, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

My face was blank as well, if a bit sullen.

A moment of silence.

“Can you tell, Mr. Silence?” he asked me, sly.

“Can I tell what?”

“Lionel, he can’t tell,” he said, pretending to be flabbergasted, looking over to Lionel then back at me. “Well I like you, young man. Parents just died. You want some’a that sweet, cold revenge. I’m down. Brother you ain’t talk to much, ex-junkie girlfriend. Degree in Physics or some shit. Smart.”

He has apparently done some research.

I was unimpressed.

“You think you know me because you know what cereal I eat?—fuck you, go write my biography. I don’t like—”

He raised the gun—BOOM

My skin shook at the loud, abrupt sound, the blaze of the gun, the brief destruction of sanity in the room. My knees locked hard. Both shoulders rose intensely as broken glass exploded behind me, hitting my back.

Then stillness.

My teeth gritted and I looked down.

“Gotta expect anything, man.” He thought it was funny. “Can’t always think you’re in control, because you – Mr. Silence...you are not in control. Now how’s about this – I’ll help you find the man that murdered your parents, shit I already know his name. And I’m gonna do it for free on one condition...”

“What’s that?”

“I’m going to call you sometime in the future.”

“...yeah, and?”

“You gotta answer.”

## endroductions

### ROOMMATES

The car accident had given me a pretty solid concussion and a few bruised ribs but nothing especially serious. After a night, I leave the hospital.

When I return home via the Rainbow Cab Company, the driver curses the narrow path left by a half-size U-Haul parked on the road near my house. I look and find the blinking hazard lights, realizing the truck isn't just on my street but in front of my house. There's also a small child milling about on the sidewalk and a lanky adult sitting on a large trunk at the foot of my front door, his head hanging limp.

"Mother fuck..." I whisper.

"Excuse me!" the cab driver turns to look at me.

"Sorry," and I swipe my card, pay the tab, and leave a generous tip. "I'm gonna hop out here."

As I make it to the sidewalk and the child stops moving – still like that goddamn frozen doe – a quick thought enters my mind:

*I could just find a new place to live.*

David sees Lizzy stop, then looks over at me and stands. Even at a distance, I can see he's disheveled, hunched, pale. A dark mop covers his head and his face is scraggly. He has on nerdy glasses and seems skinnier than I remember.

I curse again, then approach.

"I told you I need a few months," I tell him stern, ignoring the child that's run and hid behind his legs.



“Actually, you said a few weeks,” he corrects me. Some of the light is out of him since the time we went on that horrendous trip to see Pair’a’dice. He had been sullen during the funeral but he had been talking with people and I hadn’t seen him alone much during the brief trip. “But I-I have to sell the house, I can’t live there. I tried to call but...” *I had been ignoring his calls.* “I only need a place to stay for the summer. And once I sell the house and get the money, we’ll be gone. Okay?”

I regretted ignoring him for the past while – at least I could have lied and said my house was...on fire or something. But here he was, a sad sack with an inconvenient but otherwise cute child. And here I was, with a large house all to myself.

*Goddamnit.*

“Okay,” and I lean in to whisper, “but I have the feeling you’re not going to like me.”

I lead them past David’s trunk and inside, Lizzy shyly hiding behind David the whole time. She’s wearing a lot of pink but I don’t look at her much.

David lugs a large trunk in through the threshold. It’s an odd experience. Lizzy stays behind, watching. David lifts, heaves, and drags the trunk in and onto the front mat. I watch. As he goes to drag the trunk further into my house, to make room for Lizzy to walk in, I fear he may scratch the wood flooring so I help luck it into the living room. We stay silent, both of them looking over my living room without a word. There’s a heavy sliding door adjacent to the living room and I slide it down the track to show the room inside. It had been the den before I moved it upstairs but now it was now just an extra bedroom, existing for appearance only as I never intended someone to sleep in my house that wasn’t sleeping arm’s length from me. It’s the most spacious room in the house.

“This is your bedroom.”

I state it almost like a prison guard speaking to an inmate about their new cell.

The room is quite nice and already furnished. It has a bookcase built into the wall, the lower half cupboards big enough to fit the pink child still hiding behind her “father”...her step-father...? I didn’t know what to call him. I was going to have to wait to hear what Lizzy called him. The room had a queen-sized bed in it, with satin blankets and rouge satin decorative pillows. The bed took up over a third of the room.

“We still have a large bed in the truck.”

“Trash it.”

“I don’t want to trash it,” my brother says.

I sigh.

“We can get storage, I guess—”

“What about the basement? That’s where mom and dad always put all their extra shit.”

I sigh again.

“It’s gonna be in my way...” I look at him, “...but yeah, it’s fine. I guess.”

“And there’s still some toys, clothes, a few boxes of knick-knacks he didn’t want to leave behind.”

I nearly groan.

“Let’s bring it in. Get that goddamn truck out of the way. So you won’t be in *everybody’s* way.”

I help him empty the truck, bring in the clothes and we take his bed to the basement. We walk it down the steps and I look around the basement, debating where I want it. There is a wall of stuff, all of it our parents. It was everything I packed up when I finally felt ready to live here. I hadn’t touched it since. Once I overcame the barrier, I was ready to live here, to assume the life I would begin here. I was certain I would never be ready to look at the life before then. It was over and the book was closed and shelved and I wouldn’t have to think about the weakling, struggling, that I had been. To

touch the wall of our parents' stuff was to revisit that life. Like with Lizzy, I didn't much look at it.

"Just push it over dad's old—"

"No."

We set the mattress, the box spring, and the frame in the space next to the wall.

There's a second bed that David hadn't told me about, a smaller one for Lizzy. We push it to the wall under the window, across from the larger bed, with a small space between the bookcase wall and the foot of the bed. As I organize the bed to be symmetrical, David lines open space on the bookshelves with toys.

I sigh.

"We'll, uh, have to speak low after the child goes to bed, um," I feel frantic, almost a bit more panicked with each open space lost to a new, smudged and stick toy, "and, uh, it's easy to hear between the two rooms so we'll have to uh, I gotta go."

And then I turn to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"Shopping. Uh, what do you need?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I mean, is there anything you need?"

"Uh, yeah, we need some more summer clothes and kitchen stuff, may supplies, but it's not that imp—"

"Keep your phone close. I'm going to have questions."

## QUESTIONS

*What's a safe car for children?*

"Anything bigger, four door."

First thing, I take a cab to a dealership and buy a newer model, four-door, big-ass beige truck – not so much for the safety of the child but in case any cuckolded husband feels the need to rear-end me again.

The salesman is surprised when I pay for the car in full, no credit.

*What kind of art supplies does she like?*

"She's getting into coloring. Actually, she's surprisingly good at it. Painting. Finger painting. Anything that makes a mess. Anything musical. She loves to dance."

I sigh.

So much talk yet so few answers.

I grab large pile of miscellaneous toys, mostly anything girlie and pink. Paints. An easel. Chalk. Books – pop-up, poetry, developmental learning.

*What kind of clothes does she wear?*

"Uh. Actually, that was more...Sarah's department." I could tell when he was upset because he'd use the same word repeatedly. "She's in a size four. Actually, she may be uh nearing size five. I think. Actually, don't worry about clothes just yet. Her birthday's in August so we could actually go shopping for a new wardrobe then."

When David would get upset, her would over use the word "Actually."

*What kitchen supplies should I get her?*

Whereas I was learning new things about Lizzy, David was morose in recalling details. When I asked about kitchen supplies, his sentences would start, “We like to get her—I uh like to get her...”

It was hard for him to be alone in his words.

“Small silverware. Plastic plates. Juicy cups. Get the longer, skinnier kinds. She’s got small hands for her age.”

“I didn’t know it was possible to have disproportionate hands.”

Eventually, he forgot (or just plain stopped trying) to correct himself and Sarah continued to live in his words.

“Actually, neither did we. But it’s not abnormal. It’s just bone growth, actually.”

## BUSINESS (AS IN NONE OF YOUR)

That night, I show up to the country club two hours late for my shift and wearing plain clothes, walk in through the double doors and straight to the bar, to a back table where Mrs. Logothetis is sitting alone, as she does every Wednesday night. She's dressed elegantly, more so than usual, a cocktail dress, hair in a bun, and no glasses. *I wonder if she even knows her husband paid me a visit.* I sit in front of her before she's noticed someone's approached or that it's me, my hand reaching over to touch the outer edge of her thumb.

She looks up, surprised.

"Hi," I tell her, calmly.

She smiles and pulls her hand back – I'm not sure if it's from surprise or shyness or the desire to hide our affair.

"I didn't think you would show up tonight," she says, low.

Her happiness is apparent, even as I know she's trying to hide it.

"I only came here to see you. I needed to tell you something." I pause a moment, trying to figure out how to phrase what I want to say, and she looks into my eyes with anticipation. "I don't want to see you again. This was...fun, but I only did it out of pity." Her face shrinks instantly, and I continue. "I'm too young for you. And this situation is just pathetic." Tears form in her eyes and her mouth opens, but nothing comes out. "It just needs to end, neither—"

She leaps from the table and runs out of the country club, crying.

I continue sitting alone for a moment before slamming my fist on the table in anger. Mrs. Logothetis' martini glass falls over, a half-ounce of pink pouring across the table toward my fist. This is the way it had to be. Trying to be human, to interact with

people, peers, it had been a spectacular failure. My dog had died. So had a stranger at work. And the first relationship I've started in some time nearly got me killed instantly. Fuck people, fuck all of them. I'm okay with being alone...though David was around. And that child.

*Ugh, fuck these people. Fuck all of them.*

And I stand, turn to leave.

The Fisher is standing behind the bar, watching with crooked eyebrows.

As I walk past, he asks, "What was that about?"

"None of your fucking business. I quit."

And then I leave.

## DOUBT GLORIOUS DOUBT

"I got a question for you," Benjiman Dentist proposes.

"Shoot," I hit back.

We're playing chess in The Library Room.

"Who're the Savages?" he asks.

I can tell how genuinely curious he is. He's looking healthier than when he had first come up to The Fifth Floor Prison. His skin has a healthy color even though he gets zero real sun. His dark hair is styled to the left, face clean shaven. His eyes are alive, young. I can still see the youth in him, which is new.

"They were two people in prison. They had done a lot of bad stuff, pissed a lot of us off. They killed children, for one. That's a big no no to us."

"Yeah but what happened to them?"

"Um, the girl, we added something to her toothpaste that would react with orange juice, vitamin C—"

"How?"

"We waited for her to order something, which gave us a little bit to plan. Toothpaste. We had a compounding pharmacist make something we could disguise in toothpaste. Got out man to switch it out in canteen. Bing bang boom. She pushed her teeth in the morning, drank OJ with breakfast, done. Cardiac arrest. And nearly fucking impossible to trace to the source let alone where it fuckin' came from."

"And were there others?"

"Her brother. We were less subtle with him. He was on death row. We just gave him a razor hidden inside a bag of cheetos. Motherfucker killed himself. As Ghos says, 'You ain't even gotta be there sometimes.'"



“Oh. Did Ghos kill your girlfriend?”

I laugh.

“What? No.”

\* \* \*

From the country club I left for the apartment building. It was a poker night though poker had been cancelled. I still wanted to see frie...co-wor...well, I don't know what to call them, either. People I knew. When I had gotten to the apartment building earlier that evening, Ghos met me in apartment #404 and approached saying in that gravelly, robust voice, “You know how I feel about roommates.” It was always surprising when Ghos knew things that had happened that day, faster than I could have spoken the words to him – Ghos knew.

Ghos always knew.

“They'll be out before the end of the summer. He just needs a place to stay until his house sells.”

“E'ther way. I don't like it. And you shouldn't, neither. They at risk near you.”

“I know – I take accountability for the issue at hand,” I began to recite the answer I knew he was looking for, which had no excuses and the positive end result, “and I take responsibility for my brother and the child, and they will be out of the house in less than three months. An unexpected obstacle but one of little bearing.”

“Nigga, don't tell me about bearing. And you're off duty until they leave. Well, off duty but I'm reserving you for the Boston situation. We're getting information on the Banker now and when I say we go, we go.” He eyed me. I nodded. “Soon. Hear me?”

I nodded.

“Ain’t no poker tonight. Alex ain’t around, Cass is off venturin’ for the week...Lionel ain’t feelin’ too well. Et fuckin’ cetera.”

I nodded.

“And go get that kid upstairs to shoot you. Mo’fucker gets the jump but still won’t take the first shot.”

There’s a pause while Ghos looks at me.

When I went up to The Fifth Floor Prison, Benjamin Dentist was sitting in The Television Room. He had his gun on his lap, patiently waiting for someone to try and attack him. I left the lights on and, when I approached, his gun raised and pointed at the doorway, at me. He had the jump because I wasn’t particularly silent. I wanted him to hear me coming, to know someone was coming to shoot him, albeit with a BB gun.

And again, he didn’t fire.

So I shot him in the back of the head with a BB.

Then we began a game of Chess.

\* \* \*

“How do you even know about my old girlfriend?” I ask him.

“Lionel told me some of it and then I heard Alex bitching about it to Ghos. Said you left a mess with some guy in some building on South Street. Did she know you did something bad?”

“Bad? Something bad—what the fuck are you talking about? We don’t kill innocent woman. It doesn’t—”

“Something Alex said. ‘This mess is yet to clean itself up.’ He said it to Ghos, like, accusing him. It was just...odd, I don’t know. The way he said, the way Ghos reacted.”

“Did they say I was a liability?”

This is a genuine question.

“No, they stopped talking about it entirely after that—it was awkward. But they made it sound like she saw something she shouldn’t have, sort of. I don’t know, it was probably nothing. I’m just reading into it too much. I got nothing but time to sit up here and think about the few things I overhear when I do have—”

“Keep that shit to yourself.” I stand even though the game is only half-over.  
“And if you don’t start shooting first, Ghos is gonna fuckin’ kill you.”

And then I leave young Benjamin Dentist.

As I’m going, he calls out a mournful, “I’m sorry.”

## FOR THE NEXT MONTH

I spend a lot of time in my bedroom. A lot of time on the computer, watching cable television (which I despise), looking out over the street. I do the most research on my investments: current, top-priority, and options. I find some prospects, move some money around, sell, buy more. I don't lose, I don't win, and nothing really happens with the market. I go running through Philly. I run through Northern Liberties and up along the water front. I spend time in the Art Museum or wandering down to the Broad Street Theater, Independence Hall, even the FDIC building. I wander, through parks and down streets and in large, historical buildings, but I never pay much attention.

Mostly, I think about two things:

*Did Ghos somehow orchestrate the death of the only woman I ever loved?*

And I think about the fact that there is a child in my house. I can feel that she is there. As I take walks or try to sleep, I can feel that the child is there in my home, my lair – that she is near. I don't need to hear her, don't need to call out whatever her name is to know that she would call back. Her little feet tapping, toys strewn, sticky fingers running over the fabric of the couch, window panes, anything.

There's a child in my house.

It's awkward and a nuisance.

Dishes are always dirty and left out, scattered without any semblance or desire to be cleaned. Peanut butter and/or jelly can be found under tables, chairs, on the couch cushions, the books on my downstairs library, the television. Toys on the floor, waiting to ambush my feet the second I stop paying attention. The television is on morning-to-night with loud, obnoxious cartoons.

There's a child in my house.

It's awkward.

It's a nuisance.

She's always calm and quiet around me, playing silently, answering with short sentences, while I can hear her boisterous laughter when I'm out of the room, while she plays with David. He doesn't seem to care much for anything other than her happiness. He flips her upside down and calls her silly names and blows raspberries all over her body. He grabs her hands and lets her walk up his body until she does a flip. They watch cartoons snuggled up together. He feeds her candy near bedtime and lets her stay awake until 11. He's good at keeping up with her hygiene and exercise, keeps her clean and healthy, with a trip to the park or a local playground or the YMCA for swimming. (I got them both YMCA memberships to get them out of the house). He keeps an eye on her snacks, her dinners. She eats well for a child, never too picky, even as he does bribe her with plenty of sugar. "Finish dinner and you can have desert," is pretty common but, to her credit, she is well-behaved. Even when she disagrees with David's demands, or pouts to the point of tears, she reluctantly does what he asks.

The only time we spend together is during dinner. I make the same dinners I would for myself, only in larger portions – and they quickly become fans of my cooking. I smoke and grille honey-glazed salmon, or make-up a BBQ recipe for shredded chicken sandwiches. I make an exquisite Raymond Burre Blanc for a rare NY Strip, my favorite meal. I enjoy sautéing, as it gives me time to plan my next move; simmering, waiting for more salt or cumin or brown sugar. I take pride in it, and the fact that they love it makes cooking all the more satisfying.

I finally have critics.

The table that had sat one sits now three.

David, even though he loves the food, never finishes his portions. He also seems to be losing weight. His dark hair has become uncut and disorganized. He has a scraggly, misshapen beard. His eyes always look tired or sad, worn down. He feigns a

smile almost constantly for the child; but I can see him lacking. He doesn't cry, at least not in front of us, but he often looks off, distant, and his eyes will wince, lower, and then look to me or the child. Even then, he's still very present with her, smiling, suggesting things to do or places to take her, getting out into the sunshine in Center City, showing her the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall, Rittenhouse Square, Franklin Square. She's always in good spirits because she only wants two things – candy and fun. She wants playgrounds and swimming and toys and ice cream and the supplies to draw and color and look and learn and listen. The only thing she never wants is a bedtime.

She laughs a lot, too.

But around me she's quiet.

It's a nuisance.

## THE SECOND MONTH

“Back up,” I tell her, gruff.

Lizzy backs from the stove, then leaves the kitchen. She returns with a chair from the dining room. Pulling and yanking with all her strength, she gets it just out of reach of the stove, then stands on it and watches me stir the sauce with a big wooden spoon.

“Wha’s that?” she asks, amazed.

At this point, the sauce is black with the butter gently bubbling on top and little round black pellets of diced carrots and hunks of balsamic. She loves carrots because she learned they help eye sight.

“It’s called a Balsamic Reduction. It’s balsamic with butter simmering on a low heat, little salt, little pepper. Carrots.”

“Whaaaaaat?” she says, her voice high pitched at the end. “Like eyes?”

“Uhhhhhh uh huh.”

I don’t understand half of what she says.

She’s so tiny that, on a chair, her head reaches just high enough to see, my elbow feeling the ruffled ends of her dark blonde puffs, strands in absolute disarray from the sweat and heat of her skin and the humidity outside. July had just started and it was proving to be on its way to a record-setting heat-wave. It had become difficult to be outside so any trips David took her on were short, two hours max. And I had to stop running or taking walks around the city in fear of heat exhaustion.

So we had become house-ridden lately, for the most part.

“It’s a sauce for the meat.”

I taste the spoon to check for seasoning. She eyes me carefully as she knows I always forbid her from tasting the food while I’m making it; this time, I make an

exception. She looks at the black bits on the end of the stick, disgusted, but I tell her it's really sweet and she excitedly sticks her tongue out.

"Is good," she laughs.

"I think so, too. Go tell your daddy dinner is ready."

I had begun to prepare dinner earlier so they could go on evening trips, inadvertently causing more time with them. After I began appearing a bit more, and a bit more, and a bit more, Lizzy began to treat me like her new toy and wouldn't leave me alone. It was a *very tiny bit* endearing, if not wholly annoying while I was trying to focus on cooking. She asked questions and asked to help and asked to make stuff herself (usually involving only seasoning in a bowl for a hotdog), but I wouldn't let her.

David would stay in the other room and let us "talk" together, alone.

We all sit at the table to eat the red bliss potatoes, asparagus, and filet sliced thinly with a balsamic reduction drizzle. Lizzy refuses the asparagus outright, without tasting them. David allows it and she eats the rest of her small portion, eating almost the same amount of dinner as David.

"Any news about the house?" I ask David while I eat my large helping.

"Yeah, actually. That reminds me..." I sigh because I know he's about to say something I'm not going to like, "...after I give Lizzy a bath tonight, would you read her a story? I have an important call I have to make and it's gonna be right in the middle of story time."

I have a glass of wine in my hand, paused halfway to my lips as I think about it.

"Uh. Okay, I guess."

I look at Lizzy, who's smiling at me.

And I finish my glass of wine in a large gulp.



When time comes to read a story after her bath, Lizzy changes her mind and pouts a bit, saying she wants her daddy to read her a story. David makes it sound like she's going to get to stay up later if I read to her, and so she agrees.

I had bought her a series of children's books but all she ever wants to hear is a rare, expensive, first-edition Brothers' Grimm printing I had bought for my collection. It's full of evil, foreboding subject matter and the book itself is literally falling apart. As a joke, someone had signed "Love, the Brothers' Grimm" inside of the jacket. It looks like it was a part of history, drooping yellow pages, the scent of mildew, twine-stitched spine coming undone; not so much a children's story as an account of the world long-past. She loves it, though, the macabre and violent ways of the stories, the sorta-happy endings, the faulty characters.

She calls it, "the horror book."

"I wanna hear the horror book," she says.

I don't know how David found it or why he read it to her, but I guess he just knew her well, what she liked and what wouldn't scare her.

I read the titles of the stories and ask which she'd liked to hear, and she asks for *The Three Little Men in the Wood*, a story I'm unfamiliar with. As we read it, there's a lot of death and hatred and a strict morality.

To paraphrase:

*A man and woman get married after their spouses had died. They each have a daughter, the man's beautiful and sweet, the woman's ugly and hate-filled. Jealousy, evil, etc. ensures; good triumphs. The story proves kindness wins gold and the hand of the king while petulance gains a bed in a coffin nailed shut and sent into the river.*

"Black as night," I say of the story, to myself, as I finish.

"S'that mean?" Lizzy asks, her brownish hair frizzy and in her face.

Both of us sit up against her pillow in her bed. She's tucked in and curled up with Violet, a violet stuffed dog. She always sleeps with that thing, even at nap time.

"The story. It's violent."

I move the hair off her face.

"But only to bad people."

The motion, brushing the hair from her face, had been a sort of natural instinct, using my index finger to draw her bangs back behind her ear. It was as if my finger and hand had known what to do while my eyes sort of watched. A look of concern had entered my eyes and I realized she was expecting me to keep talking, as I had froze.

"Yeah, but . . ." I thought of my wording carefully, "it wasn't for young ears."

