

# **The Clay Head Benediction**

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I used to put on those earmuffs when I would meditate, the big heavy plastic ones, like the ones that people use at shooting ranges. As far as I am concerned, sensory deprivation is key to a proper meditation practice. I don't go for the whole lotus position thing, or any of that other stuff, incense, candles, prayer beads, anything like that. I meditate lying down. That way I can hear the voices. There is probably a rationalist explanation for all of it, the voices. Most logically, it is my brain, devising little entertainments for itself as I fall asleep. That is the whole deal with the lotus position by the way, to keep from falling asleep. Normally the voices are conversations...banal ones about shopping, or gossip about people I don't know. It is kind of like in the early days of cordless phones when the phone would be on the wrong channel, and you would hear little snippets of your neighbor's conversations. When I was young, my parents moved into a house where the phone would ring without cause at all times of the day. We would pick it up, and no one would be there. Two hundred miles away, there was probably some fool putting on his shooting earmuffs and dialing in, messing around in places where he had no business, and playing with things he did not understand.

For any normal rational person who understands that homeopathy is a fraud, and auras and the spirit world are all bullshit invented underachieving vegetarian baby boomers, this all seems incredibly stupid. I get that. It is stupid, but it is true. In fact, this whole thing is true. There is a whole body of literature, or more accurately writing, about people traveling around and seeing things in meditative states. In fact, if one were to spend a little time on the internet forums reading about meditation, he would find that the newbie questions about strange sights and experiences are pretty common.

There is also this other thing, the machine elves. On the psychedelic drug DMT, a whole bunch of users report seeing the same thing, beings of light with the same message... "Create". Amazonian shamans have been ingesting DMT in the form of Ayahuasca for millennia, and for them, it provides insight into the cosmos and the nature of consciousness, and all those other things that hippies like to talk about. Celebrities and dreamers in the West take it too, but like anything, you can only start where you begin. A shaman, who has a full time relationship with the nature of life to begin with, probably goes a lot farther than some guy with a backpack padding around city in overpriced sandals. I don't know. That is not really my type of thing. I would however, like to note that it is incredibly odd, that there exists a drug that makes unrelated users the world over "see" tiny people bearing a message...And that, my friend, is a bona fide mystery.

There are lots of mysteries, and modern people hate the hell out of mysteries. Fundamentally, that is what distinguishes modern people from the ancients. After their basic needs were satisfied, early people sought to find things that they did not understand. They did not really want the answer; they wanted to find what they could not answer. That is why their answers suck, and why it is so easy to dismiss primitive answers as illogical superstition. For example, do you believe, that a guy could build a boat that could accommodate two of every single animal on the entire earth, every one, and a whole bunch of food, and survive for forty days without the snakes eating the mice, and lion eating the guy, the two elephants didn't get sea sick? There is a little display next to the elephant exhibit at the zoo that shows what one adult African elephant eats in a day, the food for two African elephants for one day wouldn't fit in the back of a full

sized pickup truck. See? Bad answer. But if the motivation of our early ancestors was to create more questions than they answered, it is a wonderful answer. One of early mans' greatest impulses was to do something illogical for someone else to figure out. Particularly, because those who were able to accomplish the greatest mysteries were held in the highest esteem. I'm certain that Moses was a competent navigator, but if you ask the average person, they will probably mention the thing about the Red Sea.

The existence of the illogical is foundational to the progress of humanity. Reason does not create, it retroactively explains the mechanics of what was already created, or fulfills the promise of imagination. Alone, reason is only a tool. Anyway, the point is, that I am part of a proud tradition that includes the Pharaohs and Moses, and unsurprisingly, lots of penniless men shuffling around on the cuffs of their pants in cities across the country, but like all of them, I have a message, and it is this: Your ancestors didn't invent Santa Claus because it was fun to trick kids. They did it because at one point, it was necessary to open a tiny window of possibility in the mind. And in a rare person, that window would grow into a door, and then into a tunnel. Because, there is also a war... two or three types of war, really. I'll probably get into it more later, but suffice to say now, that each side has allies that don't even have the window cracked, and each side has leaders who have the tunnel wide open. And each side is so thick with double agents and spies that sometimes the leaders can't recognize each other and a whole bunch of leaders are probably spies to, and you're also part of it too, or at least you fill in carrying water to the front. In the Age of Aquarius, comrade, everyone carries water somewhere. But don't worry; this isn't some crazy story about lizard people or the secret bunker under the Denver airport. It is something else entirely.

First I should tell you this. One day, when I was mediating as usual, I fell into a kind of lucid sleep. But the sleep only lasted a few seconds, and when I woke up, I was standing in the hallway of someone's house, not some weird symbolic hallway, but a genuine normal hallway...one leading from the garage to the kitchen. There were cabinets on the sides of the hallway, and a couple of small unexamined paintings, and a low counter with keys on top of it and a handful of forgotten bills. The light in the hallway was off, but I could see clearly into the kitchen where a tall attractive woman of the anxious idle sort that is common in the nicer suburbs was talking on the telephone. She was really animated, and I just stood there for a few minutes, frozen... watching her. Her back was towards me, and then, she spun around, still chattering into the phone, and looked directly at me. I froze, but she didn't seem to acknowledge my presence, and continued to chatter at the telephone. Then, I waited a few more seconds and walked into the kitchen. I stood there for a moment, and for a second time she looked directly at me, but did not acknowledge me, so I realized that she must have thought that I was someone there to work on the house. So, I walked out of the kitchen and into a nicely appointed television room.

In that room, was a chubby teenage boy reclining on a beige overstuffed couch. His eyes were glued to the television. I greeted him, but he didn't respond. So I repeated myself again, this time a little bit louder. He still didn't say anything or look at me, so I walked over and positioned myself in front of him. Again, he did not acknowledge me, or even seem disturbed that I was blocking his view of the television. Then, very slowly, it occurred to me that he couldn't see me. I walked closer to him, and waved my hand in front of his face. Nothing. Then I shouted. ...Still nothing. No response from him. A rush of excitement coursed through

me. I was invisible. Actually invisible. In a space where I had never been... and I could explore with total freedom.

So, I walked through the house. It was huge, and new, and beautiful, tastefully decorated without a book in sight, except for the giant ones stacked on the coffee table in the main living room. Then I followed a wide staircase upstairs to the second floor. I glanced in each room, and in one of the larger bedrooms, sat a very old woman in a chair gazing idly out one of the windows. She was thin and frail with an uncomfortable expression on her face. I walked into the room, and again tested to see if I was visible. I got very close to the woman, and looked into her face. Her eyes had the vacant confused look associated with some kind of dementia, and I realized that even if she could see me, she was probably unlikely to be able to tell anybody. So, I decided to test my powers a little bit... very gently, I reached out and touched her arm. It was dry, and slightly cold, but she did not respond. So, then I put my whole hand on her arm, and very gently allowed myself to lightly grip onto her. I could feel the slight involuntary muscle response from underneath her skin, but still her face showed no recognition at all. Then I kneeled in front of her and gazed into her eyes. Her eyes remained focused somewhere far off in the distance. I could smell her breath now, stale. I suddenly felt very sad for her alone and forgotten in this room gazing into nothing... visited by ghost she couldn't see. So I very squeezed her arm, willing a tiny portion of compassion into the shell of her person, but as I did that, her eyes started to focus, and a look of total unrestrained terror came over her face. Her arm jerked away from me, and she sucked a huge breath of air in, and then, I was back in my bedroom. I ripped off my earmuffs, and stood up, and that was it. Some actually majorly unusual happened, and that is my best tale of the paranormal, and oddly enough, in it, I'm the ghost.

There is a guy who hangs around outside my apartment who asks me for a rolling paper every time I walk by. As far as I can gather that is some sort of code that he has drugs to sell, but you'd figure he would catch on by now that I'm not a potential customer. Other than the lone drug dealer, it is a pretty nice building. Mostly students. I am too old to live here, but I work for the company. At least in the summer I do, I rent apartments in the building and a bunch of others. It is not bad, it is easy work, and mostly it is just a lot of hours through the summer. I'm sure it gives my mother anxiety that I am taking so long to getting around to doing something that fills the minds of others with my successes, but I'm pretty content... for the most part anyway. The rest of the year, I hang around the library and read. Lately, I've been reading the *Captive Mind* by Czeslaw Milosz. The only copy the library has is really old, and they won't let anybody take it out. I have been interested in that lately, Communism. Not really communism in that I actively support it or anything political for that matter, but in these holistic thought models. Communism really took the *Every Question Answered* mode of thought pretty far. It also has the same basic problem as fundamentalist religious belief does... a pre-supposition of the outcome. It's almost as if nobody expected there to be complicated personal questions in between the beginning and the Promised Land.

When I get to the library, Ben is already waiting at my favorite table. Disheveled, Sephardic, and overweight from the psychiatric drugs, Ben has recently decided that I am some sort of prophet. Remember the cracks in my contentedness that I just alluded to? Well, here is one of them.

"You're here early, Ben" I say

“I had to go to a meeting this morning” He says, as he loudly snaps open the can of Mountain Dew clutched between his meaty hands.

I look at Ben’s filthy shirt, a too snug Brooks Brothers oxford probably gifted to him by a loving grandmother before his life took an unexpected turn. The lowest button had popped off, and is revealing the hairy recesses of his enormous navel. “Pitching a big deal to the CEO?” I ask.

“What?” Says Ben, as he stares back at me with his wide watery eyes.

“It was a joke...” I say, watching my tone “I’m sorry, Ben”

I am a little scared of him, once when the librarian reprimanded him about his soft drink, he threw the can across the room, and the police had to be called. Actually, they probably didn’t have to be called, but they were called. It was big mess. Ben cried, and the police were actually pretty understanding to both parties, but either way, Ben was banned from the library for almost a month. He spent the month hanging around by the food trucks next to CMU, where he tried in vain to talk to the students, but mostly they ignored him, and some were outright rude. By the time he came back to the library at the end of the month, it was obvious that the alterations in his routine had hurt him. After that, I tried to talk to him more, but he still scares me. He is big and unpredictable, but also about as lonely as me, so we talk.

Ben looks at his hands for a few seconds, and then digs into his pockets. He hands me something in wrapped in a cloth.

“It stopped working” He says

I already know what is in the cloth bundle. It is a little head made out of Fimo clay. I made it for him.

“I don’t think it had any special powers, Ben. It was just a little token”

“Oh that’s not true, Luke. It was amazing. As soon as you gave it to me, he went away. First he was everywhere. I even saw him in the toilet once, but then this” He picks up the little clay head “you gave me this, and he went away. For weeks”

“Well, if he did go away. It wasn’t the head that did it, it was you. Maybe it just helped you change the way you were thinking.”

Ben starts to shake his head “no, no. Not true. No way. I was outside my place smoking a cigarette, and he walked right up to me. He took the smoke from my mouth, and spun it around. Stuck the cherry right in my lip. Look, look at it”

There is a little mark on Ben’s lip that looks like a cold sore

“Maybe you just made a mistake, Ben. Maybe you just flipped the smoke around backward by accident” I say.