"My ears isn't baby!" she says, almost upset.

"No." She had taken it literally. "I mean young girls should hear stories of princesses. Not this. This is... death."

"I like the horror book."

"It's up to your dad. But it's bedtime now. Okay?"

She doesn't say anything but lets me move the pillow, putting it under her head while she scoots down and gets comfortable. As I lean in a bit, both backing off the bed and tucking her in more, she leans up and kisses my cheek.

"Lo'ya," she says, her way of saying "love you."

I pat her head and leave.

## THE NEXT MORNING

I make breakfast.

The thought of Lizzy eating nasty, sugary cereals and peanut butter and jelly and the other gross crap they feed to children had grown more unacceptable over time since Lizzy was, in fact, a fine critic with a fine palette and an appreciation for good food.

As I make breakfast – French toast sticks with a dusting of light brown sugar and cinnamon – she eyes it up and asks, “Is that egg in this?”

She hates eggs, for some reason.

“Yeah, there’s egg in French toast batter. Will you try it if I let you crack the eggs?”

“Uh, yup.”

I let her crack an egg into the bowl and she makes a mess. Shell gets in the mix. I grow frustrated and pull the shell out with my fingers, cracking the second egg to show her how it’s done. She begs to crack the third egg and, to my surprise, she does it well, sparing the shell from the batter.

When we finish, she enjoys it and eats half.

David doesn’t have any.

Shortly after follows my attempt at forming a mathematical equation to raise a child:

*The amount of sleep a child gets the night before, minus 2 for every hour before 8 a.m. they wake: the result then multiplied by 2 should give an approximate amount of hours when the child would need to sleep again:*

$$[K - 2j]2$$

*Then adjusted for a potential sugar crash by accounting for calories:*

$$\text{Meal}_1 + \text{Snack}_1 = x - [(\text{carbs} + \text{protein})/\text{sugar}]100$$

*And the amount of activity between meals:*

*X - Y, where X = minutes in sun and Y = 100 for every degree over 90°F*

*And so on...*

It takes three days of equations and adjustments before I realize I would need to write it out (something I hadn't encountered in a very, very long time).

## AN ODD DREAM ABOUT THE TOM JONES DINER

and tell David, "Fuck off, we're here."

We walk into our parent's home, which has now become the inside of the Tom Jones Diner in Delaware County, past the Granite Run mall. Tacky lighting but open space with the walls all large windows. The food's fast and delicious and cheap. It was where my brother and I most liked to go when we were in high school.

We're seated at a table that has meals half-finished and we're already in the middle of lunch or dinner or whenever it is; outside is sky, neither light nor dark. It also appears to be thousands of miles off the ground, as grass or tree or cars or poles or streets or anything is absent; just sky as ground and world. Our parents are already there but there are no introductions or welcomes or anything. Ddd and I are already in the middle of a side-conversation.

"Look, Gauss didn't mean that in relation to terrestrial magnetism —"

We're building up steam.

"Guys, not at the table," my mmm signs.

"What do you think, mmm?" David signs to her, the only one without any knowledge of the subject.

"I think you," and she looks at ddd, "should listen to your son. And I think you," to me, "should begin to believe that you can make mistakes sometimes. It's only human, sweetie."

The waitress returns to take our plates. She has dark hair and dark eyes. This is Matilda. Unlike all the other waitresses, she's wearing a flowing red dress. It's my favorite dress of hers. She takes our *leading me to a narrow hallway in the back. The walls had a dark violet wood paneling and ended with two restrooms. There was a dim hanging light.*

*It felt musty in there, warm. She turned around just out of the light and we looked at each other. Her hand touched me, sliding up from my stomach to my chest. Then both her hands were on my chest. She leaned against the wall. My hand touched her side. Without a word, we pulled each other into the bathroom and pushed her back against the wall. I kicked the door closed with the back of my heel and held her tight by the wrists, pinned against the wall on the other side of her waist. We stood between the sink and the toilet. My left hand released her wrists. The right ripped off her buttons. She grunted. Our lips were together, violently, then apart. One of her hands grabbed the back of my hair, pulling down hard. She bit at my exposed neck. I grinded myself between her legs. She grunted again, louder. Her hand loosened. Her head fell back. I bit at her neck, grabbing and tugging and pulling and yanking her pants down. She had already undone my jeans. She leapt up, her legs wrapping completely around me, and I shoved her against the wall, hard. She moaned too loud and I grabbed a fist full of her hair, pulling back hard. I put my hand over her open mouth and she bit my fingers. I simultaneously moaned with ecstasy and pain. I grabbed behind her head, pulling her face to mine. Leaning in, kissing her lips, she cried a moan out into my I walk back into the diner and sit at the table.*

My mother is sitting alone.

I sit across from her and she reaches over and takes both of my hands in hers.

“Your pain shall be eased, your burdens relieved,” she coos, her silk voice stinging like alcohol on a wound. “I need you to hold on, sweetheart. Everything will be okay soon. Just hold on.”

“Okay, mmm.”

And then my father is back at the table.

I don’t know where David went; he left, though, as always.

My father sits next to my mother and they’re both looking at me.

“Hey ddd, you think we argue physics to get mmm’s attention?” I say as a joke, but maybe I’m serious.

My parents just stare at me.

My mother smiles.

The other patrons of the restaurant begin to panic.

My father leans over, kisses my mother's cheek, pats her hand.

She continues as the manager comes on over the PA and asks for everyone to remain calm.

"Everything will be over soon," my father tells me.

"I love you, baby boo," my mother says with a slight look of pain in her eyes.

Two dozen tables, a long counter-top, a display case of the day's cakes, everything in the restaurant shakes violently – but it's in slow motion. Everyone panics and throws food and tables and runs. Everything is flying through the air, from glass to food to chairs. Everyone is panicking except my parents. They're smiling.

They stare in my eyes.

"I love you, too, kiddo," my father says.

"No matter how far you stray, you're still *my* baby," my mother says, her arm clutched against her chest they're both calm and fearless as the restaurant begins to tear away on all sides large holes tear out of the sides crumbling into debris and flying off into the sky like a collapsing 747 a bright blue day outside its tearing the restaurant apart as if we were in a tornado wind air fills the restaurant people are pulled out into the world up into the sky i grab at the table to stay with mmm and ddd and try so hard not to leave them but i cant hold on tight enough and i too am ripped from my seat and thrown out into an open blue sky it's the last i see them they're smiling holding hands waving goodbye rolling falling spinning dizzy terror darkness

## FLYING ARACHNIDS

I wake thinking of my father.

My arms are outstretched for nothing.

I can't remember my dream but I assume he was in it.

My eyes check the room for chatty dead people; there aren't any. It's been a while since I saw one. I expect one to pop up soon.

As I come downstairs, Lizzy and David are preparing to leave for the playground.

"Hey. You slept late," David says, surprised.

"I did? What time is it?"

"Almost noon. It's a nice day, finally – come to the park with us."

"Uh, no—"

"I actually need you to," David looks up at me while tying Lizzy's shoes. "It'd really make it easy for me to run an errand if you came."

*Goddamnit.*

I brush my teeth and change.

We walk to a local park and stand around while Lizzy plays with a neighborhood kid named Ewan. David had enrolled her in a local summer preschool and Ewan would be in her class, I overhear.

"You enrolled her in school?" I ask David when the mother's out of earshot.

"Yeah, did it yesterday. She starts next week. She needs to play with kids her age. And don't tighten your butthole just yet. It's only preschool – she's not registered in the county or dependent on your address or anything."



And though I take offense, what I say isn't absurd until the sound of it hits my ear:

"So you're saying I got a tight butthole, huh?"

David looks me dead in the face, his eyebrows furrowed; I don't really have a follow-up. We stand silently for a moment, until Lizzy stops playing to come get her juicy cup. She joins us and whispers something to David. He crouches down and listens. While he's bent over, I find a dry tip of grass and pull it out of the ground. After a moment, as I make sure he hasn't seen, I lean forward and tickle his neck. David bounces, jumps forward, and swats around frantically.

"There was some kind of large flying...arachnid near your neck, man," I warn David, "you should be careful."

David looks at me, checking to see if I'm serious. He has a stern look on his face, something between confusion and anger. He doesn't use the look often.

Then his eyes search the air around him for something flying.

"What's ach'nid?" Lizzy asks.

"Where'd it go?" he asks.

"Oh, man, I don't know where it went. I think up, maybe over there," I point somewhere for David to look. When he turns to look, I do it again, tickling the side of his neck with dry grass.

He nearly jumps out of his skin.

He dances like a lizard and lets out a tight little girl scream, grabbing at his neck.

I stare at him, dead serious.

Lizzy giggles.

"You sound like a girl, daddy."

"Wherethebuggo?" David yelps it all as if it were a single word, his eyes scurrying, his hands brushing at his shoulder. He stops and tries to look at his back. He checks his hand to see if he squashed it.

I point behind him urgently, exclaiming, "Oh my!"

David turns around, backing closer to me.

As soon as he gets close enough, I tickle his neck again.

"It's got a taste for blood. You should just run," I try to say it serious but end up chuckling before I can get it out.

It takes little else before David realizes what's going on.

I genuinely chuckle.

(The face muscles to smile actually hurt on my face, as it's been some time.)

Lizzy laughs so hard she pees and we have to leave.

David's anger subsides and he finally says, "I didn't know you had a sense of humor."

"Neither did I," is my response.

## FIND MY LOVE

One night I sit in the living room.

Lizzy's bathed and dressed for bed.

David's cleaning their room.

And I'm just sitting in the living room not doing anything in particular, just staring off into space. I had been waiting to ask David questions about Lizzy's schooling but, after a bit, I found myself sitting there, not really paying attention to anything.

David finishes and Lizzy runs out to kiss my cheek as a goodnight.

She tells me, "Lo'ya," and I pat her head.

David picks her up into his arms, carries her back into the bedroom.

She's cuddled against his shoulder last I see, and then I hear David sing to her this song:

*What makes it easy to treat people bad?*

*Some things you say and you can't take 'em back*

*What makes it easy to run from the past,*

*like a child runs from the dark?*

*Which is the poison and which is the wine?*

*The scent and the colors are so much alike*

*And how much of each will it take to decide,*

*when you're at the table alone?*

*Where do you go when it's perfectly clear?  
You might find your way but you won't find it here  
What makes it easy to sound so sincere,  
when you know that you don't care?*

*Love gets lost*

*Love gets lost*

*Find my love*

*Find my love*

David keeps it light and cute at the beginning, singing the chorus with a high-pitched voice...

*How can you tell when goodbye means goodbye  
Not just for now, for the rest of your life  
How can you stand there with love in your eyes  
And still be walking away*

*Love gets lost*

*Love gets lost*

*Find my love*

*Find my love*

...but I can tell he's gently crying by the end, as he repeats the same words over and over again.

"Why you crying?" Lizzy asks him.

"Because your mommy...really liked that song. And I really miss your mommy."

"Don't cry. She smiles."

"What do you mean, sweetheart?"

"She smiles."

"Who smiles? Mommy?"

"Mommy in heaven. She smiles."

"Oh sweetheart..."

And then David says what he says every night at bedtime ("One million sweet dreams") and lays with her in bed until they both fall asleep.

And I remain sitting in the living room, broken-hearted.

## STARE AT AND SMILE

David does Lizzy's laundry and stocks her food.

He takes her to playgrounds.

Feeds her, bathes her, reads to her.

On Wednesday, he drops Lizzy off at preschool and comes home alone. And alone he stays. Just two sad eyes out a window or on a television. I end my run early as the day grows overcast and rainy to find David sitting in the living room, staring out the window, waiting. I hate how it reminds me of myself.

"When's Lizzy get home?" I ask abruptly. Not "Hi", no "How you doing?" I almost sound angry or, more accurately, fed up.

"Four or five, whenever I go pick up her up. Why?" he seems a little startled.

"Good. Get some clothes on. We're going out."

"Where?"

"Just get some clothes on, hobo Michael Myers," I tell him.

He still needs a haircut. His face is a mess of a scraggly, patchy beard. He's long since stopped wearing his prescription glasses. I had never dealt with someone who seemed to give up. He cares for Lizzy, practically lives for her, but has nothing for himself. No joy. No friends. Nothing with which to stare at and smile aside from her. The only leisure activity David ever does for himself is in watching an occasional horror movie after Lizzy's in bed. He loves them, for some reason. Some nights I silently watch them with him. It's one of the few similarities we have; not that I like horror movies, but the element of excitement and violence.

It's been impossible to get him out without Lizzy.

Until now.

“Dude, I’m cool, you know...” he responds.

“Stop being such a faggy little girl.”

“Fuck you,” he says, genuinely offended.

“You’re just sitting here. Not doing anything. Not going anywhere. And you look fucking ugly. Which makes me ugly just walking down the street next to you. And it reflects poorly on Lizzy. So get up.”

“What’d you expect me to do?”

“Utilize it, maybe. Go out. Come on, me and you. I’m taking you out. My treat.”

He declines again.

I move the coffee table out of the way slow and deliberate so he can watch it in agonizing wait. With one hand, I grab his leg and pull him off the couch, onto the floor. I straddle his chest, pinning his hands above his head. I am significantly bigger and stronger now that he’s lost weight. With my free hand, I begin tapping his forehead.

“Are you gonna come out now?”

It’s degrading and he’s hated it ever since we were kids, but I’ve always been older and bigger.

It doesn’t take much time before he reluctantly agrees.

## MADEOVERING

First stop is a haircut at the most expensive salon I can find online.

He has them trim up what was becoming a half beard but, as they start, he doesn't like it so he has them cut it off completely. They trim his dark brown, borderline-black hair, snip it short and into something fashionable. It looks good and when they're done he stares into the mirror and smirks a moment.

Then we go to Sacks on City Line Ave.

I buy him a nice fitted suit. Expensive cologne. Shirts to go out in. Polished black dress shoes, some new sneakers. Polo shirts. Jeans. New pajamas, underwear, socks, khakis, button-ups, two jackets – one leather, one Adidas wind-breaker - a new wallet, belt, watch, and whatever else we pass that fits on his body and looks good. I also buy him a new laptop, as it will help with the proposition I intend to make him later.

And we talk.

I hadn't realized it before but we hadn't really talked since he moved in.

At the salon, at Sacks, in the car, and for the rest of the day, little by little he opens up more than he had in the months since they moved in. It had been tougher to be around Lizzy than David because I hadn't dealt with a child before and David had stayed quiet about things that didn't deal directly with Lizzy. As he begins talking about his life, I realize for the first time how hard it is for me to talk to my brother. As children, we had always co-existed. The only thing we shared together was a love for the acoustic guitar; it didn't make us best buddies but we found time to play together. We were never particularly good but it was something we shared, and it involved no words.



“You used to hate me, man,” he said, laughing. “You’d pick on me. Hell, you just forced me to come out the same way you used to when we were kids. I fuckin’ hated you, too, there. You were the first person to knock me unconscious. Hit me in the head with a block, had to get stitches.”

He looks over at me like I remember these moments with him but he shares them alone. I can’t remember much from my childhood before the age of twelve or thirteen. I try but there just wasn’t anything there anymore, like static on a tape someone recorded over. I remember it like paint-by-numbers – this led to that and I was here, there. I remember short conversations, images. I remember the idea of family, of home. My youth—it was there, somewhere. And it hadn’t been horrible; in fact, it was rather uneventful. But my focus had been elsewhere and time passed and remembering back, I just wasn’t there somehow.

“How is that possible?” he asks himself when I explain my lack of memory.

The fork in the road had been sharp; these memories were of someone else’s life.

## FROLFING

After the haircut, after shopping, I get David a new pair of prescription glasses. Something nice, stylish. As we leave, passing a sporting goods store, he makes a suggestion:

“You wanna go Frolf?”

“What’s that?” I answer.

“It’s the noise a person makes when they throw up. Seriously?” He looks at me, accepting I have no idea what the fuck a ‘Frolf’ is. “You’ve never heard of Frisbee Golf?”

I shake my head no.

“Throw a Frisbee a few hundred yards, get it into a basket. That’s about it.”

I agree only because I’m glad to see him make a suggestion. He had been willing and seemed downright happy by the end. So we buy some special Frisbees – heavier, with more of an edge – and head off toward Fairmont, where he says there’s a Frolf course.

The course is empty when we arrive. It’s buried deep in the forest around the park, some of it hidden and some out in the open, even leading up to Smith’s Grove, a large, free playground that he had spoken highly about. The air grows crisp but still warm; it smells salty like the ocean. The sky opens a little, the rain slows to a slight drizzle. And for two hours we throw Frisbees toward little baskets with shining chains above them.

Two holes in, David begins to talk about Sarah.

“You have your whole life mapped out. House. Kids.” He sighs, then out of a sort of desperation, he laughs out the word, “Fence.”

I tread carefully because it's still sensitive; in fact, I don't know a word to say and feel plain awkward listening to it.

"I miss that—" he breaths out. We stand at the tee, shaped like a runway with a rubber mat. Next to it, carved into a wooden plank sticking out of the ground, is the distance and the shape of the course. David is taking his shot but he pauses as he speaks. "I miss having that. Even if it was in my mind. That future. Something so...finite."

He looks forward, over the course.

And he stops completely.

"She had a box of teddy grams in her hand. When she died." His tongue licks at his teeth. His eyes search the sky but a tear still finds its way down his cheek. "It's uh Lizzy's favorite snack. I can't—heh, I can't buy them anymore. I can't even look at a teddy gram." He gives out a fake laugh before his face shrinks in defeat, his lips raised, eyes sunk. But it disappears instantly as he sucks in a deep breath and lets out a short exhale. And then he whips the Frisbee as hard as he can. It goes straight about forty yards, the farthest throw of the day for either of us.

I aim and throw after him in utter silence. I bite it big time and land in the forest.

"Throw it shoulder to shoulder," he reminds me, calmly.

We move up on the course. I throw it out of the forest and back onto the cleared gravel of the fairway.

"What are you going to do?" I ask him once I had thrown the Frisbee enough times to catch up with his first throw.

"I don't know, man." He looks at me. "It just...it hurts so much to think about her. It's like a wound." He licks his lips, trying to prevent himself a little. "I can't stop, but I can't stop thinking about her, either," he breaths out the words in a rush. "It's like a," he speaks, moving his hands around his head, "it's like a static shock in my mind. But I see her face." His voice becomes a whisper. "I see it clearly."

“So don’t think about her,” I say. It’s obviously the wrong thing to say and I realize it. “I uh,” I try to backtrack, “tsk. Sorry.”

“It’s alright, man.”

“No, it’s not. What do you see when you picture her?”

“I’ve been trying not to picture her.”

“You’ve got to face it sooner or later. It’s never going to go away if you don’t.” I’m thinking of Matilda. This is advice I’m giving myself. “Think about her. Embrace it. Her memory. Remember what happened. Your memories. It’s not going to stop until it’s accepted. And you don’t want to lose them. Do you?”

My brother snorts a half-serious laugh.

“I’m serious. What do you see when you picture her?”

The woods make their noises, animals scurry along, old rain drips from young leaf. My brother, on the fairway, stands looking at me. He licks his lips and throws the Frisbee to the green around the cup.

I watch him, unsure.

When he turns back to me, his eyes are closed:

## QUOTATION MARK

I see her lying on our grey couch beside me, her head in my lap. We're both naked. Talking. The lights are dim. Wall color's a darker red, so the world around us is red. Her skin and my skin are the same shade, a ripe peach color. She stares up at me smiling. Talking. Looks off in conversation, her beautiful eyes. I'm not cold even though its winter and we're in the basement, and the basement is cold. My smile hurts and won't leave my face, staring down at her. Brushing her hair aside. Caressing her cheek, and her ear, and neck. I lean down, kiss her, and forget to breathe. She leans up, kisses back, and moans slightly. I can't hear our words, our conversation, but that moan is a never-ending echo. And we kiss alike. Sloppily. Mouths twisting and tongues sliding together. We kiss so hard, for so long, I rub her nose and chin red. There's a full glass of red wine on the table she hasn't touched. I open my eyes and watch her kiss me. The cat's somewhere nearby. House makes a noise. She opens her eyes."

## QUID PRO QUO

"I'm going to float you \$10,000—"

"Whoa whoa, Lizzy and I aren't that hard up."

"Eh...it's not so much that. I'm going to use the money for an investment I found. Largo Tech Services."

"Why?"

"Because if I'm right, you'll make enough money to hold you over for the meantime. Whether you sell the house or not."

"So it's all just to get us out?"

"Yes and no. It's to make sure you're comfortable."

"And what does Largo Tech Services do? That you're so sure it'll make such money."

"They create web-based games. The site has consistently expanded at an almost precise rate monthly. The small, quick-load games are finding a mass audience. I've formulated the number of users and amount of time for the website to reach full saturation, the amount of time to elapse between the technological revolutions of the net and the games, the growth possibilities and demand, odds of failure in relation to money invested, etc. It's never a sure thing but it's pretty safe. I'll withdraw my initial \$10,000 and a 3% fee when we back out of the investment or invest more."

"I don't want you to do this—"

"I already did. And it'll make money. And you, and Lizzy, you'll both be comfortable and secure. And in return, you're going to start writing me a thousand words a day."

"The fucking hell I am. You did this without asking and now I owe you for it?"

"You are, David. You're going to do this for me just as I'm doing you a favor by letting you live with me. Against my better judgment. You'll do it because I'm asking. Nicely. The money, the house...I'm asking you to start doing this because it will help you. Whether you believe it or not, you're a talented writer. Something I am not. And I'll be damned if you're just not going to write while you live at my house rent-free."

"I'll pay you rent."

"You will. By giving me a thousand words a day. You don't have to do anything else, work, nothing. I'll make you money. I'll make you plenty of money. But you're going to write for me. Anything, I don't care what, so long as every thousand words is part of one project. I don't want you writing a thousand words of something new each day. Your investment is Largo Tech Services, and my investment is you."

"You know what? Okay. I'll do it on one condition."

"Shoot."

"You stop at a music store and buy us guitars. And we play like we used to. Once a day."

"David, I haven't played guitar in almost eight years."

"You'll be fine. And this'll also make me feel better. Do you accept my conditions?"

"Make it twice a week."

"Three times a week."

"And twelve hundred words."

"Deal."

"Deal."