“No. no fucking way. I didn’t burn myself. You need to fix it again. Can you? Put some power back into it” he says, pushing the small head towards me again

“Ben, I just made it for you as a present. You might be confused, man. I really didn’t do anything to make this magic.” I hold the clay head in my hand, it is cold and feels a little damp “It is just something I made for you...because we are friends”

Ben hangs his head for a moment, and then takes a long drink from his can. “He knew about you”

“Who did? The head?” I ask

“No, not the goddamn head. Him. You know who I mean” Ben says, raising his voice.

I read once that tone of voice is key when you are talking to people who are seriously disturbed, so I try to be as calm as possible. “Ben, I’m sorry, man. I will definitely make you another head. I will do it as soon as I get a chance”

Ben nods slowly.

“What did he say, Ben?” I ask, after a few second of silence.

“He said that you’re a ghost, Luke”

“Buddy, I’m not a ghost. I can talk to anyone here. Everyone here can see me” I hold up the head “I made this for you. This real, physical thing. I am definitely not a ghost”

Ben shakes his head, and looks at his hands. “I know you’re not a ghost.”

I put the clay head into my pocket, “I actually have an appointment myself.” I say

“But you just got here”

“I know, but I totally forgot I have something else I was supposed to do today”

“What is it? What do you have to do?” Ben asks

“I told somebody that I would meet them at their work to sign a lease renewal”

“Where do they work?”

“The museum”

“Can I go, too?” He asks

“I don’t know, man. Maybe not today. I will make you a new clay head though, I promise. Can you meet me here tomorrow?”

“I guess”

“Ok, same time. I will have a new one for you. “

I rush out of the library and straight up the road to the museum. They are close, actually attached, and that is one of the many good things about Pittsburgh. There are lots of good things about Pittsburgh, but don’t move here. Or else they will be all be ruined by being crowded and expensive. I don’t really have an appointment. Even if I did, I would never in the winter. I am a seasonal employee. I make all of my money between April and September, after that, if the company needs anything, it is never a rush.

The museum is almost like a church to me. I go there to wander and to collect my thoughts. At least I used to, but now there is a girl there on Mondays. She is fantastic, dark hair, too much makeup, angry and compact behind one of those carts that have additional enrichment projects for children. For the past two months, I have been going to see her there every week. I used to just go and walk around with my headphones on and absorb the atmosphere, or occasionally make some small talk with the guards, but lately I have been experimenting with various forms of engagements to see if I can get her attention.

For a couple of weeks I sketched, which I quite competent at, as long as I am not drawing from life. My real strength lies in improvisation. Then, it occurred to me that it might be a bit strange if I am sitting in front of some of Monet's water lilies and drawing a picture of a person being kidnapped by a UFO, so I left my sketch book at home. Then for a couple of other weeks I brought something that I was reading. I try to read important books, not because I am some intellectual elitist, but because it saves me quite a bit of time in searching out what to read. If it won a major award, I will read it. I respect the opinions of critics who have awards to hand out. Plus, it gives me a measure of authority when I discuss things with the type of casual intellectuals who feel like reading the New York Times is the educational equivalent of touching saints' relics. Everyone is always seeking low effort holiness. Any decent really smart person knows that they are mostly pretty stupid.

So, I would sit in the galleries and read, but I think the guards got wise to my real objective because they would tease me, and suggest that I take my outside reading to the library, or at least move to a seat where I would have a better view of the girl at the art cart. My latest trick is to take notes about the art. I think that might be the best strategy because I have noticed her starting to look at me a little bit. For some reason, even after spending the last eight weeks trying to catch her eye, once she started to look at me, and am finding myself to be petrified to look back. I have been thinking about it though, the next time she looks at me, I am going to look back. Maybe I will even say something. I have been thinking about something clever, I have gone over a few options, even something about the art. She is younger than me. I'm a bit of a late bloomer. A lot of things I thought of to say contained the word "lovely" for some reason, and I realize that that makes me sound really old and strange, so I have decided to play it by ear. Either way, if she looks at me, I am saying something.

The inside of the gallery is calm and cool as it always is. In my haste with Ben at the library, I forgot to return home to get my prop, but that is ok. I walk around for a while, and then decide to sit in the only chair that affords me a slight view of the girl at the cart. It is in front of Alex Katz's Lake Time which as Alex Katz goes, is a lump of garbage, but his really good portraits aren't in cities like mine anyway, or if they are, they are in some rich guy's house. I sit there for a while, I start to feel a bit awkward, so I pretend that I am writing something. The girl is probably too far away from me to notice that I don't have a pen and paper anyway, but I have to abruptly stop when I notice that she has escaped the safety of her cart and is walking directly towards me. In an instant, she is standing in front of me, and I make a futile effort to disguise my imaginary pen and pad in my pocket and look casual.

She is even prettier in person. With her inches from me, I can't think of anything to say, at all, but she seizes the opportunity.

"Can I ask you a question?" She says

I try to smile, concealing my anxiety "Of course"

"What the fuck is your problem?"

"I...I don't have a problem"

"So, it is just a coincidence that you lurk around here every week and stare at me? Let me see the picture you were just drawing..."

"Oh, I wasn't drawing a picture. I was taking notes." I say

“Let me see your notes, then” She says extending her paint splattered hand

“I have already put them in my pocket”

“..And you can’t get things out of your pocket once you put them in there?”

“No, that’s not it. I just don’t want to.”

“You don’t want to because you are pervert who comes and sits here every week and draws pictures of me”

“I wasn’t drawing a picture of you”

“Then, prove it” she says, folding her arms across her chest.

So I dig into my pockets, and since there is no paper there, I withdraw the only logical distraction available, the small clay head that had once belonged to Ben

“You are half right. I am here to see you” I say holding out the clay head. “I have been working up the courage to talk to you. I’m sorry I was so strange, but I actually made this for you. I think you are quite lovely”

“Oh, sure. Well, for the future, handing someone a tiny head, is not the best way to apologize for being strange”

I look down at the clay head in my hand. The green Fimo is shiny on one side from being rubbed like a magic talisman by Ben, and the face, which was crude to begin with, looks particularly distorted in the gallery lighting.

“Well, it isn’t supposed to be you” I say and smile

“That’s good” she says, still looking down at the clay head in my palm.

“Look, this was a mess. “ I say “I can’t actually imagine how this whole thing could have gone worse. It’s just, that I think you are really pretty...and you know, when you see somebody, that you think might like you, or maybe be like you, you kind of imagine ways that your first conversation would go.” I put the clay head back into my pocket. “This wasn’t it. Like, super wasn’t it. I’ll go, but I didn’t want to scare you, I was just working up the courage to talk to you” Then, I stand up and start to walk away.

“You’re just going to keep the head then?” She says

“Oh no, I just thought you didn’t want it”

I rush back over and hand it to her, but I don’t make eye contact.

So then I needed to make another head for Ben. It wasn’t the only one, there are lots and lots. The heads are my other preoccupation. I make them all of the time. Lately, the best ones have been really detailed. I brought some of my hair home from the barber and made hair and eyebrows for the last few. Then I hide them. In the woods in the park mostly, but also behind books in the library, and if I travel somewhere I will bring a few. I left a really good one in the Canadian National Gallery. I still wonder if anyone had the guts to notice it didn’t belong. Someday, I will retire to them like Aureliano Buendía and his little golden fish, but in the meantime, I will need to get more clay.

There is a store in between my apartment and the museum that has Fimo, but they don’t always have all of the colors. The store that has most of the colors is on the South Side, and I just sold



my car. I do that every year, sell the car. A couple of years ago, I made friends with a mechanic who has a car dealers license and he takes my money to one of the wholesale auctions and picks me up something decent every spring. Then, at the end of the rental season, I sell it again. It has been a great arrangement, really. I save on insurance, parking, maintenance all that stuff; except for now because I need to get to the South Side and I have no car. I could take the bus, but I never really bothered to learn how the routes work, so I decide to walk.

I try not to think about the girl from the museum as I do. That whole thing was mortifying, and worse still, I didn't even bother to ask for her name or try to recover when I gave her the clay head. Even worse, is that particular head is in an extremely primitive variation on what I am capable of. It was a rough draft. That is why I gave it to Ben. The good ones, the ones with the eyes that I bought from the taxidermy supply company, are the ones that I want to be found, not give away. I hope that the people who find the heads, keep them though, or maybe that they decide to put something else that they made in its place. I have a recurring fantasy that that I will place a lotus flower garland around the Mr. Rodgers statue that is near the stadiums. Then, a reporter for the newspaper will happen by, and that person will take a picture, and somebody will see the picture, and that person will do some research about Mr. Rodgers and Lotus flowers. Perhaps then that same person will be another person to realize that Mr. Rodgers is a bodhisattva and she will figure out her own way of getting that message across to people without beating them over the head with it.

I read this short story about some kids, who find a porno magazine by a baseball field, and it leads one of the finders to discover the truth about his sexual identity, and then later he becomes somebody who throws a pornography magazine out of a window by a baseball field. I am quite sure that the author figured that he was making some important statement about the nature of identity, but this kind of thing is a pile of horseshit. I'm not waging a moral war, but life can't be about throwing porno magazines out of windows. ...the whole thing is just so goddamn unimaginative.

At the art supply store they have a bunch of different colors of Fimo, but they don't have the exact one that I used to make the head for Ben. I will just have to convince him that a different colored one is just as good. I never tried to convince him that that original one had magic powers or anything, he actually did that on his own, but now he is committed, and I guess I am too. Maybe I will make a better one for the girl at the museum. I will think of way to explain that what I had was a rough draft that I was carrying with me to see if I could imagine giving it to her, and then I'll hand her a much better one. Maybe I could just come clean entirely, and tell her the whole story. That I am trying to spill a little magic into the world and unseat Disney as the builder of the world of wonder. He's another one too, Robertson Davies; World of Wonders would have been much better if the damn magician wasn't a pervert. She might not listen though. I could ask Donald to look into it. He's a guard at the museum, and the only other person over thirty that lives in my building. I will have to figure out a way to get him to come up to my place though, because every time I knock on his door he tells me that I am interrupting his "two beer time" or else he pretends like he has a female guest. I don't believe that though because I have never seen anyone other than him go into his place. He still goes out every Friday night. He calls the jitney to pick him up. I could try talking to him while he is waiting for the jitney, but he normally doesn't like to talk to me then either. He just stands out there with rings on every one of his narrow fingers reeking of Bay Rum aftershave and holding his cigarettes like he is about to throw a dart.

I have a big picnic table that serves as my work surface in my apartment. On it, I have all of my tools to make the heads: the scraping things that the dentist uses for your teeth, various repurposed spoons and forks, empty soup cans filled with plastic eyes and a few baggies of my hair. I lay out the new Fimo and mold it around for a while. I make a few faces using only my fingers until I settle on one that will be good enough for Ben. Then, I play around trying to make one good enough for the girl at the museum, but I still can't decide on what she would like. So I decide to bake the head that I made for Ben. I prefer to bake more than one at a time because I hate the smell, and I have to open the window while I do it, and it is already starting to get cold. But I put the head in the oven anyway, and sit and wait. I consider sitting outside and waiting for Donald to get home, so I can talk to him about the girl, but he would probably be upset if I catch him off guard, so instead I try to devise ways of running into him by accident. Then, it occurs to me that I might be able to catch him like a fish if I use the right bait.

About ten years ago, I bought a really fantastic stereo. It is a Sony, with oversized KLH speakers. Turned up, the sound could easily fill a good sized dance floor. I put the speakers into my open window, and search through my music collection to see if I can find something that Donald might like. I have a compilation CD called "The Best of Doo Wop", and I cue the track up to The Flamingos I Only Have Eyes for You and put it on repeat. Then I turn it up until it is easily audible from the street, and I sit and wait. After the sixth replaying, the kid in the next apartment starts to bang on the wall, which is unusual because they know that I work for the company, and am pretty generous about ignoring their loud parties and the constant smell of pot smoke that seeps out from under their door. It is only twenty after five though, and there is no chance that they are sleeping, and I am not violating the building's quiet hours policy, so I don't turn the music down, I just sit and wait, and watch the street for Donald. When I see him turn onto the street, I turn the music up a little bit louder. He is limping a bit, and carrying an old gym bag, which presumably contains his guard uniform. I watch him walk to see if the music is inspiring any change in his movements, maybe a little skip or a wiggle to acknowledge the unexpected serenade. But he doesn't change at all; he just walks on in his little limping way furiously puffing on his long cigarette. Then, he walks into the building without even checking his mailbox.

After a few minutes, I decide to turn up the music a little louder to see if maybe he might decide to come up to my apartment to complement me on my taste, but he doesn't. Finally, I walk down and see him. In the hallway, I notice that my music is equally loud outside of my apartment as it was inside, and even two floors down, in front of Donald's door, it is still pretty loud. I knock, but there is no answer, so I knock again. I wait another minute and knock a little louder. After about thirty seconds, I hear a rustling from inside of the apartment, and then the door bursts open. Donald stands looking at me without saying anything. Then, finally, he says, "What's wrong, Luke"

I smile. "Am I interrupting your two beer time?"

"No, you are interrupting my take a shit time. What do you need?" He asks, closing the door a bit, so that I can't get a full view of his apartment.

"I...I was wondering if you liked the music"

"Is that you?"

"Yep"

“Well, go turn it off, it’s too loud.”

“It’s a great song” I say

“Not again and again it ain’t. People are trying to res’. Its dinner time”

“People eat dinner at different times” I say

“Not me. I eat after work. Now, go ahead and turn off the music.” He says, and starts to close his door a bit more. I stick out my foot and catch it before it can close all of the way.

“Donald, wait, there is actually something I wanted to ask you.”

He opens the door a bit wider and waits

“Do you know that girl from the museum, the one with the art cart?”

“The short one?”

“I guess. She is a little short, maybe. Anyway, do you know her?”

“No”

“Oh, come on, Donald. You know her. All the ladies love Donald. ...you must know her”

I smile, but he doesn't smile back.

“I like a slim woman”

“She’s not fat.” I say, feeling a little offended.

“For me she is. To each his own” He says and starts to close the door again

“Well, if you do talk to her, could you tell her you know me?”

“Look... females like a man that is clean, who works, who takes care of his self. Look at you, man. You’re up there playing the same song over and over again with some kind of shit on your hands”

“Its clay” I say

“What is?”

“The shit on my hands”

“It looks like shit no matter what it is. Now, go on and turn that song off, it's about to be my two beer time” The door starts to swing close again

“At least tell her that I asked about her” I say, to the sound of the lock turning

Back in my apartment, I let the song play through a few more times before turning it all of the way off. I figure it would be best to do that rather than let Donald feel like he could order me around in my own place. He is wrong too. I am clean. At times even obsessively so, and the things in my apartment, though few, are of good quality, and in nice condition. The truth is, I have some familiarity with what “females” want. And in my earlier life, I had gained quite a bit of intimate familiarity with a number of different women. That is back when I used to drink a whole lot...but I stopped all that. I didn’t get sober, as the expression goes. I didn’t go into some room with a bunch of other people and admit my powerlessness or anything like that. I just came to the conclusion that alcohol was the gasoline that fueled a vehicle that was driven by

someone not entirely me, so I stopped; no pomp and circumstance necessary. On the other hand, I was never that enthusiastic about it anyway, booze and drugs and all that other stuff were the ideological equivalent of a neck tattoo to me, a way of pledging allegiance to a lifestyle that didn't involve the soul crushing bondage of conforming to a room full of desks and florescent lighting. I thought then, and still think, that there is no more shameful form of intellectual prostitution than giving ones talents up to a life of forms and meaningless arguments and insincere commitments to things that a person can't possibly be passionate about.

To really be great at selling toilets, you have to love toilets and the toilet industry, to the point that you accidentally find yourself lapsing into toilet related discussions when the conversation gets stale. I hate toilets and everything like that. There are certainly a lot of good people working hard at a lot of different things, but the stock broker, the toilet salesman, that is a strange niche to carve in a person's soul.

Donald is wrong about that, too. I work. I help people find homes. I might not do it all year, but that is my choice. I am not asking anybody for anything that I haven't worked for. I might not make a lot, but I make enough to survive, and that is fine with me. Plus, to anybody who ever rents anything from me, I never present myself as anything other than a respectable, responsible member of society. This is all I really have to offer... a pleasant exterior and a confirmation of biases. If an eagle builds a nest over a salmon hatchery, that eagle is considered a pretty smart eagle, if a person finds the path of least resistance, he is lazy and undirected, and that, my friend is exhibit A in the case against our society.

When I take the clay head out of the oven, it looks good. A lot better than the first one I made, so to occupy my time, I decide to give it the full course of embellishments. I dig through my supplies and find a matching pair of brown eyes with a large pupil that I think were originally designed for use in bird mounts, and using some epoxy, position them in the empty sockets. The effect is a slightly disturbing, but I try to offset that by sketching some eyebrows on with a permanent marker. The marker doesn't really give the eyebrows the effect I am looking for so, I decide to take the long route, and actually do the eyebrows the proper way, with a piece at a time, with individual pieces of a hair. After that is finished, the bald head looks unusual, so I set about piecing on hair in the scalp as well. The whole process of the head and eyebrows takes about seven hours, and it is already past midnight when I am done, so I decide to make eyelashes also. Eyelashes are tricky because they need to stick directly out, but not look really bristly. The whole thing with the eyelashes takes another two hours owing to an unfortunate slip with the glue, and the delicate cleanup involved, but when everything is done, I am satisfied with the result.

By the time I'm finished it is so late, that I start to worry that if I do fall asleep, I will miss my meeting with Ben, so I use the time that I have left to construct a carrying case for him. I had scrounged a bit of hard foam from one of those packing containers that computers come in. I cut out a little cube of the Styrofoam, and then cut a sliver off of the top for a lid, and from the larger piece, I dig out a depression that fits the head snugly. Then, I cover the entire box in fabric, and to hold it closed, I tie a piece of ribbon around it.

It is five in the morning by the time everything is done, so with nothing to do for the next four hours, I make myself some beans and a glass of milk, and then I put the present for Ben into my backpack and go out for a walk. The morning is cold and my joints have started to ache from the lack of sleep. There is almost nobody out, but as I get closer to where the colleges are, I pass a

few runners. I also see an older woman putting paper plates of dry cat food out behind the dumpsters of the noodle restaurant, but otherwise I am alone. I kill time for a while and think. Then I start to focus on my breathing as I walk. The action clears my head like it always has, and with the sensory stimuli, I feel safe that I won't lapse into some kind of interspatial travel. After a while, I buy a cup of coffee, and walk over to the library to wait for it to open.

When I get to the library, Coats is already there sitting on one of the picnic benches. He is a tall, older black man, and from what I heard, he is also an ex-convict. He is at the library nearly every day, normally in one of the wing chairs in the basement reading room holding with a thick hardback book. He almost never talks to anyone. He just sits there and reads with his long legs crossed in his neatly creased jeans. Ben told me that Coats is homeless, but he has a brother that lets him keep his clothes at his place and use his shower, which would probably explain why he is always at the library. Coats knows who I am, but he never talks to me, but since I have time to kill, I walk over and sit down with him. I say hello, but he doesn't respond, so I just sit there for a while and drink my coffee. After that, I decide to take the out the little box with the head in it and check to see if it stayed secure while I was walking. Coats watches me, and then he says "What'cho got there?"

"It's a present for my friend, Ben" I say

"The crazy fat guy?"

"He's not that crazy"

"He crazy enough. He your boyfriend?" Coats says, not looking at me, and resting his elbows on his knees

"No. He's my friend"

"Nothing wrong with it if he is.... That's your business"

"Well he's not" I say

"You got a present for 'eem"

I untie the box and open it up. I take out the clay head, and show it to Coats. He looks calmly at the head, and then at me.

"That's you?"

"No, it's not supposed to be anybody. It's just a little head, I made it"

"Man, I know it's not supposed to be you. I meant is that you, leaving them heads?" He asks, still looking at me, but scooting further over on the bench.

"Oh you found one? Behind the Neruda?" I ask

"Yeah, Neruda. What is that? Some Voodoo shit?"

"No, No, It's not Voodoo. It is supposed to put a little magic into the world"

"Magic? That sound like some Voodoo shit to me" He starts to get more animated, so I put the head back into its case and put the case into my backpack

“No, I mean, like a sense of wonder. Of possibility” I say, explaining myself rapidly, trying to calm Coats down.

“Don’t be hiding little heads in there, man. “ He says even louder as he stands up.

“I’m sorry. Honestly, I didn’t mean anything by it. I really didn’t. I’ll take the one back that I put that in there”

“I threw that shit away”

“You threw it away. It took me a long time to make that!” I say

“I’ll throw that one away, too, if I find it.” He says

“I’m not going to hide this one. It is for my friend”

“You just be fuckin him up worse, givin him some weird shit like that” Coats says

Coats turns around and started to walk away, but I follow him. He is a few paces in front of me when I say, “Hey Coats, I didn’t know you liked Pablo Neruda?”

He spins on his heel and walks toward me. When he is six inches from me, he puts his index finger in the center of my chest and says. “Man, fuck you. And keep my name out your mouth. You don’t know me.” Then he walks up the library steps and stands waiting by the front door.

I go back to the bench and try not to look at him. I wonder if he really does like Neruda. I don’t. I retain the right to discount someone entirely if they are an apologist for authoritarian governments. On the other hand, I would also like to think that Stalin couldn’t survive the age of the internet, but what I really understand about history could fit in a thimble. Nobody really gets anything they didn’t live through. Either way, one thing that hanging around the library has taught me, is that if you want to find somebody who has put real independent effort the literary heavyweights, you should seek out some felons. Or least the ex-cons that spend their unemployable hours at the library. They certainly aren’t in the majority. The majority are people checking out Dan Brown audio books for their road trip to Cape May, then the students, then the deranged with nowhere else to go, and then the felons, and then everyone else.

When the doors finally open, I wait a few minutes for Coats to go in and find his book, and settle into the wing chair, and then I go inside. I find the copy of the Captive Mind that I have been reading and sit down at one of the wide wood tables in the Mezzanine where Ben can find me. I read for a while, but I find that I am getting distracted, so I close my eyes for a few minutes. A little while later, I am awoken by a guard.