## FALLING IN STYLE

The next morning, after breakfast, David takes Lizzy to school while I work on investments. When he returns home and I finish my research, we tune our guitars and work very hard to remember what we used to do. Neither of us can remember the chords – what’s a Bb or F# – but our fingers are faster than we are, and they find the notes. We’re rusty and ill-equipped to play music outright so our first day of practice is relinquished to sitting near each other in the living room, quietly reading from our laptops, studying music theory and online beginner’s guides. He instructs me to learn and practice all the chords on the first five frets for the next day, since today didn’t count. Then out for a run and I stop by my gym to exercise for a bit; I’ve grown lax since David and Lizzy moved in and I can feel my chest and arms shrinking, my body growing weaker. When I get home, David’s silently working on the new laptop I bought him. His brow is furrowed and his gaze intense, his fingers dancing over the keys at a rapid pace, faster than my eyes can watch. I don’t know if he notices I’ve returned home but I gently grab the guitar and retire to my room for a bit. Holding it earlier had felt right.

Alone in my room, I do my best to ignore the immediate inclination for my mind to find reason and definition in what my hands are doing. There’s a short-lived moment of freedom in the pit of my stomach, similar to the feeling of free-falling just not quite as intense. It’s quick and the feeling itself brings me out of it. My fingers know more than I do and, though I try, it’s especially hard for me to turn my mind off, turn off my ability to analyze what it is I’m doing and make sense of it.

The more I pay attention, the less I’m capable of.



Lizzy comes home from preschool at the summer camp and talks about her day. Drawing. Playground. Nap-time. Et cetera. The preschool keeps her busy and happy and surrounded by kids her age. She's a brave girl, fearless to the crowd of strangers and established cliques, the new environment, all of it – she takes it in a confident stride and without a second glance. I wonder if all children are like that: slowly wear away the ability to think beyond the moment and embrace everything as a large merry-go-round.

While I cook dinner, Lizzy stays by my side. It's common for her to be around now, watching mesmerized, while I dice and mince and sauté; however, David had returned to writing once Lizzy had her afternoon snack and latched on to me. She asks if we can start a garden in the backyard. Her class intends to plant trees in the park near the school and she says she's interested in doing something similar at home.

“You know what, I've always wanted to start a garden in the backyard. I'll buy supplies tomorrow and we can grow our own onions and tomatoes and basil and...other things.”

She gets excited and I send her off to wash up for dinner.

I call, then walk over and snap my fingers in front of David's despondent face to break his concentration. It's at this time that I realize he has headphones plugged into his ears. Surprised, he looks up and pulls out the headphones. I ask him to do the same as Lizzy and wash up for dinner; he reluctantly agrees. When he sets the laptop down, I'm afraid to look at the screen in fear that it has the same sentence written a thousand times.

I'm please to find that it doesn't.

## RETIRED

Apartment #404 is devoid of even the small amount of furniture it has.

“You beckoned,” I ask Ghos as I enter.

He’s in the empty bedroom, dictating construction notes to Lionel, who’s on the outset of the doorway leading up to The Fifth Floor Prison. Lionel is furiously writing points down on a ridiculously tiny pad, flipping pages almost as often as he writes. He’s obviously over-burdened but Ghos continues nonetheless.

“We redoin’ most of the building. Fire safety ain’t quite up to code. And the fifth floor needs to suit a girl. No more this bullshit—” he begins to tell me, stopping to cough. The cough turns into a raging, hacking fit. He has a handkerchief in his hand already and holds it over his lips. He doesn’t look particularly well and the month since I’ve seen him looks to have been a hard one.

“You alright?” I ask.

“I ain’t dead yet.” He coughs into the handkerchief again, then points it at me and I see it’s covered in a red-tinted mucus. “You—”

“Is that blood? Are you fucking coughing blood?”

His eyes glance at the handkerchief and then glare at me.

“Keepin’ yer head straight witcher family bullshit?” he angrily grumbles.

His voice is getting worse, weaker in tone but harsher in its rasp.

Lionel gives me a worried look.

“Yes. My brother will be leaving in the beginning of fall.”

“Good,” Ghos says with a mouthful of something nasty, which he proceeds to spit into the handkerchief. “First week of September, you gon’ go up to Massachusetts and kill me that fuckin’ Banker. I want all blood and hell in Massachusetts. He’s gon’

have guards and he's gon' be hold up in a big ole' fuckin' house. You're gonna have back-up."

"No, wait—"

"No, you wait – you ain't workin' alone this time. This shit's too important and we can't go fuckin' around. We got one chance, the first week'a September, when we know exactly where he's gon' be. This mo'fucker—and his bitch fuckin' girlfriend—they bad for you, they bad for me, they bad for Philly and the fuckin' planet. You goin' in with back-up – Bartleby. This is too important. You got a month. I'll get you all the information I can, when I can. Got me?"

I look down, then back up at Ghos as something crosses my mind.

"Where's Benjiman Dentist?"

I speak and hear the question, immediately knowing the answer – what follows is a pang of frustration, borderline anger, surprise, and a lingering sadness, all at once.

"Where you think he at? Alex took him to winter. Done. Mo'fucker wasn't right." Ghos uses the term "took him to winter" and though I'm not sure where he got it from, I know it means Alex led him through the apartment building on the false promise of letting him go; he lead him out the double front doors, into a car that couldn't be traced; took him for a drive down to South Philadelphia, past 95, down near the navy yard, onto Kitty Hawk Ave; took him to the end of the road, walked him over the hard dirt and thin forest to the Delaware river; shot him in the back of the head, pushed his body into the rough waters, and crossed his fingers that Benjiman Dentist's body would end up on the Jersey side. "Now you got this Massachusetts job and yo' head needs be on tight. Will it be on tight?"

I can't speak as a litany of thoughts cross my mind.

"You could—there wasn't anything he could do? Nothing?" my voice rises.

"Hush down now, boy!" Ghos barks, enough to physically startle me. "You don't fuckin' question what I do, mo'fucker. I say he dies, I say you die—you die." He shakes

his head in disbelief at me. "Get your family fuckin' straight and you gon' run me this job. Make the world a better fuckin' place, got it?"

I nod yes.

One thought settles and remains:

"After this," I tell him, "I want to stop for a bit. I'm—I am taking a break after the Banker."

"Oh you are now?" he narrows his eyes. Lionel stops and turns to me from the doorway.

When I leave, Ghos hands me one last piece of wisdom:

"I tell you when you go on break, mo'fucker," Ghos spits, pounding his chest with his fist.

I'm already turned and leaving.

And as the door closes, I hear him angrily yell:

"Those're dangerous words to be throwin' around, kid."

## SKYPLANTS

The back yard is enclosed by a wood fence the whole way around, a cherry tree in the back corner. We line the garden against the fence on the right side, all of Lizzy's toys to the left. The season is off since it's closing into the end of the summer but, as of now, it's just an experiment. I know nothing about agriculture but it doesn't matter – I'm just an advisor.

Lizzy makes the decisions; it's her garden.

It's Goddamn near impossible for me to let the small child do what she likes, for better or worse, but it gives her a sense of accomplishment and a hobby; this is not to grow a perfect garden, I continuously remind myself.

*Goddamn near impossible.*

I let her pick the seeds and she chooses them according to the sound of their name: sweet petra dark red basil, lonicera, purple heliotrope, and butterhead lettuce, to start. I let her choose where in the backyard we would grow the plants, gently steering her more toward the side along the fence than anywhere else.

All of the decisions are hers to make.

I just suggest a fair amount.

She enjoys tearing up the backyard an absurd amount. She laughs and shoves the tip of her hand-shovel in the dirt and flings it up towards me. I try to be less annoyed and more playful but it's asking a lot – especially as a part of my mind (no matter how small) is preoccupied by the Banker, by the first week of September, by the body of Benjiman Dentist floating in the shadow-water of the Delaware. And then Lizzy flings dirt at me and I ask her to be more cautious. She gets serious, then smiles, her eyes

lowering back to her shovel and the dirt, watching carefully, until she flings it at me again and starts laughing.

This goes on for about an hour.

Digging is playing in the dirt and she loves getting dirty. She also loves the destruction aspect, ripping and shredding the grass. She loves worms wiggling in her palm. Once everything is planted, she enjoys watering the plants. I point out that we'll drown them if we give them too much water but she still wants to continue watering them. So I give her the choice to drown the plants if she wants.

It's her garden; she can do what she wants.

She doesn't, though she turns the hose on me.

"Little monster," and I rush her.

She laughs and I get her back, wet her down. July was a fiery month, with the beginning of August only slightly better. The water feels good on my skin, no matter how much I pretend to protest.

The garden becomes a part of the routine, once in the morning after breakfast and again in the evening before dinner. We spend a few minutes watering and looking for sprouts, and she asks questions, most of which I have no idea how to answer.

"Why plants grow out of the ground?" she asks me.

"What do you mean?"

"Why don't plants grow out of the sky?"

"Because they need soil to grow."

"Are clouds jus' plants growing in dah sky?"

"Uh, yeah, sure. You could say that."

"You say it, too."

"Say what?"

"Skyplants."

"Skyplants?"

"Yup."

"Okay. Skyplants."

"Yer silly," she says.

## WE-APPRECIATE-YOU PARTY

At the end of August, with the gusts of changing weather, comes Lizzy's Birthday.

David gets her a Goldfish which she affectionately names Whiskers. I get her an MP3 player loaded with songs from the Muppet Show and Sesame Street and Wizard of Oz, all covered by famous female singers. "She loves Sarah McLachlan," David had told me. We also get her more books and toys and such, though she seems most impressed with the vanilla and chocolate ice cream cake. The following Friday, Lizzy and David surprise me with a "We-Appreciate-You" party. We finish the cake from Lizzy's birthday party and they bring me presents. The whole thing is sickeningly sweet, if not completely and utterly, horribly uncomfortable. Lizzy made me a picture in her preschool class, one of me riding a pony under a giant raisin.

"Why a raisin?" I ask as she presents it.

"Cause e'body likes raisins," she answers, matter-of-factly.

She just wants to set the picture down and eat another piece of cake.

David hands me a present and I open it to find a first edition copy of Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet*, signed by the author.

"I noticed that you look in it every now and then. Just so happened to stumble upon it. Ebay, you know," he says.

I cringe. I have no words. I didn't know how to express thanks very well. Lizzy and David can tell but no one says anything; it's like they just allow it because they know me.

Because I'm awkward, the party ends a bit quicker than they expect.

It's twilight when we walk Lizzy to the neighbor's.



She had become good friends with a neighborhood boy named Ewan who lives three houses down. His parents are sweet and they have three children, twin seven year old girls and four year old Ewan. She plays together well with all three and always tells me that one day,

“I’m gonna marry Ewan.”

David had asked if they would let her sleep over Friday and they agreed.

Lizzy kisses my cheek as we approach the door and says thanks once more, mainly for the cake – God does she love cake, or any sweets for that matter – but she thanks me because I’m the reason she got to have it.

“Lo’ya,” she says.

“Anything,” I tell her.

I’ve become accustomed to saying the word “anything” as a response. “I love you” had yet to leave my lips.

To me, though, saying “Anything” meant the most.

It meant I would do anything for her, and it was true.

On the short walk back to the house, I turn to David and stop him on the street.

“Consider it said enough for a lifetime, okay?” I look him in the eye, ensuring that he understands and responds.

“Consider what said?” he asks.

“That you appreciate me.”

“Okay,” he says.

“Okay?” I ask again.

“Whatever,” he mumbles. “We’re going to dinner. My treat. Show my appreciation. Douche. And I invited someone to join us.”

“Who?” I ask, annoyed that he invited someone else.

“Oh, you’ll see,” David laughs.

## DINNER GUEST

David takes me to an expensive Japanese restaurant for dinner. The place is bathed in a blue glow, all of the tables made of glass with echoes of changing fluorescent lights beneath. It's very nice, plush. The menu is mainly sushi and sashimi. He orders us both a carafe of warm Saki and we look over the menu, waiting in anticipation of the guest to arrive.

"While we got time, I gotta talk to you about something," I begin.

"Yeah, what's that?" David says, looking over his shoulder and toward the door. He turns his head back toward me when he really hears the words, checking to see how serious my face appears. I'm looking in his young face and I can see, for a moment, our father as a young man. The long, thin nose. The eyes.

"I've uh...I got to go to Virginia beginning of next week. Two days from now. Something for an investment. I'll be gone a few days. Three at the most. But just so you know."

"Okay," David says, shrugging it off. "You made it sound like something horrible was about to happen." He turns back to look at the door, finds no one, and turns back. "Actually, there's something I wanted to say, too."

I look in his eyes.

"Yeah?" I ask.

He looks around, sort of nervous (in turn causing me a mid-level of anxiety), then meets my eyes:

"I sold the house," his lips crack into a smile. "Huh! Finally, right? Only a little bit below market value. Haha you must be so relieved."

I lean back, a bit shocked.

“I already found a nice place. It’s close by, too. So if you want us to annoy you — which I’m sure we won’t— we’ll only be about thirteen blocks away. Lizzy and I went this morning to sign the papers. I’m amazed she didn’t say anything all night but I actually think she forgot.”

I didn’t know he had even been looking at houses.

“Aren’t you happy?— fuck, aren’t you ecstatic? I know you have a hard time showing emotion but...”

I feel a familiar pang of anger at David – he’s leaving, again. Just as I had grown used to his presence, to their presence in my house; I actually grew to enjoy the feeling that they were always there, that there was the presence of a child in my house.

It had stopped being awkward and a nuisance.

“Just thinking...about the garden...” I sort of trail off.

Just as I feel comfortable...

Just as I realize I enjoy their company...

“You’re gonna be alone again,” David says to encourage me.

It has an adverse effect.

He turns his head around as someone approaches.

The guest reaches our table.

“Gentlemen...”

## P\*RNST\*R

He looks the same. His skin and face are young. (I honestly can't tell if he's 25 or 35.) His long blonde hair is hidden under a Phillies cap. Square jaw always in a smile. He's thinner, I notice.

Chris Young, the porn star.

"Good to see you again," David says.

I stand up and shake his hand.

He sits next to David.

"Yeah man. Good to be here. I haven't been in civilization in a minute," he says, scooting in next to David. "Been hikin' the Appalachian trail pretty much since I seen yah. Don't get many nice restaurants."

"Where's all your stuff?" David asks.

"Sold most all of it. Figured I didn't need it. I'm just out there, tryin' to figure out my next move in life, you know."

All of us drink a shot of the delicious, warm plum saki.

David quickly shares the story as to how he invited a porn star to dinner:

"I e-mailed his site a bit ago to uh...tell him about Sarah..."

Chris puts his arm around David, with a quick, "Sorry, bro."

"Yeah, and he responded—"

("I keep my Blackberry so I ain't out of it entirely.")

"—and the other day he said he was near the area."

David eggs us into another shot.

After we set down the ceramic shot glasses, I ask Chris a lingering question.

"So tell me how you got those scars."

"Persistent," he says and chuckles.

"What scars?" my brother asks.

"I got some scars on me. From when I was in the Army," Chris answers.

"You were in the Army?" my brother asks in disbelief.

"Absolutely I was. On the trail, I missed tryin' to survive, you know. Everything just got too easy and I just feel there's this – I don't know – something great, like there's something out there for me to *do* and it wasn't what I been doin'. So I'm trying to find it."

"What, like the perfect job or something?" David asks.

"No, bigger than that. Like there's something I need to take care of or somethin'. I don't know, I can't explain—"

"Hub bub bubub, you're not getting out of it again. I wanna know how you got those Goddamn scars," I interrupt him as I find the conversation diverging.

He laughs.

"You wanna know about the wolves, do ya?"

## A STORY OF SCARS

Army train't me. Army train't me as a sniper then shipped me off to fuckin' Siberia 'cause I talk too much.

*What's it like there? [David asks.]*

Siberia? It's like taking every bright color you ever seen in your life and puttin' a white sheet over it. Even the base of communications – which doubled as our barr'cks – it only had three colors: white, off-white, and gray. Three of us in a base built for five that could'a been manned by zero. Pointless jerk-off, nothin' but phones and grids and number trackin'. Train't killers watching computer monitors like arctic scientists.

Only interestin' thing that ever happened nearly killed me.

*What was that?*

The wolves.

There were these local wolves, these white-as-snow motherfuckers that would hunt durin' snowstorms. The wind chill would be below zero, snow blowin' at twenty-forty miles an hour, and these wolves, these packs of white, horrible wolves, they'd come out in board daylight, in the middle of this small, local town – population maybe three hundy – and they'd try an' snag anyone caught up in the storm.

Police didn't know what to do about these wolves that kept maiming people durin' snowstorms so they asked us to help, informally.

Suffice it to say, we were grateful.

Any opportunity to do something 'sides radio in coordinates or map broadcasting grids or meet up with the flyboys to trade weed for porn.

So we set up an ambush, boxed them.

There was a grocery, a long street in front. Sent out a local covered in paddin'. The three of us – me, Michael, and Finn – we all scattered out.

We wanted to trap 'em on the street.

For the most part, it worked. They attacked and we killed a few of 'em and they ran off. But it didn't stop. They started attackin' when it wasn't storming. And they started attackin' more at day, too. Strange thing was, there were other animals out there that those wolves could've eaten.

I think they just wanted to eat people.

*What'd you do?*

We set a second trap.

Only this time I decided to sneak up on a building about a block down. Do the same thing – send out a local, box 'em in – but I'd pick off any that tried to escape this time.

Nothing happened

They didn't show up.

We figured they weren't going to attack that night.

So I climbed down the wooden ladder into this junk alleyway and there they were, eight of 'em, just black eyes, black lips mixed in with the white and the snow.

It got bloody.

Very bloody.

Used my M1C, firin' without aim. Hit one, killed it. Ricochet caught another in the right front leg. Didn't matter, though. By then there were three pullin' me down. It was scary. They weren't trying to eat me but drag me off cause they knew my friends were coming.

They had poor communication skills since some stopped pullin' to eat but...

They pulled me maybe fifty yards through the snow before my friends caught up and shot at them and scared them enough to leave me.

*What happened to them?*

They found their trail just outside of town, maybe six total, led by a set of tracks without the right front paw.

*[shrugging, looking off]*

Followed 'em all the way to another town that reported a pack of white wolves attackin' oxen but there was a storm and we lost the trail. Vanished.

Must've returned to wherever they come from.

One of the town's people gave me a knife translated as 'the rout.' They told me to hide it up my sleeve in case the wolves ever got me down again.



'Use it if the wolves getchu down.'

[*sighs*]

It's the only thing I brought back with me when I came home. One of tha' only things I kept when I sold all my stuff, too.

[*reaches under the sleeve of his forearm; pulls out a slender blade, returns it*]

*Holy shit, d'you carry that everywhere?*

Pretty much.

## MURPHY'S

It reads above the door:

*What ever can go drunk will go drunk*

Murphy's Bar is a wealthy, often packed Irish pub with a sprawling bar the size of an Olympic swimming pool. There is a stage off to the side but no live music tonight. Just a DJ. The dance floor pulses across from the bar, a human amalgam swaying in a dimmer area.

We sit on stools at a small, round high-top against a wall.

Chris immediately addresses the situation and labels us the most attractive guys in the bar.

"What d'you want to drink?" David asks.

"Tonic and lime," I say.

"With an umbrella—?" Chris starts and I can't tell if he's serious.

"No—no way," my brother responds.

"I'll take a Jack and coke," Chris answers.

"Three Jack and cokes. Gotcha," David says and leaves to go squeeze himself between two groups of people at the crowded bar. He brings back three double Jack on the rocks (without any warning that there is, in fact, zero percent soda in it) and three shots of Patron. We all three chase the shot with the straight double Jack. I immediately feel ill.

Even Chris looks a bit surprised.

"You asshole," I tell David.

"I want you to get drunk."

"Why?" I ask, surprised.

"Cause I want you to be a *fucking* human for once. Have a vice! Drink, make a mistake. Something. You got barely any responsibilities, man. You're just like some floating super-genius. And what the fuck, dude." The alcohol had loosened David's tongue. "You could easily have a PhD right now and invent the next fucking...personal rocket ship."

[—"ah, that'd be awesome—" Chris says in the background.]

"Why in the fuck—" he notices himself getting worked up and calms, "I mean, I understand new passion but, dude, you loved—loved!—physics. You don't even have a physics book in the house anymore. Man, you and dad used to—"

"Stop," I say, polite but with a stone face.

And David does, he stops momentarily, but I can tell he's pissed.

And then comes:

"You're fucking practically rich," he spits, looking away and taking a sip of his straight jack. "Have a good time for once in your fuckin' life."

"Wait-wait-wait . . ." Chris stops us, "...you have a degree in physics? Explains...so much. Like when you meet someone and they're like, 'I'm a gym teacher,' and you're like, 'You totally are, dude, you are totally a gym teacher,'" Chris looks down and around, obviously working some things out in his own head; I can actually see him thinking. "That's so cool. What's the square root of this room?"

"And we're both wealthy," David continues his argument with me, steamrolling Chris' inadvertent levity, "and I think it's time we did somethin' about that. How many people you think's in here?"

I can't see David's thinking as obviously as I can with Chris but I can tell he's headed somewhere in his head.

I scan the crowd.

“Not including people in the bathroom or the booths in the back...I’d say around seventy-five. Including them, maybe a hundred-ten. Why?”

“Why aren’t you a fizzy-cyst, number crunchin’ an’ shit?” David always had a hard time with the word physicist; the alcohol wasn’t helping. “I wanna buy everyone a drink!”

“Right on,” Chris says.

“What?!” I ask, flabbergasted. “No nonono. How about you let me buy you a shot? Let’s think about this.”

He agrees and we have three more shots of Patron.

By now, I am intermittently drunk.

I explain the theory that you shouldn’t show money and that I didn’t want anyone to know we were wealthy. He had noticed my sour wince when he mentioned we were wealthy in front of Chris.

“What, people gonna take our money in the night?” he says. “Why wouldn’t you want to make all these people happy? I got money now —”

“This isn’t what I meant for you to do with it,” I snap.