“I would have let you sleep, but it is starting to get busy and people might complain” he says

“What time is it?”

The guard rubs his fat index finger across his eye and then pushes back his shirt sleeve to look at his watch.

“Almost one” He says.

“One?”

“Yeah, the college kids are starting to come in. You can stay, but you have to stay awake”

“Did you see Ben?” I ask

“Your Buddy?”

“Yeah, the big guy? Have you seen him?”

“Yeah, earlier I did. He was drinking a Coke back in the stacks. He got all pissy when I talked to him about it, too”

“When was that?” I ask

“Oh, I’d bet at least a couple of hours ago. Haven’t seen him since I talked to him”

I look down at the book. I had drooled a bit on one of the pages, so I quickly closed it, to conceal it from the guard, but he had already noticed

“Tell ‘em that you ain’t going to charge extra for drooling on the book” He says, and then he laughs loudly and walks away.

I looked down where the book had been and noticed the call slip where Ben had written me a note with one of those dull little half pencils. It says, “Didn’t want to wake you. You seemed so peaceful. Be here tomorrow?”

I read the note over a couple of times, and then decided to check my bag. The head was still there in its little foam case. After that, I return my book, and leave the library.

I have never been to Ben’s apartment before, but I know where it is. He has invited me a bunch of times, but I never accepted because he always asked at a weird moment, and he never really expressed any kind of plan about what we might do when I got there. But, since I was left with pretty much nothing to do, I decide to visit him. His place is not in the best neighborhood, but seeing as I am wearing the same clothes that I had worn for the past two days, and had just slept for four hours sitting at a table in a public building, I figure that I will emit enough of an unsound vibe that nobody would bother me. Plus, it is the middle of the day. When I reach the tall narrow building of subsidized studios where Ben lives, there is a skinny man with a patchy white beard sitting on the low cinderblock wall next to the front door. He is smoking one of those narrow cigars that looks like a cigarette, and he has two huge green bottles of mouthwash in plastic bags on the ground in front of him. I push the buzzer for Ben’s apartment and wait. There is no answer, so I push the button again. The man on the cinder block wall turns and looks at me,

“Who you lookin for?” He says, clearing his throat

“Ben. Big guy. Dark hair. He’s usually got a brown shopping bag with him” I say

“The crazy guy?”

“Yeah, but he’s not really that crazy”

“Oh. He’s crazy all right. I live right below him, He screams the whole night sometimes. What are you? A case worker?”

“No, I’m his friend”

“He isn’t exactly the friend type” The man says. He takes a long draw from his thin cigar

“Besides, he’s not here. He’s been gone all day. I can tell because his radio and TV are off. He is never in there without both of them on at the same time.”

“Can you give him a message for me?” I ask

“No”

“No?”

“No. Just because you talk to him, don’t mean I have to”

“Looks like you are planning on having some pretty fresh breath, huh?” I say, gesturing to the bag with the two huge bottles of mouthwash.

“Liquor store is a long walk from here” He says

“Not that long” I say

“It is if you are carrying a couple of bags.”

“You could get one of those little carts, or at least a backpack or something”

“I ain’t got no backpack, and I’m sure as fuck not stealing a shopping cart. This is just fine” He says as he reaches his foot out and taps the side of the bag with a filthy sneaker.

So, I take the present for Ben, and my notebook out of my backpack, and give the bag to the man.

“Here” I say

“What the fuck is this?”

“A backpack”

“I don’t need a fuckin backpack”

“I think you do. You are drinking mouthwash.”

“Backpack ain’t gonna keep me from drinking mouthwash” he says

“It’s got a better chance to keep you from drinking mouthwash than nothing does. Just take it”

He reaches out a hand and takes the backpack, and immediately sets it on the ground next to his plastic bag.

“What’s the difference?” He says

“The difference is that mouthwash is for cleaning your teeth. Plus, you might want to celebrate something. Then maybe you’ll drink something other than mouthwash”

“What am I gonna celebrate?” He asks, not looking at me

“How about your new backpack... That is something to celebrate”

“Drug store opens before the liquor store” he says

“Well, then use the backpack to carry the bottles of mouthwash from the drug store”

“If I walk into the drug store with a backpack, they will think I’m gonna steal something”

“I’m surprised they would think that about a person with such great dental hygiene” I say

“What?”

“Nothing. It was a bad joke. Anyway, enjoy the backpack. Please tell Ben that someone came by looking for him ok?”



“I told you. No.” The man says

Then, I tell him goodbye, but he doesn't say anything, so I leave and start walking home. On the way, a sad looking prostitute wearing shorts and a thick winter coat tries to make a joke about the box with Ben's clay head in it, and it somehow being an engagement ring for her. I laugh but try to walk by her as quickly as possible. She probably doesn't remember, but last year, I tried to give her ten dollars when she propositioned me on the street. When she finally understood that I was just offering the money without an expectation of any services, she got in a really animated argument with me where she claimed I was a cop, and nothing I said could persuade her that randomly giving money to a prostitute would be an extraordinary misuse of police funds. In the end, she crumpled the ten dollar bill into a ball and threw it at me, but I walked away without picking it up.

When I get back to my apartment, I am met with a horrible smell like maybe a mouse died behind one of the walls. The maintenance guys have been using poison again, so it would stand to reason that that is the likely culprit. Either way, I am too tired to check and I fall into bed, and in a few minutes am totally asleep. At midnight, I am woken from an incredibly bizarre dream where I am in some sort of large animal pen, and my job is to occupy the lions while Coats is in a business meeting. I try to fall back to sleep, but I can't. So, I decide to try to look around for the source of the horrible smell. I check behind the radiator, but there is nothing there but a clump of dust. Then, I look behind the refrigerator and stove, and in all of the cabinets. I end up cleaning quite a bit in the process, but I still don't find the mouse. So I take everything out of all of my drawers, and everything out of my closet, but there is no mouse. So then I move the bed. Underneath my bed, is a huge cache of magazines that I had picked up from outside of the used bookstore. They were throwing them away, so I took all of them. It was six boxes, and it took me that many trips to get them home since I had already sold my car. But I have never taken the opportunity to read any of them, so I decide to throw them all away. I take each box out to the dumpster, but when I get back from the last trip, I can still smell the decay. So I throw more things away, but still the smell persists.

Then, as I am emptying my normal trash can, I find the source of the smell. Underneath the can liner, there is the body of a tiny dead mouse. Somehow, it had managed to get itself between the bag and the can, and had died at the bottom. For some reason, the dead mouse made me incredibly depressed. It had probably died of dehydration, or starvation, or fear, but whatever the case, it was a horrible way to die: In the bottom of an inescapable can. Looking at its tiny body, and its soft grey fur, I feel bad about throwing it into the dumpsters. I consider finding a place for a proper burial, but the only peaceful patches of grass are in the park, and at this time of night, I would probably be arrested as a weirdo if I was caught burying a mouse. Then, I remember the cats that the old lady was feeding behind the noodle shop. One of the cats would probably like to eat the mouse, so I wrap it in a paper towel and put it into the refrigerator.

Then, I try to sleep for a while, but I can't. At 5:30 I get up, and have another glass of milk and an apple and take a shower. Then I take a long time shaving. William Burroughs said that shaving was one of the things that kept him sane, and I am inclined to agree. Feeling tired but fresh, I collect my things, the head for Ben, and the little mouse in the paper towel, into one of those cloth grocery bags and start walking towards the noodle shop. When I get there, the paper plates from yesterday are empty of their cat food, and the woman has not been there to replenish it yet. I crouch down a little and try to make a noise to call the cats. I had a dog when I was a kid, not a cat, so I don't really have a good idea of what it takes to call a cat, but I make that little

hissing noise that people sometimes do. No cats come. About twenty minutes later, the back door of the noodle shop opens and the old woman starts to come out, but when she sees me, she stops right away.

“Don’t be afraid” I say. “I’m just here to feed the cats”

She looks at me suspiciously for a moment, and sort of holds the door in front of her body. So, I smile, and try my best to look totally non-threatening. I must have convinced her because then, she steps out from inside the shop with a bag of cat food in her hand. She fills the plates without looking at me, so I say, “How do you get the cats to come out?”

“You don’t. Cats come and go when they want to” she says

“Sounds like a nice life” I say

“Don’t I know it. What do you have there?” She asks, gesturing to the paper towel in my hand.

“A mouse. It died in my apartment” I hold the mouse out to her, but she doesn’t look at it very closely

“Oh, honey, I don’t think they are going to eat that mouse”

“Why not? I thought cats eat mice”

“Live mice normally. “ She says

“I just felt so bad. The poor thing got trapped in the bottom of my trash can... I couldn’t get out. It was dead when I found it. If it was alive, I would have just let it go”

She gently reaches out and takes the mouse from my hand. Then, she takes a couple of steps towards the dumpster, lifts the lid, and drops the mouse inside.

“There.” She says

“Dust to dust”

“That’s right. Dust to dust. You can help me put some food on these plates if you want” She says, and so I do. It only takes a few minutes, and then we are done. After that, I stand there for a minute trying to think of something to say, but she speaks first,

“I take care of feeding all of the cats back here. I don’t really need a lot of help, but I bet there are some stray cats near where you live that you can feed”

“I haven’t seen any. “ I say

“I’m sure there are some”

“I saw you putting out food here yesterday”

“Yep, and I do it every day. I never miss a day, even Christmas. You don’t have to worry about these cats” she says

“Are you saying I need to find my own cats?”

“If you want to feed some cats, yes. I feed these cats. And if you are going to feed some cats, you should buy some regular cat food because most cats don’t eat dead mice”

“I don’t know a lot about cats” I say

“Well, now you know that they don’t eat a lot of dead mice, and you also know that I feed the cats that eat here, and these cats aren’t hungry, so you don’t have to worry about these cats anymore. Do you understand?” She says

“Ok. I understand. I will look for my own cats. “I say

“Good idea, because I don’t really need any help with these ones”

“Thank you for letting me help you.” I say

“Ok” she says. “But I don’t need any more help, ok? My husband and son live right upstairs, they help me carry the cat food, and they will look after the cats if I can’t, ok?”

“Ok. Well, thank you for today, at least” I say, and I start walking off towards the library. It was nice of her to let me feed the cats, but I understand, she was afraid of me. That is how people have to be, afraid. A bartender. ... I was that once. For a bunch of years actually, and it was mostly good because people are mostly good. The ones who came in the afternoons were the best, honest people without a lot of other hobbies who liked something that made their bellies warm and a little bit of companionship. Then there were the kids, who are always accidentally cruel and vain, and some of them will grow out of it and some of them won’t, but there was one young guy: A nice kid, handsome, polite, but a little bit slow. I think he lived with his parents somewhere else past Kittanning.

He would come into town of Friday nights and hang around the bar. He used to challenge me to arm wrestling matches and tell me about his dad and sister, and you could tell that somebody loved him and took good care of him and probably worried that he wanted to come into town on the weekends, but they trusted him. But he was sweet and kind and trusting, and his family probably figured because they were blessed enough to share life with someone who was that way by nature, that other people were that way too. So he came into town, and made friends with people who weren’t that way. People who needed him to pay for every tab, who secretly laughed at him, who could teach him about the ugly way that it is sometimes with friendship, and that is why I have to find my own cats, because as bad things go, the kid at the bar doesn’t even rank.

So, I walk up to the library. It is closed, and the picnic benches are empty. I look around cautiously for Coats, but he is nowhere to be seen. So, I sit for a while and think. I still can’t get past the mouse for some reason, I keep imagining the terror it must have felt looking up at the un-scalable walls of plastic. Then I realize that there is a possibility that the weight of the trash bag may have suffocated it, which gives me some measure of comfort. The desperation is what is most intolerable. The library opens, and I return to the same table I sat at yesterday. Seeking a companion in my guilt over the death of the mouse, I ignore the Milosz, in favor Hrabal. I am nearly finished with the little book by the time Ben comes in. He is perspiring heavily and carrying two large bags. He sits down across from me, and offers me his hand. I shake it, and he looks at me closely in his sincere way and says, “You were sleeping yesterday”

“I know. I was up late the night before...you could have woken me.” I say

“I didn’t want you to be mad” He says, as he sits down and arranges his bags.

“Ben, I wouldn’t have been mad. I was here waiting for you.”

“You don’t know if you would have been mad or not. Were you mad when you woke up?” He asks

“No, not really. Surprised that I feel asleep in the library, actually”

“Well, then you probably wouldn’t have been mad. They just let you sleep here, huh?” He asks, as opens a can of contraband Coca Cola

“No, a guard woke me up after a couple of hours” I say

“They wouldn’t let me sleep here even for a minute. I know it” He says

“They might. You don’t know that”

He takes a long drink “I know it. They are always coming down on me here”

“I think it is mostly because you aren’t supposed to drink in here” I say

“I need to. I am so tired all the time. Without this...” He says holding up the can “I’d be passed out like you were yesterday”

We sit in silence for a minute, and I take out the little box with the clay head in it. I hand it to Ben.

“What is this?” He asks

“It is what I promised. A replacement for your clay head”

He slowly unties the ribbon and lifts the lid off of the Styrofoam box.

“This is...”

“It is a little bit more elaborate than the last one” I say

“Where did you get it?”

“I made it. I made it for you, Ben. “

He gently touches the face.

“It has hair”

“And eyelashes, and eyebrows. The eyes are from a taxidermy supply company”

He looks at the head for a few moments, stroking the hair with his pinky, and then he very delicately closes the box and re-ties the ribbon. He reaches out and touches my arm for a moment, and then jerks away abruptly.

“I almost forgot” He says, too loudly. Then he leans over and rummages through his bag and removes a rumpled navy backpack. “This is yours, right?”

I take the bag from him. It is damp. I bring it to my nose and smell it. It smells strongly of mint.

“I think my neighbor stole it from you” Ben says

I hold the bag, and gently unzip it. As I look inside, Ben says “It is yours, right? I was watching him. It looks just like yours. Even that stain on the small pocket. “

“It is...or it was”

“I knew it...I knew it!” He said triumphantly “He steals. He always complains about my radio too”

I look down at the damp bag in my hands “how did you get it, Ben?”

“I took it from him. I saw him with it; I was picking up my prescription... He was trying to put a bottle of mouthwash in it. I told the people at the store, and they tried to stop him. The lid came off the bottle. That’s how it got wet...they kicked him out. Told him never to come back.”

“But how did you get it, Ben?” I ask

“He was sitting outside the store. It was just at his feet, I picked it up.”

“But you didn’t hurt him, right?” I ask

“What? No! I didn’t hurt him”

We sit in silence for a while, and I read a little more of my book. Then I say, “Where do you think he’ll get his mouthwash now?”

“Anywhere. They have mouthwash everywhere.” Ben says

“I guess you’re right.” I say

“Are you mad at me?”

“No, Ben. I’m not mad at you.”

“You seem mad”

“Do you like the head?” I ask

He takes the box out of his bag, and slowly goes through the whole process of unwrapping it again. He gently lifts the lid off, and looks at the face. “It is the greatest present I ever got.”

“Thank you, Ben. It means a lot to hear you say that.” I say

“You never said anything about that bag.”

“Thank you for thinking of me, Ben. But you didn’t need to take it” I say

“So, you are mad” He says looking dejectedly at the table

“No, no, I’m not mad at all, Ben. I just don’t want you to get in trouble”

“But you are my friend” He says

“I am your friend, and as your friend, I want you to be careful”

“I’m sorry”

“Ben, don’t be sorry. You were trying to be kind, but maybe I gave him the bag”

“But you didn’t”

“Maybe I did” I say

“You give things to me. You gave me this face.” He said, holding up the box

“And I could have given something different to your neighbor, but don’t worry about it. I am not mad. I just want you to be careful. People can misunderstand things.”

“Ok...fine. Do you want to talk a walk?” He asks

“I think I am going to read for a while”

He gets out of his chair and stands there looking at me. So I say, “You are going for a walk carrying all of that stuff?”

“It's not so bad, I carried it all here.” He says

“You can use my backpack if you want” I say

“Ok”

I watch as Ben transfers the contents of one of his bags into the backpack. Then he knocks his hairy knuckles against the desk as a way of saying goodbye and walks off.

I sit and read for a little while. Then, a man in a dark sport coat and a brown plaid shirt comes and sits down across from me.

“Hello” I say

“Hello, I am Brian Folz, I am one of the Assistant Directors here, and I was wondering if I might speak to you for a moment?”

“Sure, ok” I say

“Do you mind coming down to my office? I don't want to interrupt any of the other patrons”

I look around, and don't notice any other patrons but agree to follow Brian Folz down to his office anyway. Once there, he offers me a glass of water, but I decline. Then, I take a seat in one of the two shabby chairs that are across from his narrow wooden desk.

“Looking for some book recommendations?” I suggest, smiling

Brian Folz takes off his plastic glasses and cleans the nose piece with a small grey cloth. “Um, no. I was actually hoping to talk to you about a somewhat different matter.”

“A different matter?” I ask

“This gentleman, Ben...he is a friend of yours?” He begins, tentatively

“Yeah. He is a friend of mine”

“...and I assume you are aware that he is quite dangerous”

“I don't think he is dangerous. He just gets confused. He occasionally has some problems separating fantasy from reality, but who doesn't really? It's... all a matter of degree”

“We have had serious problems with him. In fact, one of our best staff members threatened to resign because of him”

“You mean about the can thing? I was here for that. That was overblown” I say

“I know you were here then. I saw you on the surveillance tapes”

“Well, then you saw how it happened. “ I say “You can't honestly say that you felt that someone's safety was at risk”

“It is all very subjective. Perhaps you weren't afraid, but some of our staff certainly were” Brian Folz says

“I'm sorry to hear that, but I'm still not sure...”

“I had a discussion with Mr. Coats. He tells me that you have fashioned yourself as a sort of Svengali to some of our patrons with more troublesome mental disturbances”

“Mister Coats?” I say

“Oh yes. He has been quite helpful. As I’m sure you were aware, we had a problem with some individuals meeting for liaisons in the stacks”

“I wasn’t aware” I say

“Oh yes, it was quite a problem. Mr. Coats helped us identify some of the problematic actors, and we were able to work with the authorities to find a solution”

“A solution?” I ask

“Yes, to stop the people from meeting for sex”

“And now Coats is suggesting that I...”

“In fact, Mr. Coats has suggested something a bit more unusual. “Brian Folz says

“What exactly is he suggesting?”

“That you are using this building as a base of operations to meet some of our more troubled patrons and encourage them to act negatively through unusual methods of psychological control”

“Are you even listening to yourself right now? Are you hearing the words you are saying? ‘unusual methods of psychological control’ is that a real thing?”

“I thought it was quite odd myself, and would have continued to think so, if I hadn’t just seen exactly what Mr. Coats described on the surveillance camera”

“Which was what?” I ask

“You... giving Ben a small box containing a head, and him providing you with a empty knapsack that was clearly wet with an unknown substance.”

“The substance is only unknown because you did not ask what it is” I say

“What is it, sir?” Brian Folz asks

“Mouthwash.”

“Mouthwash?”

“Yes, the rinse a person uses after they brush their teeth. It is really quite a common product...”

“...should I bother to ask what the significance of a mouthwash covered knapsack is?”

“Not if you want an answer that will satisfy your line of questioning you shouldn’t, but if you really want to know, it was covered in mouthwash because it became so during an effort to thwart a retail burglary”

“I see” says Brian Folz, and he picks up a pen and begins to make a note in a yellow pad

“What are you writing?”

“I am documenting what you told me. Mr?”

“Luke. You can call me Luke.”

“Well, Luke. As I said, Mr. Coats mentioned that you are the person that has been vandalizing the library with these bizarre clay totems, and we of course, reserved judgment on that matter but the proof was on the video. You gave one to Ben. We all watched it.”

“I’m not sure I would call it vandalism” I say

“I’m sure you wouldn’t, and perhaps it isn’t, but at best, it is an unusual form of littering. “

“This really seems this is outside of the boundaries of what would be included in the job description of an Assistant Library Director” I say

“I assure you that it isn’t. This is a public building, and as stewards of this public asset, we have a responsibility to ensure a safe and welcoming environment for all of our patrons. Part of the nature of our work, is that we need to make accommodations for the members of our community who have issues related to their physical and mental health. Further, if we had a patron who was preying on our other patrons with some sort of financial scam, I can assure you that we would take some responsibility on that front as well.”

“So, what you are saying is, I can’t bring any more clay heads to the library. Ok. Fine. You could have just said that directly, and we could be done” I say

“If I was confident that was the extent of it, yes. But I also feel a personal responsibility to consider what is best for Ben and our other at risk patrons.” Brian Folz says

“At risk? You were just telling me that your staff felt like they were the ones at risk”

“Sadly, things aren’t always so clear.” Brian Folz says

“So then what, Mr. Folz? You are going to make a citizen’s arrest for the crime of giving a small handmade gift to a schizophrenic?”

Brian Folz spun around in his chair and loudly opened a file cabinet. With his back towards me, he said “When we had the previous incident, I had extensive discussions with Ben’s case worker. We worked together to find a solution that would be best for Ben, and that would allow him to continue to enjoy the library as, in the view of his caseworker, his access to the information housed here is a key part of his therapeutic process.”

“Ok...” I say

“And, as such” Brian Folz continued, “I feel an obligation to inform her that Ben may have encountered a person who is preying on his weakness”

“You can’t be serious”

“Oh, I am quite serious, sir”

“First of all, you can stop calling me ‘sir’. And second, do you think that the best way to respond to an individual who has a perception that there is a vast evil conspiracy out to get him, is to construct a vast evil conspiracy out of whole cloth?”

“You seem to have given this some thought, Luke.” Says Brian Folz

“I really haven’t.”