“Spend it?” he asks. “And I got the money from the house, the money you invested for me—Lizzy and I are well past secure. Don’t get me wrong, man, I appreciate it so much. Seriously, if it weren’t for you...I don’t know what would have happened to us. So thanks. But you need to know this.” He comes leaning in close, enthusiastically whispering, “It’s lame. Lame. You’re lame, dude. You. Are. Lame. That you don’t spend it. Cause you should. Make people happy, why not? And these people, they don’t need to know I bought it for ‘em. But buyin’ everyone a round makes me happy, then what better money...to spend it on. Huh?” He confuses himself with his own words. “Yup, I’m gonna do it.”

“You’re gonna do it ‘cause it makes you happy?”

“Yeah.”

“And that’s what money should be spent on? What makes you happy?” I ask.

“Shh—no shit. What else do you spend money on? Things that hurt? Sometimes you’re like an alien, dude.”

“I’m gonna go to the bathroom,” I say. “Don’t do anything until we talk about it. I’ll share the cost or something, okay? Maybe. Gimme a minute.”

As I move towards the bar from our table against the wall, I hit a barstool and almost knock it down. My tolerance for alcohol was low and I had been misleading myself about how drunk I was becoming in order to stay in control; lying, my mind telling my body it wasn’t drunk until the last possible second, as it now says, *You’re fine, you’re fine, you’re fine—op, you’re fuckin’ bombed and you’re goin’ down soon.*

Walking into the barstool, I realize my sobriety has left the party.

I piss—it feels glorious, one of those drunk pisses where I lean against something and moan a little. When I return to the table, David’s speaking to a woman behind the bar. He hands her something, then points to me. He returns to his seat with three actual Jack and cokes.

“Do you miss it? Bein’ a porn star?” he asks Chris, settling into his seat.

I forget to ask him why he had pointed at me, intrigued to hear Chris’ answer.

“Every so often,” Chris answers, “but not really. It was just a job.”

I pick up a hint of remorse in his voice, like he’s lying.

“You do miss it, don’t you?” I ask.

He sighs, not of sadness but more exhaust, then perks up. “I miss the people. You know.” Then he laughs. “Got to meet alotta awesome people. Sex, though, it gets old, becomes work. I tried to keep it classy for the girl but some girls, they don’t want classy,” a look of disappointment forms then disappears, “and that’s fine, too. Some of them were special, though, and extra bit of uh...I don’t know what. Some girls just had it. Whatever ‘it’ is. Beggin’ my pardon if this is out of line or inappropriate but—” he nods to David, “—Sarah was special. It took me a bit to remember her but I do, which is

more than I can say for a lot of the girls. Especially after years. You always tell the special people. Always remember them differently."

"How long were you in the porn industry?" I ask, trying to change the conversation towards something more positive.

"Two years. Did lots 'a scenes, filmed 'em all myself. Tried to have ummm like themes and shit but it wasn't nothin' great or anything. Fell into it, you know, like anyone falls into anythin'."

"Wait, how's that?" I ask, incredulous to the fact that he makes it sound like I can just slip up or make a slight change and end up doing porn for a few years.

"Girlfriend let me film sex with my webcam. Posted it online, as like revenge when she broke my heart. It got like thirty thousand hits. People and comments, seemed they liked it. Quality camera. It just happened that they liked to see the same thin's I liked to see when I be havin' sex. Figured I could make some money. All I had to do was design a website – easy peazy, done and done. Two years in porn. More well known your website becomes, more people contact you. More people contact you, more money, more connections, more attractive girls. Some you have to pay, some just wanted to fuck me."

I had looked Chris up on the internet after meeting him, checked out his website, half-watched a few scenes. His site was easy to find because of his scars; just a quick search found a lot of "scarred dude fucks hot chick" results. He named the site pairadice.com. They were impressive if only for production value. He used a high quality camera, a lot of fixed camera angle, some POV, and it wasn't entirely exploitive. It was a little different, intimate yet professionally shot, never as explicit as most other porn, not especially degrading, well-edited, and the scenes were seldom longer than three or four minutes.

"Eventually I was like, 'If I can do this, I can do something nice.' You know, like something out of a Norman Rockhard painting." [No one corrects Chris.] "It's just no

one's dream to be a pornstar. You wanna be seen. You wanna be liked. You wanna be noticed for being...a good boy—person. Ahem," he clears his throat, breathes in about to say something, stops, then continues, his eyes looking down. "Sometimes the road less traveled is a dead end. Fall in love. Get married. Right? Boring, huh?" He laughs, snapping out of it and looking around.

We stare at him with long, sad faces.

Chris appears startled by our appearances.

"What?"

Three tiny mock-Liberty Bells around the bar ring in unison to signify an enormous tip.

A male bartender brings our table a bottle of Cristal and three Champaign glasses.

"This is on the house," he says to me, professional but smiling.

With a polite *thank you*, he golf claps for me and walks off.

"What the FUCK was that?!" I ask David, accusatory and working myself into a panic.

The music lowers as a female manager takes the stage and the DJ's microphone crackles to life (my eyes wide like a caged animal and frantically jolting from David to Chris to the bar and the ceiling and the people, the electric feeling of a crowd's attention headed in our direction):

"Yes, hello. May I have everyone's attention. The gentleman at that table right there..." the female manager begins, pointing directly at me.

David stands and backs away from the table, pointing at me.

Chris watches, realizes, then does the same.

All eyes are on me and I begin to hyper-ventilate, frozen.

"That gentleman over there has paid for everyone's drinks for the rest of the night. Open bar. And his brother would like to say a toast."

I'm too busy panicking to realize David's run to the stage.

"Everyone lift their glass," he says into the microphone, staring at me from across the bar. "To my brother. A man of genius and great things. I know you can never hear this enough so, just one more time, I appreciate you, buddy."

He lifts his glass into the air, as does Chris, as does the entire bar of strangers.

Everyone drinks, and the bar lets out a raucous howl of applause, just for me.

My eyes swell.

Shortly after, I black out drunk and slip up for the first time by telling my brother how I murdered the man that murdered our parents:



## THE MAN RESPONSIBLE AND SWEET REVENGE

I remember finding tha man.

[*hiccup*]

Tha man that was ta blame, huh.

He murdered our parents, that motherfucker... we were walking toward each other near Arch street, right near where mom and dad died actually, just strolling down the sidewalk and I could see him following behind a young woman walking alone and I had bin followin' him for a little while, a meek waybe.

Huntzinger was that fucker's name.

I followed him for a week and at the end of that week – that night—pretty much at that moment, I was certain I had the right man and I walked towards Huntzinger on the sidewalk of a public street in Philadelphia and—it's funny 'cause I didn't think I would be able to work up the nerve.

Killin' someone [*stare off a moment*] for the first time, taking a life – should be hard, right?

The night wasn't ssssspecially dark but Huntzinger wouldn't recognize me and no one would, though, because I had changed and become darker and my features withdrawn and I saw it – it's what happened 'cause I gonna kill someone, saw my lip come back a little, my breath raspy and warm.

There were people walking, not overcrowded but 'nuff to bump an occasional elbow and Huntzinger's eyes never lifted from the back of the woman he was following. Just...intense focus. Reminds me of this story Ghos told me about a pedophile in playground.—

*Who's Ghos?*

He's like the boss.

Hunzinger, he was steppin' in rhythm with this girl, mirrored her. His concentration was too focused to see me comin'. Tsk. If he had, he would have seen that my eyes never left his ugly fuckin' face.

We continued toward each other, closer and closer, and Huntzinger had a knife, hidden but there if you lookt for it—it was exactly what I was waitin' for, for him to do it again, they had told me he would. So I passed the woman between us with a courteous nod and I stepped in front of him and he-he-he had to stop himself to prevent from walking into me.

We shared a silent moment together.

I stared into his eyes.

It had been a long time coming, and I enjoyed the air between us.

This was the time, fight or flight. Up until I saw him, saw his eyes, his face, his dirty teeth...I had been worried I wouldn't have the nerve.

But that wasn't the case.

I wasn't scared 'bout killin' someone or if I would get caught, none of those normal feelings. It was a moment I wanted to enjoy, a moment to bask in as one might climbin' out a cave to find daylight.

First he was confused...

Then panicked...

Huntzinger lifted his knife to stick it in my breast.

And easy, slow, I reach-t up and grabbed hold of his hand as the knife actually went into me—actually penetrated my skin [*show david the inch long knife wound on my chest*] here and there was no pain, simply didn't feel it and my eyes never blinked in his face—never shiftit or narrowed, my hand keepin' the blade in my chest, preventing it from going too deep.

"You're it?" I said to him and my voice – it had a tone I'm not able to use often.

And I stared deeper and with my other hand I held the front of Huntzinger's shirt so he couldn't move, couldn't run, and, slowly, I pulled [*hiccup*] Huntzinger's hand back, the blade out its shallow bed in my chest and I said—I said two final words:

"Pathetic."

[*hold a finger up, counting*]

And though Huntzinger fought mightily with all of his strength, the knife still in his own hand—motherfucker couldn't stop me from twisting the blade toward his throat and my eyes never left the eyes of that motherfucker – kill my parents, motherfucker, and there was a crowd gathering.

"Burn."

[*another finger up, two*]

I spat that in his face, saliva flinging from my lips, the tip of the knife beginning to dig into the base of his Adam's apple and I pulled that motherfucker closer and shoved that fucking blade so hard forward that it went out the back of his head.

Violent but that's justice, right?

Came face-to-face with the line and I didn't blink.

Had I moved on, maybe forgotten it with time...I wouldn't have had to cross that line. But with me, maybe you, it feels like I was sort of always ready to cross the line. Maybe everyone is, given the right amount of push.

Tell you I murdered someone in cold blood, I'm a bad guy – it's murder.

## A DAY TRIP

The next morning, after we wake and deal with our hangovers and Lizzy is returned, David suggests we take a trip to the area where we had grown up. I downright refuse to go, saying I have too much to do, but Lizzy... she's persistent.

"Why won't you wanna come?" she asks.

She'd give me sad eyes, and she did this exaggerated pout where she'd let her shoulders droop melodramatically. Oddly enough, it was so obviously ridiculous that it would be funny and then, most of the time, she'd still get her way.

"I'm not going, Lizzy."

She eats from a little pouch of fruit snacks. She puts one in her mouth and chews it. Then, forgetting the conversation, inquires, "What's in my mouth?"

"Oh," I sigh.

We're in the kitchen. Chris had slept on the couch and had stuck around for breakfast, which had just ended. Lizzy's next to me while I clean. She looks up, then begins hanging on my arm.

"I'm staying here. With you," she says, holding onto my wrist, dangling all her weight on my arm.

I sigh again.

"Come on, douchebag. You're coming," David calls from the living room.

Him and Chris are getting their shoes on.

"We can play in the car," Lizzy says, swinging.

I look down at her.

"Darn it," I say, censoring myself.

For about three hours, we walk around Northeast Philly. We have lunch. We find two separate playgrounds for Lizzy to let loose on. At one point we stop by our parents' old house, our house from when we were young. I don't even want to look at it. I can't much remember that life and seeing it in front of me is the worst kind of reminder. And I make us keep walking after a very short silence.

Most of the time, David's busy with Lizzy while Chris and I walk a few paces behind, talking.

"Tell you the truth, I wouldn'ta come this way if it weren't for the fact that uh—" he motions toward David, "if it weren't for him losing his...girlfriend. He was adamant, though."

"Where you from?"

"I grew up, uh," Chris rubs his fingers through his hair, "sort of in Mississippi. Sort of in Alabama. Sort of everywhere. I left home pretty early."

"What do you mean?"

"I left my home. Lived with my mother and then, I didn't. I hitchhiked. North."

"How old were you?"

"Maybe ten. No, twelve. I'd make myself look like a girl so the truckers'd pick me up. Dangerous now but, then...it didn't really matter. I don't even think I thought about it."

Lizzy comes running back and stops in front of Chris.

Everybody comes to a stop as Lizzy stares up, being silly.

"What can I do for you, Pickle?" Chris asks, smiling.

"What's Pickle?" she asks him back.

"Oh—you are! You look like a little Pickle." And Chris bends down and picks her up and spins her upside down and tickles her belly and her armpits. She laughs her head off.

"How old are you?" he asks after setting her back down.

"Four," she giggles.

"You know what? When I was that age, I was five!"

Lizzy looks at me, dumbfounded.

Her attention quickly becomes distracted by a 3 ft. high ledge she wants to balance along. She stands in front of it, her arms over her head, waiting for Chris to lift her up. The ledge is thick, wide bricks along the side of a front yard. As Lizzy walks along the edge, she begins to put her hand on her hip and tilt her head to the side.

"Pretend I in high heels," she says, modeling. Then, thinking, "And dress. And I sixteen."

We all laugh a bit, even me; it was cute.

"You're good with kids," I tell him. He has something in his interactions with her that was freer than me; or, more accurately, he had something I didn't.

And Chris responds, "No, not usually. Just this one."

#### 4ENDER

“Were you messing with my phone the other day?”

“Uh-uh, why?” she says, and I believe her.

“Cause my phone’s in Spanish now, for some reason.”

She giggles.

“What’s Spanish?”

“Another language. Can you water that little sprout?”

“Yessum. I see it ‘cause ‘a carrots.”

Lizzy attributes her good eyesight to carrots.

“What do you want for lunch?” I ask her, thinking she’d say “carrots.”

“Donald’s,” which is what Lizzy calls McDonald’s.

“Fat chance. Your daddy fed you that crap yesterday.”

She goes to pinch my hand.

We had started a few new rules, one of which was that Lizzy could pinch someone if they cursed in front of her.

“Crap’s okay to say,” I tell her.

“Crap crapcrapcrapcrap that’s all I’m gonna say at school tomorrow crap crap.”

“Well played, ma’am,” I answer back.

When she has a point, she has a point, and I hold out my hand.

She pinches it.

“You know what? Okay, you can have McDonald’s. But we got to hurry ‘cause I got to leave soon.”

“Where are you going?” she asks.

“I have to go away for a few days. But I’ll be back and then we can play.”



"Promise?"

"Of course."

"Lemme hear you say it."

"I promise."

"Forender?"

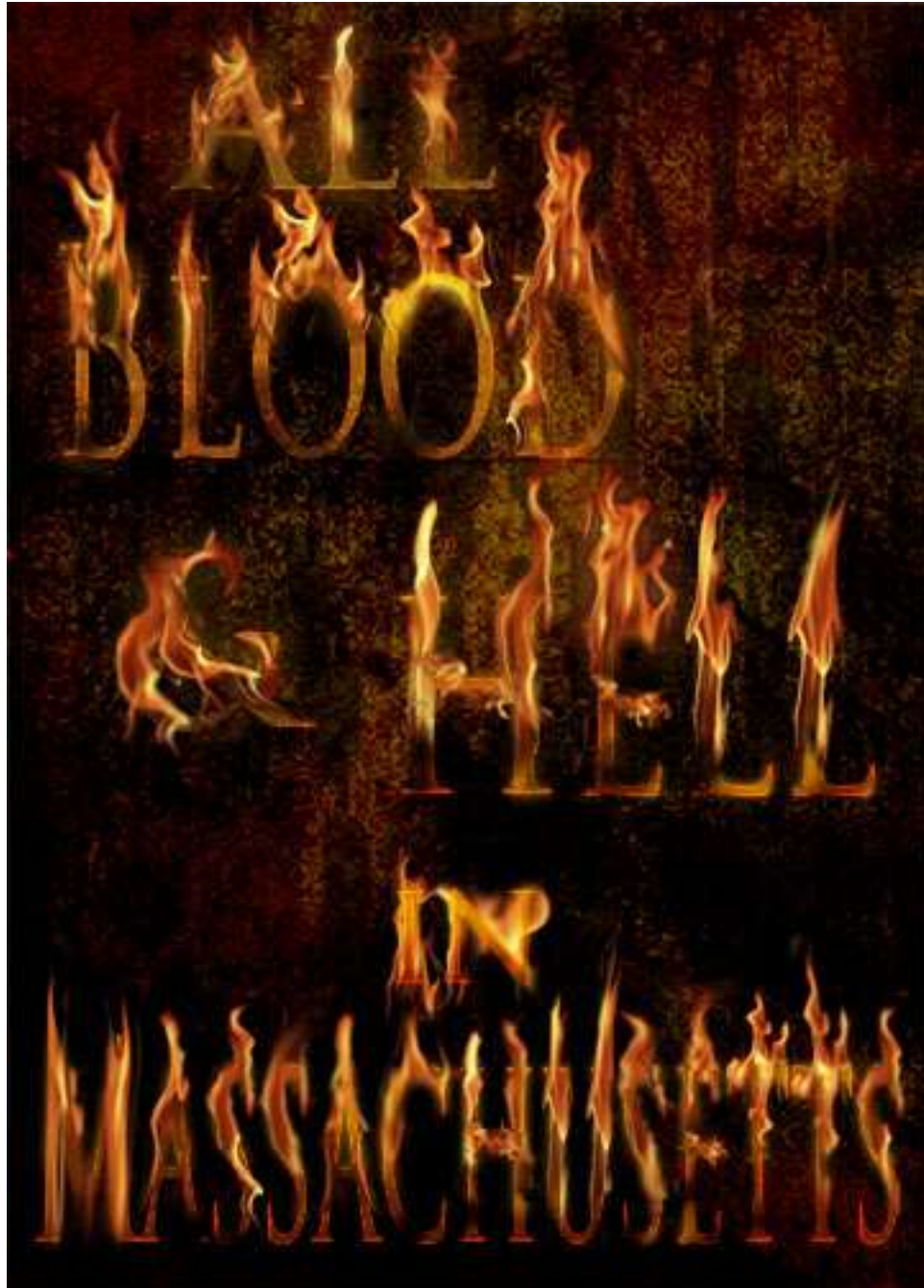
"What does that mean?"

"Like, 'Once upon a dream,'" which is how Lizzy starts every make believe story she tells, "or, 'happily forender after.'"

"It's forever, sweetie. 'They live happily forever after.'"

"Oh. Promise forender and ender?" she says again, unaware that it isn't the same as what I had said.

"I do, sweetie. Anything," I say. "Anything. Forender and ender."



## a brief interlude

no pain killers

Matilda walked into my dark apartment.

She went to turn on the light—

“Leave the light off,” I told her, sitting in the living room of the small apartment. She was across from me at the front door. The place was absolutely dark. The lamp in front of me was off.

She moved to walk into the apartment.

“Stay there,” I told her from the darkness. “Shut the door.”

“Why? Where are you?”

She narrowed her eyes to focus in the darkness.

“Shut the door,” I repeated.

She did as she was told, cheerfully adding, “Ohh, kinky.”

“Keep the light out. Where were you?” I asked.

“With some old friends. Why?”

“You know why. Why do you think?”

Her temper began to surface in her voice.

“You’re not my P.O. I can have friends. When I hang out with them, it’s not like I do drugs—”

“So they were doing drugs? Don’t be an idiot.”

“Don’t call me a fucking idiot.”

“I didn’t call you an idiot. I just think you’re capable of acting like one. Hanging out with those douchebag fucking addicts is an awful idea so stop acting *like an idiot* and I’ll—”

Matilda turned on the light.

Her jaw fell at the site of blood and a man stitching a wound in his breast.

The cut was deep and blood was everywhere.

Bloody wash rags on the floor.

Blood drops leading from the front door to the kitchen.

Bloody handprint on the white electric stove.

My pants were soaked, my skin dyed red. His blood had covered the left side of my face and left a thin crust after I cleaned it off; it was still in my hair, causing chunks of it to stick together. My chest was drenched in red with a yellow pallor from the disinfectant. There were no pain killers, nothing to numb the wound before I started stitching the inch gash. I made it three stitches in, with one remaining, when Matilda used my spare key to let herself in.

And the last conversation we had ended like this:

“Oh. My. God. What. Happened?” She spoke in short pauses as if catching her breath.

“I was jumped—”

“We are going to the hospital right now!” she scolded.

“No we’re not. Look,” I had to get her to lift her eyes, “just look. I’m almost done. Hospital is going to charge money I don’t want to pay for something I can do better. Just look.”

She glances up but the sight of blood bothers her and she looks away again.

To my surprise, I found the color of blood comforting.

“I— what’s going on?” She glared at me, ignoring everything but my eyes. “Really? What’s going on? Who jumped you? Where? I’m calling the police. You’re filing a report.” She shuffled through her purse and pulled out her phone.

I stood, approached, and snatched her phone from her hand.

“I-I...I found him, Matilda.”

There was a long pause.

“Found who?”

“The man...the man that stabbed my parents.”

She took the phone back from me; it was covered in blood.

“What? What happen— what did you do?” she gasped.

“I made sure he wouldn’t do anything like it again.”

“You—” she backed up against the wall, terrified of me.

I continued to approach, soaked in blood and trying to calm her; the closer I got, the more horrified she looked, until she backed her body against the wall next to the front door.

“Don’t— don’t—” she held her hand out but didn’t want to touch me, repeating, “—don’t—don’t— don’t. Stay away from me,” she whispered.

I caressed her cheek as she opened the door.

There was a blood smear on her face as she ran from me. I ducked out of the doorway to prevent from being seen, unable to chase after her.

And I never saw her again.

## all blood and hell in massachusetts

### part one

Four hours by bus. Transfer in New York. Five hours more. Two hour walk.

In the woods, about an hour into the walk, I change into all black:

Kevlar vest. Thin backpack. Loose hoodie overtop the backpack and vest. Legwarmers beneath loose-fitting sweatpants. Thin leather gloves over latex. Common sneakers. The backpack has three extra clips. Flashlight. Spray bottle full of Ammonia. Infrared light. Sparse medical supplies. Two silenced 9mm semiautomatics hang against the vest, the butts pointed downward in holsters along my ribs; they are hidden, tight against my body. I love the feel of the metal, the weight – it felt like safety. The inside lining of the hoodie's belly pocket is removed so I can reach in, unsnap the holster, and quickly, inconspicuously draw my weapon.

I keep out of sight until I reach the house, about three miles from where I changed. It's located in a richer area of Boston, a four story Victorian with beautiful pillars in front, large bushes lining the crescent driveway, and wide glass windows. Bright yellow lights shine across the yard, even at 2 a.m. The distance between houses is wide and empty and dark enough that I can run well-hidden from the neighbor's house to the brick-encased side-entrance leading to the room behind the kitchen of the Banker's house.

I enter the security code: 54603#

It works on the first try, the door unlocks, and I duck inside.