“Well, my recommendation is that you do so, and I’m saying this personally, and not in any authoritative capacity, but people like Ben are not to be manipulated. “



“So, are you banning me from the library?” I ask

“No. I actually don’t have the authority to do that. “

“Do you have the authority to prevent me from meeting my friends here?” I ask

“No, I don’t have that authority either.” He says

“So, then this is a conversation to inform me that, in your perfect world, you would have some authority that you do not?”

“No. This is a conversation to inform you that I have created a record of your actions and behavior, and that we may have identified you as a vandal who has disturbed library property, and...”

“‘Disturbed’ library property, Mr. Folz? “

“I plan to record the specifics in the file”

I stand up, and walk towards the door. Pausing before I leave, I say, “Do you want me to make you one of the heads, is that it? I can make you one if you want.”

“No. I would also recommend that you confine your activities here to normal usage of the library facilities. Please consider this a formal warning, any further issues and we will take the steps necessary to issue a ban from this building”

“I thought you didn’t have the authority” I say

“We are in communication with the authorities, sir” Brian Folz says as I walk out the door.

After I left Brian Folz’s office, I went down to the basement to try to find Coats. He is there, in his normal wing chair reading a hardback Louis L’Amour book, I watch him for a few minutes, but decide against saying anything. I’m tired of being in the library anyway. I consider going to the museum, but I figured it would probably best to avoid any additional bizarre interactions for the day. It is probably best if that whole thing doesn’t work out anyway, the realistic hope of a healthy long term relationship. Not that I wouldn’t welcome it if it happened, but I am not going to force anything. I got tired of it a long time ago. The weighted interactions, the language of glances, I used to love that, but I don’t anymore. Ultimately, it is a barrier, a wall separating normal human interaction, of really figuring out what another person is about. Instead of the museum, I decide to walk around for a little while. I go to the CoGos and buy a quart of chocolate milk. Then I go to the Pitt campus bookstore and buy two backpacks. After that, I walk to the grocery store and buy a small bag of cat food.

At home, my apartment feels empty. I had thrown a lot of things away, but I can feel the weight of the missing magazines most deeply. I never saw them really, nor did I ever read any of them, but they were there, under the bed emitting all of their informational energy, all of the effort of the writers, and the layout people and the printers, all condensed into shiny paper, something honest and legitimate to show for all of their efforts. I like that, the feeling of the sense of earnest satisfaction that people put into the output of real physical things, like the carved wood walls in the cathedral. I go there sometimes and touch those walls, to feel close to all of that sincerity and patience. It was all hand tools then, or at least I think it was. My mind is too tired to mourn the magazines though, and ultimately, they are ephemeral by intention anyway, so I put it out of my mind, and I lay down and fall asleep.

I sleep well. There are no dreams about Coats, or lions, or mice, or Brian Folz, there is only silence. When I wake up, it is 10pm. I eat two apples and consider taking a walk, but I decide that it would be better if I attempt to return my sleep cycle to some normal standard, so I try to read for a bit, but the only book that escaped the purge is Graham Greene's *The Lawless Roads*, and I have already read it, and don't really like it. The subject matter is good, but Greene's genuine dislike of Mexicans is tiresome, and the world is full of mediations about bad food and foolish companions, so I sit for a while instead. Then I try to listen to some music, but I can't. That comes and goes too, the music. I can really hear music sometimes, and it speaks to my soul and does what it is supposed to do, and sometimes it is just sounds, and today it is just sounds. So, in an attempt to sleep, I break my own rule and put on my earmuffs and lay on the bed, and let the rhythm of my breathing create a non-sensical mantra in my head that I repeat over and over again, and then there is Coats, and he is on a stage. One of those tiny wooden stages, like the type they use for marionettes, and he is moving like a marionette. Then, there is Brian Folz, and he joins Coats on the stage, and they start to fight each other with stubby wooden swords. At first they are angry, but then they start to have a wonderful time, and the stage disappears, and they are on a much larger stage. A proper stage, like at a music hall. And their sword fight turns into theatrics and they turn into dancers in ballet costumes, with Lycra tights and vests. Then the light of the stage comes on, and they begin to talk, but I can't hear them. And another person, one who I have never seen moves in from the side of the stage and begins to narrate.

"Mr. Coats is scorned" He says "Not scorned by a lover, or scorned by the world, but scorned by one man"

And then I am in the balcony, and I am trying to listen, to learn the identity of the man, but the woman in front of me starts to talk, and I cannot hear, so I tap her on her shoulder, and her companion turns to me instead, but it is not a man, it is a cat in a tuxedo, and he says to me, "you know very well that we won't eat a mouse that is already dead" So, I start to apologize, but I don't just apologize once, I fall all over myself apologizing, explaining how little I really know about mice, and talking about how I just wanted to help, and I cannot control the sound of my voice, but then another voice drowns out my own as though it was coming from some sort of amplification system. And it says,

"You there, in the balcony. Sir, I'm afraid we are going to have to ask you to remain silent during the performance. It is incredibly rude to the other patrons, and also to the performers" And then I notice that I had been standing, so I sit down again, I notice the source of the voice too, and it is the man on the stage, and he now has a microphone.

"If you would like to be a performer" He continues "You are welcome to audition, but this is a performance. One that all of us have worked very hard on, and your contributions are most unwelcome" And the audience, overwhelmed by his wit, and restraint, and handsome confidence breaks into wild applause, and I try then, to excuse myself, but I find that the ushers have already arrived to help me do that, but ushers are also the actors filling a double role, and I am escorted from the hall by Coats and Brian Folz in their unitards and vests. I am taken to the door of the theatre as the crowd continues to applaud and cheer, and the man from the stage again arrives to serve as my final escort, and as he hands me my soaking backpack and opens the door for me, I rip the earmuffs from my ears and sit upright in bed.

It is 3:30, and it still being too early to return to the street, I decide to create some heads. I sit down and arrange my clay and begin to work. I patiently make six new creations, and when I am

done, I place all of them in the oven to cook. Then, exhausted, I fall back into a dreamless sleep for an hour. When I wake up, I realize that I had forgotten about the heads, and rush to the oven to make sure that they have not become damaged in my negligence. I am happy to find that they are all in fine condition, and hadn't suffered any cracking from the extended stay in the heat. I very gently lay all of them out on my work surface, and think for a moment about what eyes and hair I would put onto each. Then, as I look at them a bit more closely, I realize that they all must be destroyed for every head that I made is the image of the man in the theatre.

The clay from the heads could not be saved, once it is baked, it is ruined, so I put all of the heads into a paper bag. I was going to put them into the dumpster, but it didn't seem reasonable that they should share the same fate as the magazines and all of the other noble trash, so I decided to break them up instead. It took a long while because I didn't want to use a hammer and wake the neighbors, so I try to use a screwdriver, but the heads are too hard. I decide to put them back into the oven at a higher heat to make them a bit more brittle, and after an hour, my efforts prove successful. After that, I put a little bit of cat food into a plastic bag and look through my collection of finished heads and found a good one that I had been saving to hide somewhere in the city during the arts festival. I put the cat food, the head, and the second backpack into my new backpack and go out into the street.

It is still early, and there aren't a lot of people out. The walk to Ben's apartment from my place takes about twenty minutes. It had rained sometime during the night, and the sidewalks are wet. In the recessed doorway of an old storefront I pass a man sleeping on a deconstructed cardboard box. He had taken his boots off to sleep and one of them is outside of the safety of the overhang where it had been collecting rainwater over the course of the night. I pick up the boot and dump the water out of it, and put it behind the sleeping man and outside of the elements. At Ben's apartment building, the Mouthwash Man is nowhere to be seen. I push the buzzer for Ben's apartment and wait. Through the small window on the door, I watch as he comes down the steps. He seems upset, but when he sees me, his face relaxes. He pulls open the door.

"Hi Ben"

"You are at my apartment" He says

"I was in the neighborhood"

Ben doesn't say anything for a while. So I say, "I'm sorry, Ben. I shouldn't have come. I didn't mean to surprise you"

"No. No. ...I was asleep. Feels like all I do is sleep anymore" He says

"Well, that's good, at least you are getting your rest" I say

"It's not good. It's bad. They want me to sleep my life away."

I don't say anything, and then Ben says, "Do you want to come up?"

"Ok"

Ben's apartment is smaller than mine. His single bed is rumpled, and in the corner are, two huge black plastic bags which are overstuffed with clothes. The air is stale with the old cigarette smoke. Ben walks to one of the plastic bags, and rummages through it, and pulls out a large package of nicotine gum, he removes two pieces from their blister pack and stuffs them into his

mouth. He chews furiously for a minute and then returns to the bags where he searches a little more, and pulls out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He lights a cigarette and sits on the bed.

“Why are you here?” He asks

“I just wanted to come and say hello, Ben”

“Hello” He says

“Hi” I say

He stands up and starts looking around the room again. Ultimately, he finds what he was looking for, an ashtray that had been perched on the top of big pile of papers. He sits for a while and smokes, flicking his ashes at a distance into the tray.

“Can I move that ashtray for you?” I ask

He looks at me blankly for a minute. “Why do you want to move it?”

“I don’t want to move it, I just wondered if you wanted me to.”

He turns and looks out his window. “I don’t” He says

“I can go, Ben. I’m sorry that I woke you up”

“No, I just have to piss” He says, and then he walks into the other room. As soon as he leaves, I dump the cat food from the plastic bag into my backpack and quickly empty the ashtray into my plastic bag. Then, I notice one of the papers that was underneath the ashtray. It is a medical record with the name of a caseworker on it. I quickly stuff that paper into my pocket and was just finishing as Ben walked out of the bathroom.

“What are you doing?” He asks

“I was just emptying your ashtray.” I say, holding up the bag of cigarette butts.

“You shouldn’t have done that” He says, not making eye contact as he takes the bag from me.

“I’m sorry”

“It’s ok. I’m just really tired” He says, as he shakes another cigarette from his pack.

“I will let you get back to sleep.” I say

Ben walks over and sits on the edge of his bed. He sets the bag of butts down next to him and picks up his ashtray. “Ok”

“Do you still like the head?” I ask.

He stretches his legs out and reaches down to pull his sheets over his feet. As I helped him, he says “it’s the best present I ever got, man” But his voice is flat, and I could tell that he is not really paying attention to me, so I thank him for letting me come over, and I leave. When I walk out of his building, the Mouthwash Man was there sitting on the wall smoking one of his thin cigars. I say hello to him, and he says,

“Upstairs visiting your crazy boyfriend, huh?”

“I heard about what happened with the bag.” I say

“Yeah, that motherfucker punched me in the lip and took it from me right in the store”

“He punched you?” I ask

“He would have... if the security guards didn’t get involved”

“So, he didn’t punch you?”

“I just fucking told you, man. He would have”

“But he didn’t”

I took off my backpack and took out the extra one I brought with me. “I brought you a new backpack”

“What the fuck, man?”

“Ben took the other one I gave you. I wanted to replace it” I say. The Mouthwash Man didn’t debate me this time; he just takes the backpack and says,

“What is your fucking deal with that guy... is he your brother?”

I walk over and sit by him on the wall “kind of. He really isn’t a bad guy, he is just confused” I say

The Mouthwash Man takes a sip from a tall can of beer concealed in a paper bag and says, “Everyone is fucking confused. Your brother is crazy” Then, he picks up his new bag and turned it over “and you’re the fucking backpack fairy” Then, he unzips the bag and looks inside. He reaches in and pulls out the clay head.

“Oh, I thought that was in my bag” I say

“What is it?”

“A clay head. I made it.” I say

“No shit? “ He says, turning the head over in his hands. “Looks just like real, man. You made this? For real?”

“I have a little workshop in my apartment” I say

“So, you’re some kind of artist, huh?”

“If you say so” I say

“No, man. Don’t kid yourself. This thing is fucking good. You really made this?”

“Yeah, I made it” I say

“What are you then, if you ain’t an artist” he asks

“A real estate agent, I rent apartments... In the summers at least... People don’t move a lot in the fall and winter.”

“You make enough in the summer not to work all year?” He asks

“Not a lot, but enough. I normally work overnight down at the post office over Christmas; I make a little money then, too.”

“They let you collect after that?” He asks

“Unemployment? No, not usually. I don’t know though. I’ve never tried. I make enough” I say

“See that’s me, too. Twenty two years in the army” He says, hitching his thumb towards his chest “I ain’t getting anything I didn’t earn...not like the rest of these fucking bums”

“Some people can’t work” I say

“Some of ‘em. And even more of ‘em don’t want to”

“It doesn’t bother me”

“What doesn’t?” He asks

“Other people” I say

“Well, it should. There’s always someone trying to get over. Half the people are trying to rip somebody off, and half the people are sitting around figuring out a way not ta’ work”

“You can have it, if you want.” I say, gesturing to the head.

“Really?”

“Yeah, sure. That is why I make them, to give them away”

“You could sell this. Thing like this could be worth some money.”

“It isn’t worth any money. Plus, nobody with any kind of money will want to buy it anyway. You can have it, but you have to promise me that you won’t sell it.”

The Mouthwash Man laughs a little bit. “I won’t sell it. I’ll leave it to my son. He never got a damn thing from me in his whole life...he’d love this”

“I could make him one.” I say

“No. I’ll give him this one” He says, and then he reaches out and shakes my hand.

I say “Take it easy on Ben, ok?”

“I can’t promise I’m gonna do something special for ‘em”

“You don’t need to do anything special, just don’t give him a hard time if his music and TV are too loud”

“He gave me a whole pack of squares once” Mouthwash Man says

“Who did?”

“Your brother. I was setting out here just like this, and I asked him to bum a square, and he handed me a whole pack”

“That was nice of him” I say.

“I could buy him another pack”

“I think it would be fine if you just didn’t complain about the noise”

“You give me this” he says “and I won’t complain about the noise”

“I already gave it to you” I say.

Back at my apartment, I opened the paper that I took from Ben. It was an official report from his doctors, a letter with title that read: Memorandum for Coordination of Care. In the letter, it mentioned the name of his social worker.... a woman named Maria Olson. I wrote down her

information in my notebook, and then ate a cheese sandwich and an orange. After lunch, I walk up to the building where Maria Olson's office is. I ask the front desk receptionist if I could speak to her, and she telephoned upstairs. Then she tells me that Ms. Olson was not in her office, and that she was unsure of when she would return. So, I hand the receptionist the letter that I took from Ben's apartment, and tell her that I had found it on the street, and was hoping that it could be returned to the proper party, and the receptionist wrote a note to that effect on a yellow sticky note, and put it in Maria Olson's mailbox.

After that, I walk around for a while searching for cats to feed, but I don't see any. I briefly consider stopping to check if the ones behind the noodle shop had been fed. Then I walk past an alley that looks vaguely like the one behind the noodle shop that is flanked on either side by dumpsters, and I find a spot far enough away from the building doors and dumpsters as not to attract mice, and I pour out my little bag of cat food. After that, I go home and try to read *The Lawless Roads* again for a while, but I get bored, so I place a call to Maria Olson. The phone rings to her voicemail, so then I leave a message,

"Hello, Ms. Olson. My name is Luke Kolbe and my friend, Ben Berman is a client of yours. A mutual acquaintance of ours, Brian Folz, has somehow come to the conclusion that I exert an unnatural influence over Ben, and I would like to talk to you a bit to clear the air" Then I leave my telephone number.

After the call, I am exhausted, so I collapse onto my bed and fall immediately asleep. And then I dream. I dream that I am in a stand of pine trees where the ground is covered in dried needles and the branches of the trees don't begin until far above my head, and I know where I am. I had hidden one of the little heads here to be found by a hiker, or a dog walker or some kids. Then the wind starts to blow, and the trees sway and emit their tired sounds, and I stand at the bottom in wonder. Then I am a tree. One of the trees in the stand of trees, and I am swaying too. Each gust is like a breath, in an out, and in and out in a steady rhythm. Then, I hear my heart beat, but it won't match my breath. It is faster, wildly faster, and then it stops. And I can see that it wasn't my heart at all, it was the wings of a bird. A huge hawk. I watch him flap his wings and coast, and then he lands onto one of my branches. I feel him move, but I cannot see him any longer. He moves along my branch in little hops, and then flies away again, and then he returns with bits of paper in his mouth, and he hops along my branches again, and then he flies away. He does it again and again, and I can only sit and wait, and breathe with the wind. I decide that I do not want to be a tree anymore, and I try to focus my will, so that I am a man again, standing on the earth, and unaware of the life of trees. So, I try to imagine myself as a man, and I am on the forest floor. So, I start to walk, but I only move a little bit at a time, so I decide to climb the tree, and am thrilled to find that I am an incredibly good climber. I scale the tree without the slightest strain on my muscles until I near the branch where the hawk is perched, and I see what he is doing, building himself a nest. I look at the hawk, and I notice his eye, and his eye is the eye of the man in the theatre. Then, I am aware of my tail, and my size and I leap to a father branch and scale higher in the tree. I am above the hawk now, but he is not interested in me. He is interested in his nest. So, I climb along a branch above him, so I can also see the nest. It is a huge construction made entirely of papers. I sit and watch him work. Then, the hawk flies off again, and I descend the tree to inspect the nest. The papers are covered in words I cannot read, so I try to imagine that I am a man again, so that I can read. Then, I am a man, but I am clinging to the narrow branch high above the ground, and my heart is racing, and I move to grip the

swaying tree tighter. After I secure myself, I reach out to the nest, and remove one of the papers, it says, Memorandum for the Coordination of Care at the top, and I am falling.

When I wake up again it is 3:30. I don't try to sleep. Instead, I exercise, and eat, and clean myself and my home. At six, I pack the backpack with a few of the heads, and I refill my small plastic bag of cat food and start to walk. The morning is cold, but it feels good to be outside. It is still mostly dark, but by the time I get to the park, dawn has formally begun, and I have enough light to move down the walking trails without struggling to see. I pass a few people walking with their dogs, and the enthusiasm of their animals makes me feel positive. I find the place where the earthen trail separates from the gravel walking path and move further into the woods. After ten minutes, I locate the stand of pine trees from my dream. I look up at each branch to check for the presence of a nest, but there is not one there. Then, I move to see if the clay head has been removed from the tiny root shelter where I left it. The head is gone, and there is a small smooth stone in its place. I pick up the stone and put it into my bag, then, I replace the head with a new one, one even better than the last one that was there.

After that, I start to walk back towards the library. It will be open soon, and I am lonely without my books. When I get there, the library is a few minutes from being open, and Coats is sitting at one of the picnic benches in a heavy winter jacket waiting for the doors to open. When he sees me, he stands up and walks away. I consider following him, to try to talk to him, but decide against it, and wait alone. When the doors open, I walk around for a while looking for something to read. I forgot my list at home, but in the reference section, I select *The Way of the Seeded Earth* from Joseph Campbell's *Atlas of World Mythology* and take it upstairs to the science section to read. Later, I will try to find Ben, but for now I am content to sit alone. I read for a while. The floor is mostly empty except for two librarians who have extended bland conversation about another librarian who has called off sick. Then, a very skinny older woman comes in and reads the *Physicians' Desk Reference* with one of the library's huge magnifying glasses, and takes lots of notes on dozens of call slips. I watch her for a while. After she returns the book, I go and find it on the shelf, and hide one of the heads behind it. Then, I walk downstairs to try to find Ben.

As I am walking down the staircase, I am met by Brian Folz and one of the library guards.

"Would you please follow us down to the lobby? We are going to have to have a look in your bag." Brian Folz says to me.

"I don't see why you would have to do that." I say

"The library reserves the right to inspect any bags that come into the building" He says

"You reserve the right?"

"Yes, sir." Brian Folz says

"Is that the same thing as having the right?" I ask

"As far as this situation is concerned, yes. It is the same thing" he says

"Why don't you just say that you have the right to search my bag?"

"Excuse me?"

"It just seems like purposely confusing phrasing. You could just say that you have the right to search my bag"



“We do have the right to search your bag” he says

“Well, you should say so. Saying that you ‘reserve the right’ sounds like the kind of pointless word substitution that people use to make themselves sound smarter” I say.

“This still won’t stop us from searching the bag, sir”

“I told you the other day, I don’t require any honorifics, you can just call me Luke” I say

“Well, Luke, if you would please follow us to the lobby...”

I am escorted to the guard station next to the front door where Brian Folz says

“Please set your bag on the table”

So, I do

“Would you please unzip it for us?” He says

“You don’t reserve the right to unzip it?” I ask

“It is our policy that the patron unzips the bag that we intend to search” He says

“Why?” I ask

“It is our policy”

“If you think there is something legitimately dangerous in my bag, wouldn’t it make sense to have someone more qualified than the Associate Director of the library here to supervise its unzipping?” I say, and the guard laughs a little bit, but Brian Folz gave him a sharp look, so the guard says sternly,

“Unzip the bag, sir”

“I would also invite you to call me by my first name. I am Luke” I say, as I extend my hand to the guard.

He does not shake it. Instead, Brian Folz picks up my backpack and unzips it himself. Then, he reaches inside and removes the plastic bag of cat food

“What is this?” He asks

“It is cat food”

“You eat that?” Asks the guard

“No. Cats eat it. It is a type of food for cats” I say

“Do you mind if I ask why it is in your bag?” Says Brian Folz

“I intend to feed some cats with it” I say

Brian Folz gives me a disgusted look and sets the small bag of cat food down on the table, then; he reaches inside and pulls out one of the two remaining clay heads.

“I believe that we talked about this.” Brian Folz says

“I also believe that. In fact, I think that it transcends the boundaries of belief, because I directly recall it happening two days ago. You were there, remember?” I say

The guard reaches in and removes the second head. He holds it in his hand, and turns it around, looking at it closely.

“You can have that if you want.” I say. The guard looks at Brian Folz, then sets the head down on top of the bag. “No, seriously.” I say “I make those to give them away, for gifts. You can have it if you want it”

Brian Folz reaches down and picks up the second head, and takes that one, and the one he was already holding and brusquely puts them back in the backpack. Then, he puts the small bag of cat food in the bag, and zips it closed. He holds the bag out to me. “Sir, I am afraid that I am going to have to ban you from this building. You have been warned about this type of behavior formally, and you chose to ignore it. At this point I do not have a choice but to ban you. If you try to return, we will pursue our legal options to keep you from returning”

“I think you have a choice” I say

“No, I do not have a choice. You were warned” He says

“But you are the one that made the choice to warn me. “ I say

“And you ignored that warning, and so you are now banned” he says, pushing the bag towards me.