Gently, the door shuts behind me and I remove both guns, crouching at the knees, low to the ground, moving forward with one gun pointed out and another pointed behind. The room is storage for the kitchen. The lights are out in the kitchen and I pass a marble countertop, reflective even in the dark, and move out to the hallway.

There's a light on in a room on the first floor.

The door is open and I press myself against the wall in the hallway, peering around the edge. The room isn't well lit. I can tell that, like the rest of the house, it has a very strict color scheme, mainly dark reds and oranges, faded gold and polished wood. There are hundreds of books and I take a fifth of a second to admire it.

Shame they would all burn.

Someone is in there, a bodyguard or relative of the Banker. They're all lumped into one sum – his family and his protection – because they're all well-armed threats. Each is assumed to possess the new model Smith & Wesson M&P: 15 round capacity, 27.45 ounces, 4.25 inch barrel, steal ramp front with a possible tritium night sight. His entourage is referred to as the Suits as all of them wear tacky, dark-colored suits. The First Suit – dark orange with a light red paisley tie – stands leaning against an 8 ft. gold-painted ladder attached to the library shelving, his bored eyes wandering through a book in his hand. He has his back to the door at first but he moves from the ladder, pacing over a well-fashioned Persian carpet. He passes several fancy, frilly chairs that line the edges of the room on his way, then closes his book and turns to the door.

A weapon is holstered on his hip.

His closed book in his hand, at his side, he makes his way to the library door. I stick my arm deep into the room, my body still pressed against the hallway wall. The First Suit is almost to the door as he sees the arm, the dark barrel at his face, the finger on the trigger. His eyes focus in surprise – CRICK – then relax.

I catch him as he falls, the only sound a slight metal bounce as the shell hits the floor.

He feels no pain.

I set him slumped in a corner of the room, turn out the light, pick up the shell, and continue on. I pass a table decorated with aging flowers next to the front door as I run, crouched with a gun pointed in either direction, climbing up the blaring white stairwell as it curves up and connects to the second floor. There's a light shining from under one of the doors on the second floor, a bathroom. I wait for a noise or a sign...

The door opens.

A bright light washes into the dark hallway.

The Suit—dark blue with a light blue paisley tie—walks out of the bathroom. His neck touches the muzzle of my gun before he even knows someone is waiting for him. His reflexes are fast, swiftly reaching for—CRICK—the first bullet hits his throat, next to his Adam's apple. I hadn't anticipated him being 6'4 so the shot is low. He keeps moving, ducking to reach out and grab my—CRICKCRICK—through his temple. There is no horrific burst of blood or gore, just two lonesome red trickles and a small flow from the side of his throat.

The Suit is still sort of alive and he makes a noise, a rattle-like gasp. His hands apply pressure to his throat. He falls into my arms and I catch him out of reflex. My initial reaction is to drop him but, instead, I carefully lay him down. And then I quietly put my gun to his forehead. And though he's already dead, his eyes still widen in horror—CRICK—as they see their last image.

Swift, merely a Silence in the shadows, I move up to the end of the second floor hallway where a doorway leads to the third floor stairwell. It leads me along a narrow, shorter corridor to the bedroom where the Banker is to be in bed, alone and asleep.

Slow, the muzzle of my gun edges the door open.



Someone is asleep in the room. Their breathing is heavy and loud. One step and I move inside the pitch-black room. Another step closer to the bed. My gun is pointed at the sound. Another step and my eyes adjust to find that I'm standing over the sleeping person. The cover had slipped just below their chest.

I can see a breast, a nipple. It's a woman. I had strict instruction to kill her if she was present. Her skin looked smooth, her closed eyes kind. I point the gun, aim at her sleeping face...she makes a snort, the beginning of a snore, almost. I had heard Lizzy make a similar noise before, during her naps. Like a startle in a dream. I stare at her longer and, even though I point the gun at her, I know I'm not going to shoot her. I just can't. Not shooting her doesn't mean she'll survive, just that she might have a chance to escape the fire when I burn the first floor. It's up to her to survive; she'd have to earn it.

There is a secondary location for the Banker, his study, and I make my way back to the ground floor. I creep silently, a Shadow among shadows, and find a light on in the first-floor den.

The door is open.

There are three large panes of glass overlooking the backyard, in front of which is an immense oak desk. I watch the Banker from just outside the doorway. He's a lean man in an ugly red robe, mid-forties, a little gray in his slicked-back black hair; he looks nerdy but handsome. He has thin, small glasses on and a receding hairline. He looks like someone that would invent a new computer.

The Banker is talking into a Bluetooth plugged into his ear.

"—but I don't know why he would consider it a prerequisite to install a . . ."

I raise the gun into the room and the Banker stops talking.

The gun has caught his attention.

His expression distorts in horror.

Movement—BOOM

There is a massive eruption from behind me.

A bullet rips through the back of my left shoulder, into my vest and through, though not all the way through my body, lodged in my shoulder. My left hand loses grip – the gun lands fuck knows where – and the impact pushes me deep into the middle of the room. I double over, my chest hitting violently against the wood of the floor in the center of the room as—BOOM—someone fires behind me—BOOM—and fires again.

Disoriented, I see who shot me.

It's the Banker's girlfriend, the Goddamn woman I just let live. She must have woken when I came into her bedroom, must've known I was a threat, must've shot me in the fuckin' back. After the first, her gunshots miss, each more erratic, further up and further away. The recoil of the handgun—BOOM—throws her back farther and farther—BOOM—as she continues firing, her hair up and out and frizzy like wild lames.

The impact threw me directly into the room of the target.

From face-first, my body uses the momentum—BOOM—to roll forward over my right shoulder toward the desk. It's muscle memory, a maneuver I practiced over and over again in order to use involuntarily forward momentum to escape. I move forward, rushing, my left arm limp.

The gun's recoil backs the woman out of the room.

I find myself against the far wall on the opposite side of the room.

My left arm has lost all use as I push forward a few extra feet.

A gun is still clutched tight in my right hand, though.

The desk is next to me.

On his knees behind the desk, I find the Banker.

He has a Lugar in his hand.

The chamber is open but he rolls the gun and snaps it shut.

We catch eyes, both surprised by our proximity – maybe two feet between us, both of us on the floor, backs against wood.

He lifts his gun and I lift mine—

—and the Banker's head snaps back, his body crumples.

I survive from a quarter-second victory.

Barely, though; he had shot at me, panicked, but his shot was just short, firing into the wood floor as he lifted to point at my head.

I crawl up alongside his body and use it, along with the desk, for cover. The windows behind the desk reflect the room as well as any mirror. I stick my gun under the limp calf muscle of the Banker and wait for the woman to reenter the room.

But she doesn't.

Instead, one of the Suits—dark green with a light purple paisley tie—emerges, ducking his head into the doorway, then back out. I keep pace by staring at the glass windows behind me and the desk, lining the wall, and its clear reflection. The Suit has a Goddamn hand-cannon, cocked and ready.

Just as quickly as he ducks his head in and out, he pops into the room, his gun trained on the desk.

From under the dead man's leg, with a clear line of fire, I shoot again and again and again toward the door until a bullet hits the Suit somewhere in the middle of his leg. He drops, firing—BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM—at the desk, keeping me pinned. Even wounded, he's trying to flank me.

I find a clear shot at him from below the desk, one for the center of his body...

—CLICK—

...but my gun is empty.

There's a scream from the hallway.

The woman walks to the doorway, braces herself, and begins firing all around the desk, shot—BOOM—after shot—BOOM—after shot—BOOM. Blood from the Banker pools under me, soaking my clothes, my arm, my chest—BOOM—splinters blow from the desk, other shrapnel, a mess of jagged debris in every direction.

I toss the empty gun.

My eyes dart to something I'm laying on—the silver Luger. Nazi insignia on the bottom of the ivory grip. Succinct, tiny movements—BOOM—and I pry the gun from Banker's dead hand, his lifeless eyes staring back at me. A number of loose shells roll in the blood on the floor when

—CLICK

Never had I heard the same sound twice with such differing attitudes, one of impending doom and again now as the sweetest thud.

The woman's gun is empty.

As the guard continues to move left and flank me, I roll right and onto my knee in a short-stance sprint. I lurch forward, Luger in my hand, my body twisted toward the Suit. He aims at me in his surprise but I'm already aiming square at his chest.

BOOMBOOM

The muzzle explosions echoes painfully.

Two shots from the Luger pass through The Suit's chest and into the wall and short bookcase behind him, bits of paper and wood and plaster blowing out behind him.

The hits roll him back across the floor as if he's dragged.

I'm up, rushing the terrified woman.

She's frozen in shock, pointing the empty gun at me, pulling the trigger over—CLICK—and over—CLICK—and over—CLICK—and, just as I get to her—BOOM-BOOM-BOOM—the center window shatters behind the desk.

Three shots from the back yard:

The first bullet hits the wall near my head...

The second hits the woman in her chest...

The third hits my right forearm.

Blood—my blood—explodes everywhere, gushes all over me and down me, all over the floor, all over the room and the dead bodies, spreading my DNA everywhere—BOOM-BOOM-BOOM—there's another set of shots but they're late and I'm already outside the study, against the wall in the hallway.

There must have been another Suit that circled around outside.

I stand in the hall, bleeding, deciding my next move, waiting—fifteen seconds feels like an hour—until I'm certain the Suit had left to go around and find another way in. My last bit of strength is depleting; I use the adrenaline that's fueling what's left to run back into the study—

No shots.

The Suit must have gone around the side of the house to get back in.

In the den, swift as I can physically move, I run to the window, kick out the remaining glass that had taken the three bullets, and jump through to find—

The Suit.

Dark brown with a light brown paisley tie.

He's waiting for me, his gun trained on me.

The wound in my right forearm had made me drop the Luger, I realize, and the blood loss from two gunshot wounds has made me weak. I begin to lift my blood-soaked right hand in protest, the only defense I have left.

Even in the darkness of the back yard, I can see the expression on his face.

I recognize it – prepared.

He's ready to shoot me in the face.

And as he prepares to fire, a tall, thin man in all black nonchalantly walks up behind him, puts a gun to the back of his head, and fires. The Suit's head jilts hard to the right and he drops, a fair amount of blood, guck, and brain-matter spraying my face.

Everything grows dark after that, all light fades – the world a bit dimmer.

My knees buckle under my weight.

And then darkness.

## all blood and hell in massachusetts

### part two

*“please, I’m so” — FLASH of RED—blood, a horrible headache, fever, and screaming, Matilda was screaming and her face was pale white like the bed sheet of a Halloween ghost with two holes cut out for eyes, but someone’s behind me, near me, I can hear someone with me, but the confusion grows into sickness, dehydration—FLASH of RED—and she arches her back, lifting her body up, forcing the paramedic to use both hands to hold her down until everything slows—everything—and all sound ceases, but the paramedic’s strength holding her down causes her to bleed more until there’s more and more blood filling the ambulance, so much blood that it pools beneath her and into the gurney’s sheets glow a brighter and brighter shade of red, then a darker and darker shade, darker and darker the more blood that spills out of her—FLASH of RED—the image of skin on a forearm being pulled up and stitched together, vomiting—FLASH of RED—her mouth’s open, silently screaming, a little red on her lips, and she twists her head from side-to-side as the other paramedic fills a syringe with a sedative and I can’t stop thinking that I’m not a killer I’m not a killer I’m not a killer I’m not a killer even though the only sound I can make is a mumble, “I...I am so s—”*

I hear her before I see her. She’s trying to wake me up and when I open my eyes, I see that I’m standing—that we’re standing next to each other. She’s wearing a white mini-skirt and tight white tank top. I’m in white gym shorts and a white tee-shirt. She has a white veil on but it’s pulled back. We’re in the frozen food section of a wedding chapel.

Her arm is linked in mine and we’re walking the aisle.

"I think we should get married. We're already here, at least," Matilda says to me.  
Dark eyes. Dark hair. Dark lips.

God, I love her.

if we get married is everything gonna happen the same way or can it be like this  
She looks at me.

"It has to be the same way," she says.

no nonono not this time we know whats gonna happen we can change it

"It's already happened, sweetheart. No re-dos. But at least we got this moment right now. Where it's perfect. We're in love. We kiss. We hug and sleep next to each other every night. And it's great, sweetie."

then lets just lets just keep it this way okay just like it is now please please don't leave please don't leave Matilda please don't leave me ill stay with you and lets just stay like this i don't wanna lose you again i cant i just cant do this again

And then it changes. I already hear her saying the words, "—don't—don't—don't. Stay away from me," she whispers. We're different now. I'm different. She's different. We're both a bit more haggard.

There's a legal prosecutor with us, too. He's a fat little dwarf fuck prosecutor.

We're at a gazebo in a public park.

"Stop," I say, tearing. I know if she leaves me again, she'll die. "Don't leave me again. I can't...I can't do it again. Why didn't you just— why didn't you stay with me?"

"Don't answer," the prosecutor tells her.

"I'm just—I'm not right, okay?"

"Objection," he says, "you knew from the start that you were going to murder someone."

"No, I didn't. I didn't think I'd ever realistically find and murder someone. And I TOLD her I would. So she knew. So object that, motherfucker." I push at him, dash even, my hand cocked back to throw — "Move to strike."



Then wait a moment.

"Let me rephrase," I begin. "You could've... we could've been fine."

She's sitting on the wood bench of the gazebo, beside the prosecutor, staring up at me with doe eyes, unanswering.

"Look, son," the prosecutor says, "you committed a crime—"

"I was WRONG! Okay? I know it now. I didn't know it then but I do now. So fuck you." I pace in front of her. She's sitting on the gazebo bench and I'm standing. She doesn't answer. The prosecutor disappears off into the background somewhere, gone.

"I'm sorry. I don't want to lose you."

"So you're just going to kill me, just like that? Abandon me to my loser friends, break my heart," she finally says, solemn.

"I'm not going to kill you, sweetie, please," I sob, "just, don't go. You didn't—I fucked up but you didn't have to leave. I could've..."

"Take this," she says.

She has a crumpled bag in her hand. She opens it, reaches in, and hands me a small gun.

"Is it loaded?" I ask her.

"I don't know."

I point it at her stomach and shoot.

"Yeah, it's loaded."

She doesn't react much from the gunshot to her belly.

"Did you mean to shoot me?" she asks.

"No. Not really."

"Did you have to kill all my friends?"

"...yes. Vengeance is the only thing I'm good at anymore."

"Don't worry, baby, your pain shall be eased," she tells me, "your burdens relieved."

"Can I take a picture?" I ask.

Our worries have fled. We are together.

She nods.

I lift my cell phone and cuddle next to her on the bench, take a picture of us, her smiling and my head tilted on her shoulder. I stick my tongue out toward her skin in a silly way.

"Why'd you get so crazy after me?" I ask her after. "You were so good for so long." the sun sets quickly behind us "i was always crazy hon you were my glue tho" you werent always crazy "you were sweet on me i was always crazy sweetheart i just think you ignored the bits that showed thru" the sky goes blue to orange "remember that time we went to peters and you got drunk so fast we spent the entire night in his basement bathroom" yeah i still miss you crazy or not "you'll see me soon enough everything will be over soon your pain shall be eased your burdens relieved everything will be okay" she takes my hand in hers the sky goes orange to red "just hold on" she says why does everyone keep telling me to hold on "cause its gonna get a lot worse before it gets better" the sky goes red to

**all blood and hell in massachusetts**

part three

Wa—p.

He—[snaps]—hey.

Wake up.

C'mon, let me see those— well g'mornin', sunshine. Glad to see you're awake. You've been out for nearly...two days. Wow.

*Whe...*

There's some water next to you. Drink it before you talk.

*[carefully watches]*

*Where am I?*

We're in a motel about two hours outside of Philadelphia. It's the farthest point I could drive from that cluster-fuck of a shit job. You just been crying and crying, like a baby. I couldn't tell if you needed bandages or a bottle.

Just cried and cried and cried.

Annnnnnyway...you'll notice, your right forearm has been given a fantastic stitch job. You-are-welcome. Luckily, the bullet was rather shallow. Full recovery. Bullet's on your beside table [*points*] right there.

Bad news, though.

Your left shoulder – medically speaking – is straight fucked up. Part of your scapula is shattered, your SITS muscles are contracted and a straight mess, nerve damage, rotator cuff—ugh, all a mess. So you're left arm is no longer functional, as of right now. The longer you go without genuine surgery the less function you'll prolly have when you finally do.

Once we get you back, get a proper doctor – I'm saying, maybe 40% recovery of your left arm and shoulder.

*Who...?*

What? What, who am I?

I!

Am the guy that just saved your life.

I!

Am also the bad guy.

[*looks up, to self*]...kind of contradictory...

Anyway, I'll likely be your-your enemy very soon. But don't worry [*thinks, looking down*] I'm not gonna do anything right now. Not right now, at least. You're so weak, all hopped up on painkillers, I could do whatever I want.

...

That sounded kinda gay.

I meant it in, like, a-a bad way. Like I'd kill you or something.

*[chuckles]*

I!

Am Bartleby.

It is nice to finally meet you in person.

I been following you ever since uh you started with the oh what was he? Drug dealer? *[remembers passionately]* Oh no it was the rapist. Remember! In Northeast Philly. Craig something-or-other. Four, five women in Fairmont. Operands, always had that stupid skull lookin' gray ski mask.

*[sips drink from a rocks glass, ice clinking]*

That guy, though – the rapist – phew, he really was the next Ted Bundy. You did a good job. In. Out. I don't need to rehash it since you were there but—you know what you did.

And, more importantly, I know what you did. Let's get that out of the way. Let's not forget that I know you. Better than anyone else, I. Know. You.

Very well, el cap-e-tano.

Hell, I prolly got almost everything you've said over the past six months on a single USB back at the lab.

You never met me but, like you, I'm pree-ty smart! You and I, we're in the 2.2 percent of all the humans right now. That's what? Like a hundred and fifty thousand?

Or fifteen million?—fuck it, I suck at math. Either way, it's pretty good. Don't like to admit it but...you scored three points higher than me, I.Q.-wise. What's the difference once you reached over 130, right? [*thinks if over*] Eh, fuck you anyway.

Unlike you, though, I like to brag.

Everyone got their jobs and I guess uh since we're finally meeting and we're gonna prolly get a lot closer as you wanna kill me – I'll just tell you what you're up against.

I'm the follower. The documenter.

I control the chess board.

And I'm the one that plays dirty.

It's why Ghos leaves me be.

[*looks off*]

"I play dirty." I like that. Accurate.

Nowadays I got a computer program – [*melodramatic*] which I designed – that pretty much does everything. I don't even gotta be anywhere near you. G.P.S. track you, records all of your locations; I don't even have to pay attention. Red flags certain areas. Tracks your websites, phone conversations – actually, those're almost entirely absent in your case. And every twelve hours it just sort of gives me an average of the distance traveled, new areas, and key words recorded.

It's rickulously easy.

You got so many trackers and bugs around you, I don't miss a beat.

I even know you flush the toilet before you're done pissin'.

Every time.

Everything.

*[clears throat, leans back in the chair beside the bed]*

Hope you don't mind if I drink. Tell you the truth, I been drinkin'. You haven't been the best company the past few days, just crying and saying *[mockingly short, whispering]* "Matilda. Matilda."

Just over and over.

*[looks off, ice cubes clink glass; sips]*

*[laughs]* I guess you could think of me as your supervisor — it's so good to talk about this stuff. I never get to. Ghos keeps me at such a distance from you guys, since I'm the b-side track. Only people besides you and Ghos and Lionel and Cass — I do like Cass a lot — only others I ever met...they dead now. Same amount of company as you've been, I guess.

*[looks off to the side and blinks in a slow, lazy way]*

I'm the G.M., the uh what do you call it in construction — the foreman. Ghos, he's majority stock holder. Head of the board. Lionel, Vice Pres. Simple but significant. And you're the front of the house. You're the waiter, the-the cashier, or the *[condescending; harsh K sounds]* clerk. It's funny 'cause you and I are — well, very similar. Maybe not the same but close.

You were gonna be in my spot, when I take Ghos'.

Motherfucker ain't got much time left, stage two lung cancer borderin' on stage three. He's got months now.

Maybe you still will take my spot, we'll see.

I mean, the others can't. Cass and that-that fucking cop and the few others that're left...that fuckin' cop, he's becoming a liability like you. His problem is likin' this shit too much. [*reaches behind him, to the bedside table; grabs electronic device; looks at it, hits a button*] You seem to be having the opposite of that. Listen to this. Ain't nobody else heard it yet but me.

[*recording begins*]

"Why — why is the boat this far out?"

[*the voice is benjiman dentist*]

"Keep goin'. We're almost there. Can't exactly send you off publicly."

[*the voice is alex the cop*]

Wait, it's after...[*fast-forwards electronic device*]...after that.

[*hits play*]

"—no-no-no please."

[*the voice is benjiman dentist*]

"Tell me something, kid. What did you want to be before we found you?"

[*the voice is alex the cop*]

"I uh I uh didn't— don't really know. Not dead, though."

"You tell me what you want to be and I'll let you live. But you have to leave Philadelphia and you have to go become it. Or I'll find you and I will kill you."

"I uh a firefighter like my uncle he was . . ."

[*alex the cop starts laughing hysterically*]



"I was just kidding."

*[two gunshots; splashing water; more chuckling]*

Fucked up, I'd say. How about you? Think it was fucked up?

Yes.

Yeah, me too. That's uh...dangerous. Ghos hasn't heard it yet.

*[sips his drink, thinking]*

Only reason I'm here and you're there is cause'a Ghos, cause I knew him young. I was the first to get that uh that special fifth floor training, and I was much younger than you. Old faggot...wasted my childhood.

*[looks off for a second, thinking]*

It's good to talk to you.

Forest for the trees, et cetera.

How do you feel?

*[moves close; lifts the forearm bandage, looks it over like a fascinated science student]*

Oh my.

*[flicks the I.V. hanging overhead, returns to his seat]*

Pumpin' you full of antibiotics, vitamins, painkillers. You should be feelin' alright. I understand if you don't talk or answer much. But you should be able to hear me. See me.

Right?

Nod, mumble, something. Answer me.

Yes.

Are you comfortable?

Yes.

Good.

So, we got a good news/bad news situation.

*[belches loudly]*

Which would you like to hear first?

*Bad.*

Bad? Ah, well...I think we'll go with good first. *[reclines, takes a sip of his drink]* I think the bad might mmmm *[swishes his head side-to-side]* make you biased to the rest of the conversation.

And we got a fair amount of conversation left.

So the good news – which is a multi-tiered good news, keep that in mind – involves the fact that you're still alive. You didn't die there. I didn't leave you for dead. I could have. Would've probably been better, actually. Could've left you, case closed. Those weren't the plans, though. My directions if things went bad were to help you but, ultimately, at that last second, it's my command. (Ghos likes to argue that point.) Doesn't matter, though, cause I'm there and that old cocksucker, he's not and he knows I don't wanna be there and sometimes there's a split-second decision I have to make. He's not there; it's my decision. And you – you could've just as easily died and saved me the trouble. Luckily, thanks to my efforts, as far as I know, the police don't know shit. It's been a

good two days into their investigation and there hasn't been a word of Philly. Which is great 'cause this guy was seriously fuckin' shit up for us. The fact that this asshole – this fuckin' douchebag cocksucker – the fact that he's gone is sooooo worth the cluster-fuck you caused. By the way – and I know you can't answer so I'll ask this rhetorical – but why in the fuck did you leave that woman in the bedroom alive. She was just as fuckin' bad as he was. Didn't you read the intel? Everything I gathered. She was really, really bad. Bad for us, bad for business. Bad for humans. What the fuck?

[*scoffs*]

Dude, you could've been a rocket scientist – look at you. What happened?

Eh, guess I'm giving you shit.

Sorry.

Anyway, good news.

So there's that.

Aside from your shoulder, which could possibly make a full recovery – hey, I'm no doctor; just wouldn't count on it – everything should heal up and you should be fine in a few weeks.

Gives me time to make it back before you, which leads to our bad news [*puts his chin in his hand, resting against the arm of the chair; looks off, thinking*] I guess...[*deep inhale, sigh*] I guess I'll tell you the bad news. I mean, we're gonna keep talking. Me more than you but...and you aren't gonna be doing anything. Going anywhere. Nothin'. I just pumped 250 ml of morphine into your body. I also put a little epinephrine in there, too, so your adrenalin should be keepin' you wide awake.

You've lost a fair amount of blood – you're weak. You're gonna fall asleep soon. Once the epinephrine wears, it's inevitable. And I'm gonna leave, but not before pumping you with enough medicine to keep you asleep for a day or two.

I'll get in my car, which is just outside.

I'm gonna leave.

Disappear.

Next time you'll see me'll probably be after Ghos dies (which'll probably be real soon) and I inherit that building.

But I want you to know that it was me – it is my order and no one else's – to have your brother killed. By the time you're able to move your body, by the time Cass shows up tomorrow and drives your unconscious body all the way home – your brother will be dead or in the process of dying.

Sorry.

Alright, alright, calm down.

*[stands, moves to the I.V. where a needle is connected, and pushes the plunger in]*

That should be enough to keep you from moving. I don't want you fuckin' up my stitch work or falling out of bed or something.

Orders are, you're to get better.

I do think you're a borderline liability. *[sips drink]* I think, in retrospect, I should've left you there. But, c'est la fuckin hindsight. And Ghos wants you back. I'll give it to him, you are valuable.

But your brother, man *[stern]*—you, you fuckin told him you kill people? What did you think we'd do? You told him how you killed someone. Not just someone,

someone Ghos told you about—gave you their location, where to watch...if you're arrested, because of him, how long until you dime it out? You can keep secret but we didn't hire your brother—how the fuck do I know that? He's liability now. It's your fault.

Oh, you don't remember? Maybe that's 'cause you can't hold your fuckin' booze. You told half that Goddamn bar you fuckin' killed people for a living, as far as I know. I heard you, slurs and fuckin' all. You have no idea how close you were to getting' someone sent after you right then and there.

I didn't hear it till the next morning, that's the only thing that saved you.

*[points his finger at nothing in particular, dead-serious]*

Lucky.

Just before you were completely incoherent, you had a heart-to-heart with your brother and I couldn't hear exactly what you told him. You spilled booze on almost every recording device I had on you. And neither of you have talked about it since. But I know you told him enough.

I have to assume he knows something.

And dude *[shakes his head]* even if he doesn't, Ghos told you not to have roommates.

He told you, man.

This is why—he warned you.

This ain't fuckin' Walmart, shit is serious. You fuckin' stupid?

That was it, the nail, the straw. I don't care if no one believed you – maybe they did, maybe they didn't. But since I'm not going to kill you, you're gonna disappear for a bit. And you're brother's done for. Period. He can carry this far and he-he-he gotta be stopped, just incase.

Collateral damage, motherfucker. We don't set rules just for our benefit.

[sighs] I'm glad that's out of the way.

Having said that, as your "supervisor" I feel it courteous to tell you how fantastic a job – up until the blood and hell in Massachusetts – that you've been doing. You've easily been the best we've ever had. Don't get a big head but, I mean, we've had a lot and you...you really turned out. [sips drink, ice cubes clink] Your work, I mean, my personal favorite has gotta be that guy – the drug dealer you took to Ridley. It was dark. Couldn't see much. That was back when I tried to keep cameras on people, for the short period of time that I did. But I could hear you walking, could hear his pleading—over and over and over and over. You were silent. You're a cold-fuckin'-blood. Distant. Didn't say anything, didn't do anything except punch him to keep him moving. Too dark see anything but then, crack, a FLASH in the distance. No sound. Not. At. All. Must've caught him before he hit the ground. That was it. FLASH, no body at dawn, and me, sittin' in my lonely ass work pad like an idiot in shock. I was uh impressed.

[belches, sips drink]

You and I – we're both wealthy.

You don't know this but you get paid the most out of almost all of us. Your Caymen has gotta be mid-seven figures by now, just from us. We wanted to reward you for your good work, let you know that we do appreciate you.

[*waits*]

No thanks necessary.

I was talking to Lionel about why we do this just last week.

He said its cause it's what we're built for, that this is where we get our enjoyment. But, really – at least for me – I think there's probably a thousand other things I would enjoy much more. Like, bein' the towel boy for a female volleyball team.

Even if it's just for the beach-side championship.

Plus, you know, Ghos got me at a young age, totally conditioned me.

When I chose my name, I picked Bartleby Stockholm.

I felt it was in honor of Ghos, like taking his surname.

What's it matter anyway? Lionel's all kinds of stuuuuupid.

We all got our roles, though.

Mine was originally supposed to be either a lawyer or a cop, actually – at the start. He started me out like that. But then technology changed and once they saw the potential of that, what could be done, they had me at a computer 24/7. It just happened that I was better with computers than I was with law and order and justice and all that bullshit.

They also realized that it was unnecessary to train a lawyer to be corrupt.

But then Ghos...[*looks off*] he saw something else in me, dark. He knew he could use me. [*pause*] Knew I was willin' to get dirty – hell, I felt dirty since I was kid. He

knew I'd handle the shit he didn't want to. Middle management, right, that's what it's for.

Eventually they got Alex to be the cop. And Cass, he's the hospital, an inside voice to the wounded and unsettled. The rest, only a few of them still out there. Most of them didn't get the fifth floor treatment. Never met Ghos or anyone important, never been to the building, can't be traced to nothing nowhere. Expendable. Often sloppy but usually get the work done. Druggies that'll do anything for a rock or three. I got three of 'em goin' to your house tomorrow for your brother and whatever they feel like snatchin'.

Oh, and Lionel's—he's the baby. [*chuckles*] Brilliant but so stuuuuuupid.

Definitely brilliant, though.

He was the National Chess champion four years in a row.

When he was picking his name, Lionel wanted to be called McTienkin. He had thought it was the name Genghis Khan had before he was Genghis Khan, which is Temudgin – not even close. When he researched "Smartest Guy in the World" – which I don't understand how that even relates to Genghis Khan – he found someone named MicTienkin. And this dude, he wasn't a genius, only a guy smart enough to post his name on the internet so it'd show up if you searched for the smartest guy in the world.

Lionel wanted the name McTienkin.

Ghos told him he would be called Lionel.

Smart.

But stuuuuuupid.



*[clinks the ice in glass, waits, thinking]*

*[lifts his glass; toasts]*

“Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

Alright.

*[sips drink, looks at glass; lazily blinks]*

You know the feeling...

When you want to talk to someone and you can't...

*[sits, thinking]*

So...*[searches for conversation, belches, sips drink, ice cubes clink]*

Story time:

(And I think you of all people will appreciate this one.)

Long time ago, two young children met.

A boy and a girl.

Bartleby and Mairead.

First time the boy saw her, she was hiding behind her daddy's legs in the hallway. The girl, she was shy, very quiet, damn near catatonic. But they lived next to each other in a small apartment building. The boy was only a year older, four and five. And, over time, they became friends. Movies, roughhousing, school, all that stuff. *[sips drink]* Not romantic, more sibling.

After a while, they even slept in the same room. Their fathers were close friends and they would sit in the living room and drink and talk all night. So the boy and girl shared a room some nights. Headlights dancing with shadow figurines against the wall. Stale scent of mildew from a wet towel next to the bed. He'd lay next to her some nights until she fell asleep. Sometimes she'd pretend to be scared of something – the dark or Freddy Krueger or ninjas, whatever – just pretending so he'd lay with her.

But her bed was always more comfortable so he didn't really mind.

He'd listen to her fall asleep, her body loosen up.

Then he'd go back to his bed.

After a bit, the boy don't remember nothin' before she showed up.

Her pop liked to clean the bathroom, scrubbin' the tile and the bathtub. Obsessively. Happens to be what the girl's father was doing when her mother left 'em both. The girl doesn't remember her mother, not at all.

*[finishes drink]*

That's family, ain't it? Not always sunshine and the Brady Bunch. Sometimes you gotta pull it in yourself, you know.

At least their bathroom was always spotless.

The boy, his mother had been shot. So had his father, gave his daddy the most horrifying voice for a child...like a cancer robot, like he swallowed gravel. Both shot during a car robbery, of all things. Usually bloodless. That time, though...

And the boy understood that. The girl, though, she kept asking about her mother – she didn't understand where her mother went or why she couldn't come back. I don't think she ever got it, even now.

It was like she was always waiting.

She just...

*[stands; walks to dresser counter; adds ice cubes from a dish; opens a bottle of maker's mark, pours another large drink]*

*[a gruff, deep voice – accurately mimicking Ghos]* "Took seven bullets – three in me, four in my wife – to show me the man I am."

That's tough, I'll give it to him.

One of his wounds hit his lung, fucked up his voice for the rest of his life.

Only other thing his father ever said about his wife was that she was a uh a "memory from someone else's life."

That tragedy happened before the boy and girl met, though.

And, once they became friends, they were...I don't know, always together, even when the boy was taken away. They were always friends, no matter how far the boy had to travel to get back to her.

Best friends.

They did take him away a lot.

When he was seven years old, his father took him to South Africa with a guide and together the three went from South Africa to Europe.

Took over five months of endless traveling.

Now I know – I mean, I certainly didn't then, but this was the beginning of his...of his training. You know, in Africa, the boy learned so many things. Poverty, human nature, the world and human condition and et cetera et cetera and fuckin blah. Blah. Blah. There's so many stories from that...adventure, from that time, but his father...the point was to plant seeds. It didn't matter, this wasn't the definition but the things needed defining...*[shakes his head in understanding]* things for which you keep an eye on.

The memories, though...they're smeared, faded.

There's only one memory. One specific memory. They had been walking on the side of the road in Dodoma, Tanzania. Dry air. Dry land. And the road went through a circle near the center of the city. There weren't any sidewalks, only brown-ish/red-ish dirt next to the road—brown-ish/red-ish dirt everywhere, really. Short buildings were uneven, the roofs more like barely-secured tin lids. They got to the intersection of Ndouvuu and Swala.

And about four feet ahead...

I only remember she had on a white clothe with a red stripe *[slurs]* sssswraped around her waist. She stepped into the road and a bullet hit her in the head. *[drinks]* It hadn't been fired locally; it fell from the sky after someone must've fired a gun in the air – this type of death is actually pretty common there.

His father ran to her side to help her. The boy saw the wound on the top-back part of her skull. Father checked her pulse. She was walking, the sky blinked, and she fell over dead. No reason, random. There was nothing she could've done. Her life had

built to a moment that didn't matter, and then she was dead. Ghos turned back toward the then-seven-year-old boy, who had started crying. And he grabbed the boy's arm and yanked him further down the street.

The boy struggled to get away and his dad just smacked him.

After that, they walked without struggle. The boy didn't understand what happened. All he saw was a little blood and a woman sleeping on the road and the grown-ups reaction to her wrist, which seemed sad.

That night, they slept next to the fire as they always did. The guide was asleep. Bartleby had his eyes closed. He could only hear Ghos' harsh voice as he said, [*gruff Ghos impression*] "People always look for a reason but...death ain't got no reason. You could live to be a hundred or die tomorrow by some nothin' fallen out of the sky. Happens. A lot. People die everywhere. All the time. Death ain't need no reason and it ain't got no reason."

The boy hadn't realized the woman was dead until then but, at that point, he was tired of crying from earlier in the day. He was tired of traveling, of never feeling safe anymore.

The sadness had left.

So he just went to sleep.

[*drinks*]

Boy's gone five months, comes home...

Every time they took him, when he returned, it was different. What he felt – it was never the same. They shipped him to military school for a year, and Ghos gave him the fifth floor treatment every so often when he was more uh rambunctious.

The fifth floor prison was built for me, by the way.

To slow me. To stop me. Condition me.

I'm the reason that fuckin' thing exists.

He would always fight hard to come back, to see Mairead again. When uh when he was older – I think he was 17 – they dumped the boy in the middle of Eastern Germany.

That time especially – he had to fight mighty hard to get back to her that time.

Sometimes Ghos would give him the fifth floor treatment because of the boy's relationship with Mairead. And then the boy would come back – after a month, after a year – and what the boy felt when he saw Mairead again...each time, it was [*chuckles*] always so much stronger, exponentially.

For every time he left, and came home, and saw her [*sighs*]...but every time he left, it got so much harder. He didn't have a choice, they were sending him places – he couldn't fight back, couldn't leave 'cause leaving them meant leaving her... couldn't do nothing. He would have to go, where they sent he had to go, just—he was helpless.

When they sent the boy to boarding school...she locked me— she locked the boy out of her room, like it was his fault. He had no choice and he didn't want to go. He sat down outside her room and leaned his back against her door. He could hear her crying on the other side. And he sat there until she calmed and opened the door and let him in. They laid on the floor together – they always did it when she was upset – and neither of them

said anything. His head was near her mid-section but his body was at an angle away from her. She didn't want him against her body, but she wanted him there.

Every time he left, he promised, "Everything will be okay."

And every time he left, he promised, "We'll always be together."

That's about the point things changed.

You see, the boy had two divergent paths. He had the girl – his life with the girl. God...two sides of a coin, and one was light, and the other became very dark.

And he never let the girl know about the dark side of the coin.

It started with...ugh.

The boy would lay next to her and she'd fall asleep.

And she couldn't hear because she would be asleep but the boy would listen to their fathers' conversations in the living room.

And his father especially would tell these horrible stories from his line-a-work.

There's one story that always stood out to the boy, about a pedophile named Pendleton.

The boy had already been to Africa and traveled and seen a lot, but this story was the marker, the divergence toward that second, darker path.

*[phone rings; checks caller ID; answers]*

Yeah? *[pause]* What up, Big Durdy? *[pause]* What time? *[looks at watch; pause]*  
Alright. *[pause]* Yeah, he's right here. *[holds phone up]* You wanna say anything to Cass?  
*[back to phone]* I don't think he can really talk right now. *[pause]* His shoulder is

completely fucked. He'll be a one-armed man. *[pause]* Oh he does? *[pause]* Alright.  
*[pause]* Yeah, I got a sorta busy day tomorrow, we can talk about it later. *[pause]* Alright.

Bye.

*[hangs up phone]*

Good news.

Seems we got big plans for you.

Cass'll be here in a few hours *[checks watch again]* to watch you until you wake up. He'll be the one driving you back.

*[silently drinks for several minutes]*

Killin' someone, takes years...thinkin' about it, not thinkin' about it, anger did it or whatever – hate – and blah blah blah, right? Justice! With a capitol J and an exclamation point. You hear about it – news, tv can't describe it, not to anyone. They can't know. It's a splinter dug in deep. And it divides you, 'cause it's too fuckin' deep for anything to reach it, so you stay divided.

Darkness so that you know there was right.

Light. I mean light.

*[sips his drink; belches; finishes drink; goes to set it down on the bureau with the lamp but misses the edge, dropping the glass and watching it shatter]*

Think I need to switch to beer.



You doin' alright?

Take your pain in stride.

*[pulls a cooler from under the bed, removes a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon, returns cooler; as a toast:]* "One ant to save the hill."

*[takes a sip]*

Somethin' Ghos always tol' us.

*[deeper, darker voice]*

"You wanna care about these people, that's fine, and you wanna help them, that's fine, too, but your job is bigger than them, than these individual pedophiles and losers and dealers and whatever. This job is too fuckin' important to worry about a person, you need to start worryin' about the people. One ant ain't gonna save the hill."

It became our task:

"Op, one ant to save the hill."

*[four minutes of silence, drinking]*

*[stands, knocks over his the Maker's Mark bottle sitting on the arm of the chair; it shatters next to the bed]*

*[distracted by more broken glass]* Damn.

*[pause, returns]*

What would you tell a baby born today, if'n you had one? You practically do, that Lizzy girl. Would you say, "Sorry, kid. This world is real and death hunts us all for sport, or maybe just plain ole' fun and tragedy. Meanwhile, there's about two dozen

people in a three block radius from here that'll kill you for something that costs \$40. And your father and his friends have conspired to murder a ton of people, two of the worst and most successful mass-murderers in American history. P.S. have fun at school."

One day they sent the kid away and when he got home, the girl was gone. Mairead was gone. Dead, hidden, whatever. Kid worked on computers for most of his life to track her down but...I guess that's what Ghos does, his job. Make people disappear. She was getting in his way, because of me. So she was gone. I've never found her since, and I'm good at finding people that want to hide.

*[stands, walks over to the bed]*

I guess that's enough for one night.

Goodnight, buddy.

*[pushes plunger all the way in]*

*[darkness...]*

...

...

...

...

Okay-okay-okay wake'p.

*[slumps into chair, long drunk exhale]*

Tha'sh be enuff adrenlin to keep you awake. I need someone ta talk to—looka me. I can't hold my booze any bedder an you.

*[hammered drunk; long sigh]*

I dunno what I'm goooaa do. Maybe sleep. Maybe I should jus gessum sleep. Maybe, s'that sound good to you? Shit I jus gave you so much adrennnnnn-lin—you know, fuck't. You can stay awake and think'a whatchu done. Okay.

*[stands, stumbles; turns out light; falls to the floor with a blanket wrapped around him]*

THE  
PUSHBLADE  
Symphony

## a brief interlude

the beginning

I was alone when the phone rang, just as he said it would.

And I answered to hear his gravelly voice...

"Want a job?" he asked.

I looked around my empty apartment and settled on the half eaten plate of food on the kitchen table, the one I couldn't finish earlier as my appetite had long since fled.

"Yes. I do."

## the pushblade symphony

### CASSIUS

Cass likes rock candy. He likes rock candy and reality television shows about relationships and the feeling of cookie dough between his fingers. (He makes cookies often.) He's 6'6, 300+ lbs., age 32, and always irritated – unless he's eating rock candy, watching reality television shows about relationships, or making cookies; these things keep him placid. He also enjoys poker but he hasn't played in some time.

He brings with him rock candy in a plastic bag, which he keeps tucked firmly in his track pants; just the feeling that there's a large piece of rock candy on which he can chew keeps him moderately sedated. And he has an especially large piece in his mouth as he arrives at the Flat Rate Motel an hour outside of Philadelphia. He had lost an hour to the wrong back road, cursing and speeding faster and faster. As he parks, facing the door to room #9, he fears he may not have brought enough rock candy to last the trip.

The door is unlocked and he walks in.

The room stinks. The air is stifled and there's the overwhelming scent of booze and something rotting, putrid. There's no light. He opens the curtain. Bartleby is passed out on the floor in front of the bathroom. There's a broken bottle of Maker's Mark on the floor, and more broken glass closer to the bed. A half-full can of Pabst on the bedside table. A waste basket full of bloody gauze turned brown. And an unconscious, wounded man tucked into bed with an IV hanging over his head.

Cass leans forward, grabs the thin body of Bartleby by the scruff of his shirt and the waist of his pants, and he lifts him onto his feet. Bartleby wakes up violently,

obviously startled, and it takes a bit before he's stable on his feet. His bowl-cut brown hair is in every direction but calm. He briefly flicks his Cheshire grin at Cass when he recognizes him.

"What the fuck happened to you?" he asks.

"Cass?" he asks, rubbing his head.

He nods, asking again:

"What the fuck happened to you?"

"I don't think uh..." Bartleby sadly shrugs it off. He looks to the unconscious man, then coughs and rubs the sleep from his eyes. "I got sick of babysitting. I needed a drink."

Cass lets go and Bartleby stands up straight.

He points to the unconscious man in the bed.

"What about him?"

"He should be waking up," checks his watch, "in ten hours or so. I think. I suggest you take a nap or somethin' 'cause it's gonna be a while. And he ain't gonna be moving much when he does wake up."

Bartleby sits in the chair next to the bed. He puts his head in his hands for a moment, then puts his shoes on.

Neither of them says much before Bartleby leaves, nothing except:

"You comin' back?" Cass asks. He's talking about Philly.

Bartleby nods.

"For a bit."

Then Bartleby leaves.

Cass takes the piece of rock candy from his mouth and sets it in a plastic cup next to the sink. He undresses to his boxers, curls up in the same spot on the floor as Bartleby had, wraps himself in a dirty blanket, and takes a much needed nap.

A loud thump wakes him.

Cass rumbles, rolls, and stands up, his large frame towering over the bed.

The unconscious man had rolled out of bed.

Cass sighs and walks over to the man on the floor. The IV had fallen back against the wall, ripped from his arm. Still in his boxers, he leans forward and picks the limp man up, both arms lifelessly swinging against Cass. He lifts the man by his white tee-shirt, bringing him up against his chest, then sits him on the bed and lays him back.

Once the man's comfortably in bed, Cass notices his eyes are open.

There's blood on the man's right hand and Cass moves to look at the stitches on his forearm.

The bandage isn't bleeding, nor are the stitches.

He notices something in the man's hand and he pries it out.

It's a shard of broken glass.

"Did you fall on the—"

Cass takes a step back to look where the man fell and he notices fresh blood on the sheets. He takes a step back to look down at the floor and stumbles a bit. When he does look down, he finds a pool of blood forming at the base of his right foot. His leg is pouring, gushing, spewing blood.

He stumbles back again and blood squirts out sideways from his right thigh.

He briefly applies pressure but it does nothing, and it will do nothing – his femoral artery is slashed. He knows it.

The man sits up in bed.

Cass' eyes are bewildered, then angry.

He takes a step forward to hurt the man in the bed but his knee crumples and his weight gives. He falls to the side of the bed, blood on his hands smearing the sheets, and then he falls to the floor.

There's a moment where he just looks up.

And then his eyes close.





## LOVERS, DREAMERS, ME

David Ridley is sitting in the living room of his brother's house.

There's a cartoon on the television that his daughter is watching, a coloring book in her lap, crayons scattered around the couch. She has her headphones around her neck, plugged into an iPod in her pocket. It was a birthday present and she hasn't taken them off except to sleep.

They're both still in their PJs, mid-afternoon.

"Alright, sweetie. Let's get dressed. I don't wanna see your uncle get home and roll his eyes."

She pushes the coloring book off her lap and they walk toward the bedroom on the far side of the living room. He pulls back the sliding door in the living room. Their bedroom has become cozy lately, actually warm and inviting. Their two beds line opposite walls, the library again the far-wall.

It's been a slow, uneventful day.

As they reach the bedroom, David hears a crash, glass breaking in the kitchen.

*Someone's breaking in*, he thinks.

"Sweetie," he whispers. "I want you to hide. There," he hurriedly points into their bedroom, to the cabinets built in against the wall, under the shelving. "Put these on. Quick quick quick. Don't come out until I get you." He pulls her headphones over her ears and scoots her into the bedroom.

He closes the door behind her.

She runs over to the cabinet thinking it's a game. Hide and seek from her uncle who must've just gotten home. And as she's hiding in the cabinet, she turns on her iPod. *Rainbow Connection*, as sung by Sarah McLachlan, begins. She likes the song but

she pulls out her tiny pink iPod to change it anyway. She's already kinda bored of hiding. She looks down but it's too dark to see so she opens the cabinet a crack, to let some light in. (*why are there so many songs about rainbows and whats on the other side rainbows are visions theyre only illusions and rainbows have nothing to hide so weve been told and some chose to believe it but I know theyre wrong wait and see*) She finds what she's looking for, the button that changes to the next song. She can't read the titles but she knows which button to hit for the next track.

There's a loud thump against the bedroom door and it almost knocks it off the track. She thinks it's her daddy, playing. Letting her know he's coming in with her uncle. She giggles, curls up in a bit of excitement, and waits.

(*someday well find it the Rainbow Connection the lovers the dreamers and me*)

The door slides open hard, slamming against the side and damaging the wall.

Her daddy falls into the room, followed by three men she's never seen before.

All of the men look skinny and dirty. And their hair is ugly. Their clothes are gross. They look like those guys in the city sitting on the street.

Her daddy gets up.

He punches one of the men so hard that the man falls down and doesn't get back up. One of the other dirty men (*who said that every wish would be heard and answered when wished on the morning star somebody thought of that and someone believed it and look what its done so far whats so amazing that keeps us star gazing what so we think we might see*) hits her daddy in the back of the head.

She's startled, her body shaken by this.

Her eyes turn sad and she can't speak, not yet. She wants to scream "daddy" but fear prevents her from saying anything. Her breath is stuck in her throat.

One of the men holds daddy up from behind. He has his hands in her daddy's armpits, keeping him up. One of the dirty men has something in his hand (*someday well*

*find it that Rainbow Connection the lovers the dreamers and me*) that FLASHES in front of daddy, like a camera.

Something hits her daddy's shirt.

She sees something come out the back of her daddy's shirt, which then hits the man holding her daddy up in the chest, too.

Both her daddy and the dirty guy holding him up fall backward and to the ground.

She screams, finally; it bursts from her lungs.

And she cries, kicking open the cabinet door.

*(have you been half asleep and have you heard voices Ive heard them calling my name are these the sweet sounds that called the young sailors I think theyre one and the same Ive heard it too many times to ignore it theres something that Im supposed to be)*

She doesn't see or care about the other dirty man standing and holding the camera or whatever. She runs to her daddy. He's leaning on his side.

He isn't moving, though.

Blood is covering his shirt.

His eyes look sad.

She shakes his shoulder *(someday well find it)* she's sobbing and sobbing and not speaking real words *(the Rainbow Connection)* she looks up at the dirty man *(the lovers)* he's looking down *(the dreamers)* pointing his camera at her *(and me)*.

## HEADBOARD THRONE

He rents a hotel room. First thing he does is empty the mini-fridge and fill it with Red Bull, mayo, onion, and a 40 oz. bottle of Olde English 800 malt liquor (it was either that or Pabst Blue Ribbon, which he's sick of). In the bathroom, he turns on the light and the fan, and then opens several cans of tuna with the tiny black can opener he always keeps in his car; neither the fan nor the drain work well and, for the rest of the day, the bathroom smells like rank tuna fish. Bartleby just closes the door, acknowledging he won't notice soon enough. He puts the tuna in plastic Tupperware, seals the lid, and puts it in the fridge. Window shades open for the moment, he unpacks the rest of his equipment from the larger of his two duffel bags; the other bag has some clothes in it, not many. He never packs much except equipment; only whatever clothes he's recently gotten from the nearest Good Will or Salvation Army (he only keeps clothes about a month at a time). There are three things in his life and clothes don't factor much into any of them.

He moves the night stand so the front faces the bed. He sets up the first laptop on the table and turns it to face the pillows; the second he sets on the bed. He hooks up speakers, a high-power antenna, and various hard drives to the laptop on the table. A long cable joins the first computer to the second, further ghosting the work he's about to perform.

There's a level of relief, of lifted weight and parted dark clouds that Bartleby hasn't felt in a long time. That feeling, that release of having just talked to someone new – talked to someone about important things, without lying, without masking. Bartleby hasn't felt that in maybe years...definitely years. He feels calm now. Complacent. Ready.

A quick shower.

Dresses in blue pant scrubs. No shirt. No underwear. No socks.

The tuna gets mayo. The raw onion gets diced by a tiny pocket knife. The tuna gets onion. A Red Bull gets popped ~ **kerche** ~ and Bartleby takes his place at the headboard throne, computer on his lap. First is Credence Clearwater Revival, low so as not to disturb anyone else in the dingy Center City hotel.

And as he goes to begin typing, his phone squawks once.

A red flag.

Bartleby plugs his phone into the computer on the night table and furiously types on the other computer.

The red flag is for an unusual G.P.S. destination made by Cass' car:

The first surprise isn't the fact that Cass' car made an unusual detour; it's that Cass' car had already made it back and, actually, it kept going until it drove through Philadelphia to the Conshohocken exit off 76. The car had parked at a storage facility only a moment before beginning its trek back into Philadelphia. Bartleby stares at the blinking red cursor on the screen, frozen. He thinks of options, the first being a phone call...

Someone picks up on the second ring.

There's silence on the line while both parties wait for someone to respond.

"What are you doing?" Bartleby asks, hesitantly.

"I want to see you face-to-face," the voice says, calm.

"Where's Cass?"

Silence.

"Why would I meet you?"

The man politely says goodbye.

The phone clicks, the line dead.

Bartleby sits for a moment.

The phone rings again, startling him.

Bartleby checks the number and recognizes it as the leader of the “three wisemen,” as he calls them; it’s ironic since only the leader is wise—actually, more of a functioning addict with a slightly-above-average IQ. The other two are half-stupid and full-blown junkies.

He answers.

“This better be good news,” he whispers.

This day is getting worse.

And the leader wiseman responds,

“Yeah, uh, we uh...we hit a snag. You and I gotta talk.”

There are two quick squawks – two more red flags.

The first is a notice that Cass’ phone has just had the battery and simcard removed and that the phone could no longer be tracked. The second red flag is to signify Cass’ car is currently parking a few blocks from Winter, the desolate, creepy shoreline where Alex disposed of bodies.

## THE MAN IN BLACK

Outside the front doors of an apartment building in Philadelphia stands a man. It's daytime, mid-afternoon, September. The gray sky air tastes stagnant and there's a chill. Silence, and he looks to a dirty copper penny on the ground. Up, he lifts his head, sees himself, then stares past the reflection and in through the double-pane glass at the dirty lobby.

He makes a phone call on a burner cell he bought at a corner store down the block. The number rings straight through to voicemail.

"Hello, this is Matilda. I'm unable to take your call right now but if you'd like to leave a message with your number, I might get back to you."

The message is youthful, happy, with a gentleness of tongue.

BEEP

"Hey. I'm calling to say that, um...I'm not lost. Not anymore. This is where I'm meant to be. This is the end." He looks over to the gas can at his side, sitting on the ground next to his feet. He had to put it down to use his right to dial, since his left hangs limp at his side, no good. "This is the end," he affirms before saying, "This is what I'm meant to do. Goodbye."

He picks up a gas can and enters the building, the gasoline can swish swashing side-to-side with his movement and he struggles when he tries to remove the cap. He has to set the gas can on the ground, straddle it with both feet, bend, unscrew, and then pick it up once more. The smell of gasoline fills the lobby as the liquid splashes left, right, over everything between the elevator and the doors; over the fake gold mailboxes, the filthy brown carpet and grime-riddled couch, the floor, left and right until everything in the lobby drips gasoline. The man tosses the can to the corner with the



mailboxes and pushes the button to call the elevator. The bell dings and he tries to light a match; it's hard as a newly one-handed person. He bends the match back against the emery, squishes it with his thumb, pushes it like a finger-snap, and burns a callous on the bottom of his thumb.

The elevator doors open.

He enters.

With the match lit, he bends it back with some maneuvering of his index finger and the rest of the pack twists and spirals up in orange flame. A flick and the flaming match pack crosses out into the lobby. The button for the third floor lights beneath his finger. Fire spreads like a river overcoming the shore. He reaches for his gun, tucked in the back of his pants, and he reminds himself:

This is the end.

And then he's disappeared.

## DEATH AND ALL HIS FRIENDS

Lionel smells the faint hint of fire and steps outside of his third floor apartment.

When he steps into the hall, he sees someone emerge from the elevator.

The man is dressed in all black. He has a gun in his right hand. His left arm hangs limp.

“Wee Blaze?” he calls out to him.

The man in black walks to Lionel, who stays under the threshold of his apartment door.

Someone in Lionel’s living room calls out, “See any smoke, dawg?”

Lionel and the man in black stare at each other for a moment.

The man in black lifts his gun to Lionel’s face and there’s a FLASH.

This *someone* in the apartment watches Lionel fall back into the room, his dead body hitting the floor with a loud, shaking thud. Whoever this someone is, they’re up and running to the bedroom.

The man in black never gets much of a look at him, though he knows it’s someone he’s not especially familiar with.

Not that it would matter if this was *someone* he knew.

This *someone* pulls a shotgun from under the bed.

He’s cocked and firing wildly at the doorway and hallway wall as he re-enters the living room, pauses a moment, then fires twice more into the wall between the living room and the outside hallway. He misses anything moving but someone’s out there.

There’s smoke outside the windows, coming up from the ground floor.

This *someone* waits for a sign of movement outside the door, and something does move, something small, and it comes in through one of the holes in the wall. It's fast, bounces off a piece of furniture, then rolls somewhere nearby.

The *someone* has two seconds.

In the first, he tilts his head to see what it is.

(It's shiny with a red fire design on it.)

In the last second, he realizes.

The residents of Apartment #404 are standing in their living room when there's an explosion one floor below. Before had been loud blasts, obvious gunfire. Then the floor shook.

The two men arm themselves.

As one heads out into the hallway, the other signals to his roommate for 5 paces, low. The roommate uses his hand to acknowledge he understands and that he's moving into the hallway; then he moves out into the hallway. A litany of holes – like rain, like shrapnel – blow in through the wall between the hallway and the apartment. There are decorations on the wall, photos, a square shelf with a plant on it, and a bookcase; holes rip and scatter, break and push through, paper and wood and plaster and glass spewing out over the room.

The shots begin close to the door as the roommate instantly leaps back into the room, sliding to the tile kitchen floor on the far side of the living room. The rest of the bullets had tried to follow him through the wall but took the wrong path, higher and closer to the other man in the room.

In the hallway, there's the sound of a door being kicked open.

There are the sounds of a scuffle, something shatters.

Two gunshots BOOM BOOM.

Then silence.

Awkward silence, a black hole of sound. Both men remain where they're situated, on either side of the living room. The roommate is against the kitchen counter, next to the fridge. He signals to be quiet; then stands, sliding up. Something hits their door frame. The roommate ducks back down, waiting, checking. Something bounces, and rolls back down the hallway.

There's the sound of footsteps retreating, running back the way they'd come.

Then more silence.

The roommate signals for both of them to flank either side of the—

Eight feet of the wall – including the door – disappears in a ball of plaster and heat. It blows into the room, swallows all the air and replaces it with the taste of gunfire and diesel fuel. The world vanishes beneath copper and glass shards, smoke and daggers of wood in so many directions it becomes the humidity in the room. The roommate's forehead is cut; it takes a moment, then bleeds relentlessly into his eyes. His ears are ringing, soot and dirt blown into his left ear. He shakes his head. Shakes it again. He's in a level of shock. It takes him great effort to lift his hand toward the smoke and rubble, only to realize his gun is gone. His friend is gone, too, invisible in the smoke and dirt and shit floating; he had been closer to the blast.

The hallway's a frayed edge of what once was a floor, a gaping hole full of dust and floating crud like shifting clouds. The third floor hallway's down there somewhere, buried beneath the cloud, beneath puzzle pieces of twisted metal, wall and ceiling and floorboards. And there's fire. The smoke never settles. The air never returns. The fire burns the wallpaper edges of the hallway walls still intact, illuminating shapes in the smoke, contrasting the hovering debris into a dense, opaque, uneven wall. A dangling electrical wire outside the room flickers with life, a bright shot of the odd, twisting shadows.

The roommate flicks the blood from his eyes before scurrying to the other side of the kitchen. He keeps wiping blood from his eyes but it's not helping, and the soot and

dirt on his hands is beginning to stick to the blood. There's a noise in the living room and he moves without being able to see farther than his hands. He moves to the living room, then toward daylight through the windows.

There's sweet fresh air pouring in. He crawls against the floor, moving faster, rushing to stick his head out the window for delicious, wonderful air. But he stops. The window's already open – not just open, his hands find broken glass.

Barely, just a shadow in his vision, a man in black stands.

He looks down at the roommate, then the room.

The roommate lifts to his knees as his forehead bleeds into his eyes.

The man in black lets his right arm swing out a little BOOM BOOM and then heads toward the bedroom.

## CHECK AND MATE

Francis Dupont is shutting down the fifth floor. All of the individual rooms had been removed, only windows, pillars, and hardwood floors; the Fifth Floor Prison now looks like a clean dance studio. Renovations aren't complete and it appears they never will be. He powers down the backlights and overhead lights. Even though it's fake, Mr. Dupont stops, admiring the view before he shuts off the rest. All the lights are off except the panorama; it's night down in his city, even though it's the middle of the day. The white noise is off so it's a world of still illumination and unmoving cars.

And then he turns that off, too.

He leaves one light on, the light over a chess table in the back of the empty floor.

There're noises close, and Mr. Dupont waits.

A loud explosion erupts beneath the floor, somewhere near the hallway outside apartment #404 just below. A portion of the flooring collapses but Francis Dupont isn't near it and he doesn't see it; he doesn't move from his spot next to the only light on floor, the one above the chess board.

Silence for a bit.

Two muffled gunshots.

More silence.

Soon, there's a shuffling behind him.

Mr. Dupont sighs and turns around.

The man in black is standing there, his gun on him. He looks haggard from pain and injury, retaining a look of purpose and rage – two qualities he didn't rightly show before this moment. Francis Dupont, on the other hand, is slow, frail. His voice has

deteriorated to the point that it's almost inaudible. His arms and hands shake constantly.

Mr. Dupont blinks, staring at him blankly.

"Chess?" he finally asks.

The man in black is equally calm, nodding.

Francis Dupont sits at the table in front of the set chess board, cradling his silver .38, as always, and the man in black joins him. Both men keep their guns pointed in the general direction of each other as they play a quiet game of chess while the building burns from the ground up. Their moves are slow and calculated, the man in black moving his pieces with the same hand that holds the gun. Neither talks. The man in black has nothing to say and Francis Dupont can barely speak, as it is. Move after move after move until Francis Dupont sees the end coming. He knew it had been near.

The man in black only nods in recognition of the checkmate.

The game is over, the man in black the victor.

"So..." Francis Dupont begins, and it's odd for the man in black to see him have a hard time talking, considering how much he used to do it.

Neither man talks.

Francis Dupont lays the silver .38 on a corner of the chess board absent pieces. The man in black reluctantly tucks his gun under his left armpit, picks up the .38, empties the bullets onto his lap, then returns to the gun to the table. He stuffs the bullets into a pocket before retrieving his own gun from its armpit holster.

They meet eye-to-eye for a short moment.

The man in black stands to leave.

"You ain't gonna make it, son," Francis Dupont says.

The man in black gives a tired acknowledgement, then leaves.

## BURNING

From the street, there are flickers of light in the lobby, smoke growing, growing white to gray, flowing between and under the front double doors, growing gray to black, billowing, masking any sight inside.

Strangers gather on the sidewalk in front of the apartment building.

The first explosion is the gas can in the lobby. It's muffled but enough to startle the strangers and the gawkers and the lookers-on, and they move across the street. From then on, no one passes directly in front of the building, and the crowd only grows.

There is a series of loud CRACKS from inside, echoes of tiny explosions, a sound familiar to the Philadelphia crowd as gunshots.

Time passes and the crowd grows.

The smoke climbs, curling and rising out the windows on the second floor.

There's a massive FLASH of FIRE LIGHT on the third floor; the windows shatter, glass and wood and plaster and porcelain and dirt and cinders blow out amongst a large plume of flame licking up and rushing up from a single apartment on the third floor, the debris raining down on the sidewalk and street. The watchers across the street duck as ash and dirt rubble shower on them. Strangers in the distance see commotion and wander over.

More smoke.

More time.

More people.

As the crowd recovers from the third floor explosion, their voices rumble in exclamation, each speaking louder and louder to one another – a brotherhood of strangers, a shared experience among the gawking mass – their collective voice



unintelligible and growing to meet the roar of the destruction, the police sirens, ambulance sirens.

Another staccato series of CRACKS from inside the building, a slight bit more distant, possibly a higher floor.

The police arrive, three cars blocking the street, officers emerging to push the crowd back, taping them off at the edge of the block.

There's a massive thunder from inside the building, fourth floor. It looks like lightning strikes the center of the building and shuttles down to the first floor, rumbling the entire building, literally shaking dust and grime off the outside edges. Again, some of the windows shatter out onto the fire escape. Flames don't lick out to the sky but gray smoke billows relentlessly, embers and ash floating up.

A man in black is at the window of a third floor apartment, slamming it open, pushing out onto the fire escape. The fresh air makes him cough. He looks out and finds a gathering crowd on the street. No fire truck yet. Police sectioning off the street.

He looks up. No one.

People scream at him from the sidewalk, police and the crowd alike.

Keep moving, he keeps moving.

Up the fire escape, to the window, to apartment #404 one floor above him.

He kicks in the wood as the window's already broken, then hops inside.

There's two more CRACKS inside; a pause, then two more.

The building burns.

The crowd watches, huddled together.

An ambulance sets up near the end of the block, paramedics waiting for the fire truck, which arrives shortly after. The firemen park in front of the building and bring out the hose, begin firing it into the lobby. Firemen extend the truck ladder up to windows on the third floor in search of survivors.

The man in black appears again, jerking the wood frame and pulling open the window of a fourth floor apartment, climbing out onto fire escape. Blood all over his face and clothes. He yanks and pulls himself out with one arm, breathing heavily; air, it's a miracle. His lungs fill sweetly, throwing him into a coughing fit until he gags and tries to spew out the blackness in his chest. His eyes are clouded in the September air. His left arm is in agony; it hangs limp as his shoulder bumps against this, against that, and it burns deep in the bone and muscle. He coughs out more blackness, throwing himself against the rail.

He recovers, his eyes focusing down as he hangs over the guardrail of the fire escape. Four floors below, the Center City Police Department swarm the sidewalk from across the front entrance. They block pedestrians from passing in front of the burning building, a safe 100-meter distance.

Smoke billows from the window behind him.

Cinders float from out of the apartment and into the air.

He disrobes, tossing his gun back into the apartment. His black sweatshirt. His black vest. His backpack, with medical supplies and two remaining grenades, he swings it back and throws it all in with more force, aiming for a spot that'll give a minute or two before the heat could possibly detonate the remaining incendiary grenades. Then, he is no longer in black: he's in a white, ash- and blood-smeared tee-shirt and black sweatpants soaked with more blood.

He moves down the fire escape two stairs at a time.

At the bottom, a fire truck is parked in front. He struggles to climb down the final ladder between the second floor and the sidewalk with one hand but he's capable and his feet touch solid ground. A fireman is waiting and escorts him to a paramedic, then returns to the fire. The paramedic pulls a blanket across his shoulders and leads him farther from the fire.

Now that he's not running, he begins coughing again. The paramedic begins pulling him by the arm to keep him moving away from the building, toward an ambulance at the edge of the crowd, at the end of the street—when BOOM! the fire escape tumbles down, collapsing to the sidewalk, and the fourth floor of the apartment building explodes out over the block and onto the street. Wreckage, rubble, and rock showers down over the city pavement and burns into the sky.

The explosion shakes the Earth, blossoming into the hazy gray September day. The flames, the smoke, the debris, all organized chaos. Slow—the orange ball grows out like a rose but wilts in black until all that's left is a funnel-shaped, impenetrable cloud in the sky overhead, ash and embers, flaming bits of paper, the final pieces drifting, floating down like a snowstorm in hell.

And as the paramedic drops to the ground – shaken, reacting instinctually, covering his head from the loud blast and cowering – the man in blood and ash continues on. He holds back his cough and moves faster, leaving the medic behind. And as he reaches the end of the block – and the others, the firefighters, the paramedics regain composure – as he reaches the crowd, also bent and shielding themselves, one stranger catches his glance.

All around, the people are ducking and hiding their face...except a red-haired police officer at the edge of the crowd, on the bend of the sidewalk where the caution tape is tied to a streetlamp. He stands up straight, unflinching, watching the man in ash and blood as the building destructs in all out mayhem in the background.

The officer's face is deadpan.

He doesn't react, not like the other people.

As the man in blood and ash turns around to put his back against the crowd, he catches the attention of the officer. There's a jolt in the policeman's eyes, quick. The officer looks at the blood-covered face of the man and rushes toward him.

The man in blood and ash pushes into the crowd.

The officer follows.

## THE THIN LINE OF TREES TO WINTER

“You fuckin’ killed ‘em all, didn’t you—I’m gonnafuckin’ put a fuckin’ bullet in—put a bullet in you,” he relishes the sentence, “and fuckin’ kill you. Fuck you—you killed them all, didn’t you? Ghos? Is Ghos dead?...Lionel—did Lionel survive? You motherfucker. Any of—mmm, I’m gonnafuckin’ take you to winter, you piece of shit – oh ho – I’m gonnafuckin’ take you to winter. Ain’t no GPS here, ain’t no watchin’. You...you fuckin’...”

The man in blood and ash remains quiet. He doesn’t speak.

His hands are cuffed behind his back.

He’s locked inside a police cruiser.

They’re driving to South Philadelphia, past Route 95, down near the navy yard, onto Kitty Hawk Ave.

The redheaded Center City Police Officer has talked non-stop since the arrest of the man in blood and ash a block from the apartment building. The officer barely frisked him (as he was in such a rush), cuffed him, and led him back to a cruiser parked just outside the parameter set for the burning building. They reversed – the officer angrily cursing and questioning without a breath, working himself up higher and farther and angrier – and he sped off, lights flashing, siren blaring.

“You piece of shit. I’m gonna drown you—I’m not even going to shoot you. I’m gonnafuckin’ put a bullet in your leg and I’m gonna drown you in the fuckin’ Delaware face first and drown you, you piece of fuckin’ shit. Do it quick but slow. I’m going to make you suffer. I’m going to make you suffer so hard—so fucking hard.”

The officer pulls to the end of the road.

There isn't a person around. No houses nearby or buildings or dogs (Cass' car is parked just out of sight), nothing interesting except the Philadelphia skyline in the distance. The area's been abandoned for some time. The soil is too soft to build on due to the unpredictable shore; it's desolate, the water gross and impenetrable. No one ventures down a pier that ends in ugliness, in bloodiness and hairiness. The man in blood and ash had never ventured out there. As the officer pulls him out of the car – both hands still cuffed behind his back – and pushes, and shoves, and moves him toward the thin forest, the man in blood and ash looks over the dry, grassless land leading to the trees. The river is just past, gusts of heavy salt wind hitting their faces; they can taste it in their mouths and in their sinuses. The man in blood and ash had never been out here before, and in his head he had always imagined taking someone to Winter was to take them to a monster.

To take someone to Winter had been to feed that person to a beast on the shore.

The officer continues from behind, pushing and cursing and elaborating on the gruesome death that waits past the thin line of trees to the horrid beast Winter. The man in blood and ash feels a gun muzzle in the small of his back. He doesn't have to be told – he knows the gruesome death that waits past the trees.

And then they're past the thin line of trees to a short line of shore.

There are rocks and they stumble along them on the way to the shore line.

"I'm gonnafuckin' enjoy this so fuckin' –ow–" the officer grunts as he stumbles on a rock. The next few sounds are gunfire – four shots. Then gurgling. The body falls into the rocks and sand a few feet from the water.

Then there's the PLOP of a bloody knife landing in the water.

The man in blood and ash unlocks the cuffs off his left hand, then tosses them into the water near the knife. He rubs his limp left wrist with his right hand. For a while there, the cuffs had been on hard enough to cut off circulation. His right wrist is bleeding from having ripped his wrist out of the loosened cuff. He didn't loosen the

right hand until halfway through the drive, and only now is it getting the feeling back. Taking a page from the book of a porn star he once knew, the man in ash and blood had fastened a knife to the outside of his shin bone and duct taped a handcuff key just below his waistline.

Now he stands, alone on the shore.

And one last obstacle remains.

## RIDLEY IN AUTUMN

Bartleby drives his car past the large wooden entrance sign to Ridley State Park and turns onto a narrow road leading deep into the barren forest.

The GPS signal on Cass' car stops at the end of the road.

This was the destination the man had given him on the phone. The man had been specific, that he need to rent a car steal one, whatever, and drive it to this location. If he didn't, the man would turn himself into the police with every bit of information he had on everyone.

Though everyone, it appeared, was dead now.

Bartleby was going to murder this man, if nothing more. So he stole the nearest car, a Lexus, and drove to the destination. The park is thick with a forest shedding leaves. The ground is covered in torn, dying debris in brown. He continues to drive slowly, his eyes alert – but he's a second late recognizing the dozens of carpet tacks covering the road. Three loud explosions erupt from under the car as the tires explode flat. The car continues rolling on rims, unable to accelerate or slow.

In the distance – maybe fifty yards down – something moves from out of the forest. Bartleby panics and grabs the gun under his seat. As he lifts his head back up, gun in hand, the figure in the closing distance begins firing his own gun—BOOM BOOM BOOM—into the windshield of the car.

Each of the shots hit the passenger seat.

Bartleby jerks the wheel to the left, using the car as a shield. The car slows its roll and he opens the door to sprint for the woods. Two more shots—BOOM BOOM—hit the passenger side door as Bartleby leaps from the still moving car and runs into the woods.



He doesn't think it odd that he happens to be leaving his car and running into the woods at the exact spot of a designated trail; instead, he's concentrating on his feet as they slide on the dead leaves coating the dirt path. He runs full speed, checking over his shoulder, soon out of sight from the car and the shooter. He reaches a quarter mile marker when—

SNAP

Bartleby howls in pain and falls to the ground.

His right leg is caught in a non-lethal bear trap.

From the ground, amidst the dirt and leaves, Bartleby's hand scrapes across the ground in search of the gun that had fallen from his grasp. His eyes are wincing in horrific pain from his leg. He whimpers as his hand finds the gun. He clasps the grip and brings the gun up to point back down the path in the direction from which he came.

The woods are silent, still. Nothing rustles. The air smells clean, cold as it fills his nostrils. Bartleby listens for a sound but hears nothing. He reaches into his pocket to grab his phone—

Something kicks him in the back and Bartleby crumbles.

The man in blood and ash comes around from behind and takes the gun from Bartleby's hand using very little effort. The man's left arm hangs limp, so he takes it with his right hand. Tosses it into the woods a good distance. Then he sits on a log in the muck, facing Bartleby.

The man in blood and ash lets out a large, relaxed sigh.

In that forest, together alone, the man in blood and ash sees himself surrounded by everyone he's ever murdered, as he asks a question...

"Now, tell me the address..."

...and then speaks freely with a stranger for the first time in maybe his whole life.



### THREE WISE MEN

The first – the wounded wiseman – he’s lying on the couch, bleeding profusely from a wound in his chest. His face has grown pale, his body weak. He’s stopped crying and complaining, and instead wheezes a faint cough every other minute.

“You shot me,” he occasionally whispers in a dreamy voice.

He’s in shock but he’s talking about how the bullet had passed through its intended victim and hit the wiseman in his chest. The other wiseman lazily looks over his shoulder every so often, expecting the whispers to stop, the wheezing to stop. He’s sitting against the front of the couch, next to the wounded wiseman’s legs. He had to scoot down when the blood had seeped into the cushion so much it almost reached him. They’re in a shitty first-floor apartment in South Philly. The streets mid-day are busy, people walking, bicycles, children and adults sitting on their stoops, none the wiser.

And the second wiseman slowly drifts to sleep.

Earlier, there had been three wiseman.

“What’re we gonna do...with him?” the second wiseman asked the third after they had gotten back to the house. He wasn’t panicked considering the amount of heroin he shot into his system the moment they arrived.

The third – the leader wiseman – reiterated the plan:

“He’ll die and uh...we’ll figure it out.”

“Think anyone seen us?” the second wiseman asked, blinking dazed, then he looked up. He had a cigarette between his two fingers, the ash long and thick and unmoved. His eyes at a constant stage of half-open.

“No. You and your shit buddy right there—” he pointed to the dying wiseman “—why don’t you give him some of your H, he could prolly use it.”

“No...he’s gonna die soon anyway. It’d...be...a waste . . .”

“Whatever. Either’a you get caught, get fucked. You don’t know my name anyhow.” He pointed his finger right in the second wiseman’s face. “And you killed you friend because you’re—Hey!” The second wiseman had started to doze off, but the leader, he got close, and he grabbed the back of the second wiseman’s head to shake him awake. “Open your eyes, hear this. You shot your friend and he’s gonna die because you’re a fucking idiot. Hear me? You killed your friend ‘cause you’re stupid.”

And then the third wiseman left.

When the second wiseman wakes, his cigarette is down to a nub and out, and it had burned the skin between his fingers. He hadn’t even noticed. He looks toward the front window, over the couch. Music is blaring from outside and it takes him a moment to hear it. He rolls to his side and sort of crawls to the nearest wall, by the front door. He leans himself against the wall and slides up, steadying himself against the drywall. He pushes himself off, steadies, then lumbers toward the window over the couch of the wounded wiseman; he’s not wheezing, or whispering, or anything – his eyes are half open, his face a light blue, and he looks like he’s about to say something.

The second wiseman dismisses it and looks out the window.

Outside is a car parked in the middle of the street, blocking any traffic (though none has yet to form), it’s doors open and the inside stereo on full blast. The second wiseman recognizes the song blaring. It’s R. Kelly “Ignition (Remix)”. He loves this song. He takes a short glimpse down at the dead wiseman again; he died with a look of pain on his face.

“Alright,” he says to himself. “ga’a do whatchagot’a do.”

He looks for his gun but doesn’t find it. They only had one gun. He looks and looks but doesn’t find it. As he stumbles his way toward the kitchen, he realizes there’s a man standing in the hallway. He gives the man a quizzical look. The man is kind of shaggy, long-ish blonde hair, and very, very determined eyes.

These are the eyes of Chris Young, retired male pornstar.

## LATE TO THE PARTY

The phone rings.

“Hello?”

“Chris?” says the voice on the other line. It’s hoarse and beaten.

“Yeah. Who’s this?”

“It’s David’s brother. I uh I need your help. I need your help. I need it badly.”

“Oh man, what’s goin’ on? Everythin’ alright?”

“I need you to go to my house. I can’t seem to get my brother on the line and I think he’s in trouble, him and Lizzy, I think they’re in trouble. I need your help. Are you still in Philly?”

“Yeah, man – I was just packing. What kind of trouble’re they in?”

“Danger,” he almost gasps. “Please. Get them out of the house. Take them somewhere safe. Anywhere. I’ll call you in thirty minutes. Whatever you do, don’t call the police. And I’ll pay you whatever you want.”

Chris denies any sort payment and they hang up.

He checks out of the hotel, hails a cab, and leaves for the house with his suitcase in tow. He gets to David’s front door, knocks. Knocks again. His hand lifts to knock a third time when his phone rings. He answers.

“Hello?”

“Are they ok?” the voice is rushed.

“I don’t know, I’m at your house knocking but no one’s answering.”

“Go around back and go inside.”

Chris goes around back and finds the window to the back door broken. He advances inside slowly, carefully. He finds David's body; it isn't the first dead body he's seen, and he tries to react calmly. His eyes are distressed, his voice soft:

"I'm sorry," Chris whispers.

The voice on the other end is silent. Chris catches the hint of a muted sob but the voice continues to be quiet. Chris waits for the voice to regain composure.

"It looks like he was—" Chris says, leaning over...

And David coughs a very low, very soft little breath of air.

"Scratch that, he's still alive," Chris says, rushing to his side. He's careful to move him, but he lifts his body just enough to reach under and feel for an exit wound. The bullet had entered his chest very close to his heart, penetrated through his breast plate, and, as Chris feels around back, exited directly below the shoulder. "He's alive. Bullet wound to the chest. I'm calling an ambulance."

"Do it," says the voice. He's back in control, clearing his voice.

Chris hangs up and immediately calls the police.

"There's an emergency. Someone's been shot. Needs immediate attention."

He gives them David's vital signs and the address. Tells them he's dying. They tell him the ambulance is on the way – ETA seven minutes.

The call-waiting beeps.

David's brother is calling on the other line.

He flips over to the other call.

"An ambulance is on the way —"

"Great," the man answers, "but before the police get there, tell me a few things."

"Okay."

"What do you see?"

Chris looks around.

"There's a lot of blood and David's been... shot."

"There's no...? Lizzy's not there?"

"No. No child." Chris calls out, "Lizzy? Sweetie pickle, you here?" No answer. He continues looking around. "I don't see her. Oh...God . . ."

There's an exasperated breath.

"I need your help," David's brother starts, "Lizzy is in danger and...I need your help. I can save her, I just need . . ." the voice is worked up and tiring of enthusiasm. He calms himself, continues in a more even pace. "I can't answer any questions right now but...we can save Lizzy. I need your help."



## THE END OF THE WISEMEN

The second wiseman doesn't move or panic as Chris moves toward him. He doesn't really have time as Chris moves faster than his brain can comprehend. Chris is next to him, over him, and beating him down into the floorboards before he even realizes he's begun screaming for help. He begs and pleads for a "time-out" or for the dead wiseman to "please help" or for everything to "stop" until Chris beats the second wiseman unconscious, letting him drop to the floor, blood-covered and audibly breathing through his mouth.

Chris moves to the dead wiseman, checks him, finds him to be, in fact, dead, and turns back to go to the bedroom. As he moves toward the first bedroom —

BOOM

—there's an explosion of plaster near his head. Someone's come in through the back door and fired a gun at him. There's a corner between the two men, with no direct line of site, but they're well aware of each other.

The leader wiseman stays against the wall, moving toward the living room.

Moving, moving...

The second wiseman, his face covered in blood, his head drooping, comes around the corner. Chris has him up and standing, barely. If it wasn't for the fact that he was a junkie, Chris may not have been able to use the second wiseman's thin, light body as a projectile as well as he does. He shoves, tosses, and kicks the body into the hallway with enough forward momentum for it to hit the leader wiseman. The gun goes off twice—BOOM BOOM—both of which hit the second wiseman, one of which passes through his body and hits the ceiling. After the second shot, the body collapses into the front of the leader wiseman, blocking his arm for a brief second.

Chris is there, fast, his body moving sideways, his left arm forward and grabbing the sleeve of the leader wiseman's right arm while his right hand punches swiftly into his nose, all just above the fallen body of the second wiseman. The two men – a dead body between, both covered in blood – struggle and roll until the dead man is next to them and down against the hallway wall. The leader wiseman uses his forehead to hit against the bridge of Chris' nose, and they roll for dominance over the other.

The leader wiseman begins to gain the upper hand, rolling out to pin Chris down.

Chris stops fighting as hard, and the leader wiseman gets out and on top and reaching, reaching for the gun that had dropped next to them. His hand finds the edge of the grip, pulls it close, and tries to lift it when a sharp pain reaches deep inside his body from under his armpit.

The gun drops involuntarily and the leader falls over, a long, thin blade – the word Rout inscribed along the side – sticks out from between his ribcage up under his arm.

Chris had reached beneath his shirt sleeve, up against his forearm, and pulled out a knife that had been given to him as a present in Siberia, something that he always wore. With his palm, he jams the knife in deeper until he's sure it's reached the leader's heart.

The leader wiseman gasps, clenches, and dies.

Chris grips the knife, pulls it out, wipes the blood from it on the leader wiseman's clothes, and replaces the knife in his forearm holster.

Once the madness has died down, Chris can hear a crying from inside the bedroom – a little girl crying louder than before:

“Daaddy!”

And then balling.

“Viollllleeeeeeeet!”

And then balling.

And those two words just keep repeating.

Chris opens the bedroom door.

Lizzy's hands are tied to the bed frame. She has a blindfold over her eyes. She has dried blood on her clothes, but Chris checks and finds that the blood isn't hers. The little girl shakes with the noise of someone coming into the bedroom, and someone touching her, checking her for wounds.

"It's okay, Pickle. It's okay, sweetie. Lizzy sweetie. It's okay. I'm here to take you to get food, sweetie. Pickle. But I need you to keep the blindfold on for just one more minute."

Chris says all this as he unties her.

Lizzy's so worked up she can't speak, hyperventilating. He unties her hands, picks her up. He holds her in his arms, pats her back, and carries her out of the house, past the dead wiseman, out the back door, and down two full blocks. They're in a disgusting alley, the backs of dilapidated houses and closed businesses all around. He carries her a full two blocks before setting her down. When he sets Lizzy on her own two feet, she's calmer but not by much.

Chris takes off Lizzy's blindfold.

As sunlight filters back into Lizzy's vision, she stares up with a flush face.

And with the new light, her eyes find the face of her savior.

**LEELAND RIDLEY**

You had your turn to talk. It's mine, now. Until I hear from Chris that Lizzy's safe, you're here and I'm here and we're going to talk. I'm going to talk, I mean.

And I don't want to hear you say a goddamn word.

Nod if you understand.

*[he nods]*

No one's coming. No one's around, no one's going to hear you scream.

So...*[short pause, thinking]*

I knew this girl, Matilda. My ex.

She was taken from me so I...I killed people. I killed a lot of people. My ex's friends, her dealers, their dealers...she's dead. They're dead. It's like this stupid movie my brother showed me. The whole film the guy's trying to kill the people that killed his-his whatever – doesn't even matter – his wife, his dog, his kid. He's trying the whole movie to kill a group of gang members, and he succeeds. And the movie ends. But it's a sad ending. He killed the guys, good – 'cause that's not what's sad. What's sad is that the man no longer has anyone to kill. He got revenge, fantastic. But then he's crossed that line to get it and where's he going after that? Can't just uncross the line. Can't retire from murder to run a bookstore, right? Who does he kill? He's going to kill someone –

eventually, he'll kill someone. The happiest ending would have been that he just forgot about it to begin with, just moved on. That's a strong person. Never crossed the line to begin with.

But that's not how it works. Is it, Bartleby?

It's just not how it works.

Eh, you don't need things spelled out. You're already good at spelling. You know. You get it. You shoot my brother, I shoot you. You kidnap my niece, I kidnap you.

I assume the only reason she's still alive is so that—were Ghos alive, you would have finally had a girl for the Fifth Floor Prison, right? Nod. [*he nods*]) You saved my life, I owe you a life – so I'm going to spare yours. If my niece dies, if my brother dies, though...I won't owe you anything. Got it? I'm going to need a life to replace what's been taken from me. Right?

You take one from me I take one from you.

Isn't that how it works?

[*deep breath*] This does feel good.

You know my parents' died in Philadelphia. Not too long ago. Feels like forever. Like a whole life—like they died when I was an infant and I just remember them better than an infant might.

And I feel abandoned.

It's hard—they didn't mean to get stabbed to death. I don't imagine anyone does. But it's hard...not to blame them for leaving me.

They always loved each other and they fought every battle together.

And then one day a junkie comes up and stabs them. Steals maybe a hundred in cash and jewelry. Leaves them in the street to die...and they die in the street, holding hands.

I tell you I murdered that man and it's justice, it's fair.

It comes with congratulations.

Good riddance.

*[phone rings, answers; speaking low]*

Yeah. Okay. *[whispers inaudibly]* Bye.

Good news – and it's not a multi-tiered good news. Just a single detail – I'm going to let you live, Bartleby.

You saved my life and thus I will spare yours.

However, if I ever...even think I feel your eyes on me. If I think you're even in the same state as me, I'm going to kill you. I'm not going to underestimate you but I ask that you do not do the same to me. You're capable just as I am. I planned this, to get you here, to beat you, in no one time at all.

You were such a dipshit drunk, you hopped me up on adrenaline and then gave me a night to plan. You and Cass and everyone were done before you even left that hotel. And I did it all one handed.

Don't piss me off again.

Tonight I'm gone and tomorrow – my family, my friends, they're going to wake up. They're going to live nice, happy, full lives. If anything happens to them, I will spend my life finding you. My revenge cup is full right now. You and I can move on. We crossed, we aren't going back. But there has got to be something else.

I'm not going to ask if any of this is okay because you're either going to lie, so I don't kill you, or you're going to actually agree, so that I don't kill you. Either way, you can go far away from here. Or stay forever. I don't give a shit.

I'm never coming back to Philadelphia.

I'm done.

I'm just done.

It's like I can see an alternate future.

*[laughs]*

For the first time, I see future.

There will be color, and there will be life – vibrant, exhilarating life.

There will be a large, rose-colored celebration, not dark. Not gray.

There will be friends, plenty of friends – God, friends! And they will be singing to the music and dancing and having a good time. There will be a delicious white cake and a fountain of chocolate. There will be free booze, beer and lots of champagne and appletinis and chardonnay and all that girly shit.

New friends will smile while old friends shake hands.

There will be happiness—fucking happiness everywhere, and laughter, infectious, booming laughter.

I will be there in my best tuxedo, my arms wrapped around Lizzy – she'll be getting so big – and we'll move together on the wooden dance floor. She will be standing on my toes, so beautiful, so much older and taller that it's amazing how big she gets.

There will be an interruption near the front table, a clinking glass, signal to the DJ. The music will lower and all eyes will turn toward the sound.

There will be a porn star – a friend...and he will give a speech:

"I..." he'll clear his throat, smiling at the attention of 100 people, "Where— where's the best man?" he'll say to the head table, and David will look through the crowd until he finds me on the dance floor.

My friend will find me, too, and turn away from my brother.

And then there will be a moment when he will raise his glass extra high and shout, "To sunshine, health, margaritas, and the beautiful women we love! To all the things that make us happy!"

And then I, well...I will raise my glass in return.