“Can I at least check out a few books to tide me over?” I ask

“No, you cannot. You are prohibited from entering this building for any reason”

“What if I had books that I needed to return?” I ask

“You don’t. I checked” Brian Folz turns to the guard. “Miles, would you please escort this gentleman from the building and see that he doesn’t return?”

So, the guard walks with me to the front door and down the front steps. As we walk, I unzip my bag, and reached inside. “Do you want one of these?” I ask, taking a head out.

“I can’t take that” says the guard.

“Well, if you do want one. I hid one upstairs in the science section behind the Physicians' Desk Reference, you can take that one” I say

“Ok” says the guard

So, then I have nothing to do. I walk around for a little while until I pass a street corner preacher who is reading aloud to no one in particular “The cow and the bear shall be neighbors, together their young shall rest; the lion shall eat hay like an ox.” So, I stand and gave him an audience for a while, and then walk on. Then, I sit on the picnic benches outside the library and wait for Ben, but Coats keeps coming out to smoke, and when he does, he watches me the whole time, so I decide to walk over to the Pitt art building and sit by the fountain. There is another person there, a heavy, short haired woman with a big overstuffed backpack who I have seen occasionally inside the library on the coldest days of the winter. She is walking around the fountain and talking loudly into a cell phone, and I sit there for a while and watch her, and keep an eye out for Ben. By the evening, with nothing to do, I start for home.

As I walk home, I pass the alley where I left the cat food the day before. Something had eaten all of the food, so I pour out the little bit that I brought with me onto the same place and arrange it into an appetizing pile. Then I go home. At home, I sit and eat and think about maybe taking

another job because now my books aren't free, but Christmas time will come soon enough, and there will be temporary work at the post office, and plenty to do to keep my mind busy. So, I turn on the radio, and the music sounds like real music now. I can hear it again, and this makes me happy, so I sit down to make some heads.

The heads are great, some of the best that I have ever made. In the past, it has taken me six hours to make a single decent one, but today, I make three great ones, and in time that passes without notice, and then it is dawn again, and I haven't slept at all, and I don't want to. So, I look for something to read, but there is nothing but the bad Graham Greene, so I decide to look through my notebooks with the notes on what I already read. I hadn't remembered, but it seems that I had transcribed a big chunk of Seneca. There were a lot of other good things, too. At the bottom of one of the pages I wrote "When the convict ponders the light, Is it the same light that shines on you?" Then I feel bad for everything that I said about Neruda. Half of the worlds' great musicians were terrible people, and their music is still fantastic. So, I decide to stop taking myself so seriously and plan to go the museum. So, I pack my backpack with more cat food and the new heads I go out to walk again.

I get to the museum as it is opening and the building is empty except for the staff. I put my backpack in a locker, and I go to the gallery to look for the girl with the cart, but she isn't there. So I go to look at Edwin Abbey's painting of the Penance of Eleanor instead. As the shoeless Duchess of Gloucester looks at her husband and speaks the words of Shakespeare she is forever frozen in punishment for the crime of witchcraft, but I imagine her asking Neruda's question instead. Now it is no crime to consult a sorceress. There, our timeless Shakespeare was wrong; like Neruda was wrong about Stalin, and all the old hippies were wrong when they thought that lying around stoned in the dirt would drum up a revolution. But CS Lewis, and JFK, and Aldous Huxley all died on the same day, and that is a fact that most of them knew, but a lot of us don't, and the little signs that we all seek are rewarded with a three day shoeless penance like my friend in the painting. After a while, the ache in my legs reminded me that I had stood there too long, so I leave and get my backpack, and go back into the street.

I go to the library and sit outside for a while hoping that Ben would come, but he doesn't. So I walk back to the fountain by the Pitt art building. You can still see the walkway in front of the library from there, and it also lowers the chances of running into Coats. I would still like to talk to him, to see if I could give him something. One of the heads I made is even better than all of the others, and I think he might like it, if I can talk to him a bit, but right now, I do not have the energy. At the benches by the fountain, the same woman is there. She is on her telephone again, and when she sees me, she starts talking even louder. I sit there for an hour, and she talks the whole time. Then, she finally gets off the phone, and starts to walk around the fountain. When she passes me she says, "I'm trying to get my ride straightened out"

"I am looking for my friend" I say

"She knows you're waiting?" She asks

"I normally see him at the library every day" I say

"Well, the library is over there"

"I know"

She stands there for a moment, so I say "Do you want something to drink? There is a pop machine in the building here, I can run in"

“You know what? I would, but I’m out of change” She says

“I can buy it” I say

“I don’t need nothing from nobody” she says as she pulls her backpack tighter across her broad shoulders.

“No, No” I say “I am not expecting anything. I’m just offering. Since I’m offering, I’ll pay”

“It don’t work like that” she says

“This time it does... what do you like? Coke?”

“You think they got Dr. Pepper in there?” She asks

“I bet they do”

So, I go in the art building, and buy two drinks. When I come out, the woman is sitting on the bench where I was, waiting for me. I hand her the drink, and we sit together in silence for a minute.

“You sure you ain’t expecting something for this” she says

“No”

“Because I work. I can pay you back”

“I don’t want you to pay me back. Actually, I was just hoping for some company” I say

“Why? You lonely?” She says

“Not normally, no. Normally, I have plenty of people to talk to”

“You can have people to talk to and still be lonely” She says

“That’s true” I say

“What ‘cho doing hanging around here anyway? You look like someone from an office or something”

“This is where I am” I say

“Where you stay at?” She says

“I have a place”

“I stay with my cousin, but she’s at work”

“Oh” I say

“I had my own apartment, but my daughter got into some trouble, and after I got done helping her out, I ended up short on rent”

“I might be able to help you out; I do some work for an apartment company”

“It's not that. She got int’a all kinds of medical bills, then she got hurt, and couldn’t work.”

“Is she ok now?” I ask

“She doin’ all right, but it's hard. She was livin’ with this man out in Las Vegas, and she got pregnant, but she lost the baby”

“I’m sorry to hear that” I say

“I didn’t even know she was pregnant until she called me cryin’. So, I flew out to be wit’ her. And the place she was workin’, she had only been there like two months, so when she had to go to the hospital and everything, she called off. Then, they fired her”

“That’s terrible” I say

“So, I gave her what I had. I’m her mother, no matter how old she gets... that is still my child, and I will do what I can, to help her out”

“Is that when you went to live with your cousin?” I ask

“Yeah, about right after that. It’s all right though. She works down here, too. She drives me. I come down here and wait when they keep her late. It will be fine. What is important is my daughter. I just don’t want to see this change her, you know. She was always such a good child.”

“I’m sure it won’t”

“Yeah, but this man that she was with, and they been messing around with drugs and all that”  
She says

“It seems like that, doesn’t it” I say “that those bad things always nest up right next to what’s good?”

“The devil working harder every day” she says

We sit for a little while longer, and she says “So where’s your friend at?”

“He might be in the library. I don’t know. “

“Why don’t you check?”

“They kicked me out. They said that I am banned from the library forever”

She looked at me and laughed. “You?”

“Yep. Banned for life” I say

“What did you do?”

“They said that I was causing a problem because I kept leaving these around” I reach into the bag and pulled out one of the heads, and try to hand it to her. She moved further over on the bench

“Oh. Its cause you crazy” She says

“I’m not crazy”

“Just up and handing somebody some kind of face is crazy” she says as she stands up and picks up her backpack

“No, I made it. It’s my art. I want people to see it”

“You’re an artist?” She asks

“I don’t normally put it that way, but maybe”

She stands and looks at the clay head with her body turned defensively away from me.

“You can have it if you want” I say “I make them to give them away”

She looks at the head warily for a moment, and takes it from me.

“You made this?” She asks

“Yeah. I make a whole bunch of them. I like to give them away. They said that don’t want me doing that in the library anymore, though.”

She looks more closely at the face. “Why?”

“I don’t know. Because of how people can be, I guess. They said it bothers people”

She tries to hand the head back to me.

“No, you keep it” I say. It is a gift.

The woman smiles and reached out and squeezes my wrist “Ok” she says.

After that, I cannot think of anything else to say, so I say goodbye to the woman, and decide to start walking home. Even though I had not slept, I am still not tired. On the way home, I pass the alleyway where I had left the cat food. I check the spot where the food was, and again it is gone. So, I remove the small bag of food from my backpack and begin to pour more out onto the ground. As I do, I hear a disturbance from underneath the dumpster. I stand up and walk over to see if I can find the source of the sound, but I can’t. So then, I look behind the dumpster, and still, I can’t find where the sound is coming from. Then I notice a section of discarded drain pipe behind the next dumpster. In it, I see the unmistakable glow of the eyes of a cat. Very slowly, I crouch down to get a better view, and the cat in the pipe mimics my movements. I can make out its shape, tensing its muscles and hunkering down further against the pipe. I try to make the little hissing noise that people use to call cats, but that seems to scare it a bit, so I stop. Then I take a single step towards the pipe. As I watch, the cat again tenses itself, but it does not move, so I take another step. I repeat the process of stepping and waiting and stepping and waiting over and over again until I am in front of the pipe. Then, I very gently remove my backpack and place it behind the open back end of the pipe to slow the cat’s escape from the other end. We sit together for a minute while the cat measures his distrust of me, and then, he slowly emerges from the darkness. I bring my hand out to touch him, but as I do, I sense an imminent panic in his eyes, and instead decide to stay totally still. The cat moves towards me, and inspects me from a distance. I don’t know a lot about cats, but I can tell that the cat is not fully grown. It is short and skinny and is that sort of modeled brown color that some cats are. I hold out an open palm like you would to a strange dog, but the cat just remains there eyeing me warily. So, I shut my eyes, and exhale slowly through my nose, and then breathe in again at the same pace. I try to clear my mind of the intention of catching the cat, and replace that intention with a sense of welcoming. When I open my eyes again, the cat has moved closer to me. So, I repeat the process again, the slow breathing, the active repression of the natural predatory sensibility that seeps from the pores of men, and when I open my eyes again, the cat has moved a little closer still, but I can tell that if I reach out to touch him, he will run. So, then I concentrate on the cat, and try to will him closer to me, and I try to remain passive as I watch him put his tail high into the air, and walk directly towards me where he crawls into my lap.

The cat is warm, and I remain still for a while breathing and thinking about nothing, and I can feel the cat slowly begin to relax. “Do you want to go inside?” I start to ask him, but I as the words escape my lips, I feel his posture change, so instead, I think of the feeling that accompanies the question, and will that feeling into my hands, and the cat extends his long neck, and puts his head underneath of my chin. So, I lift the cat, and gently set him back onto the

ground, and communicate to him to wait. He watches me as I retrieve my bag, and unzip it, and place another head inside of the empty pipe. Then, I sit down again with my backpack on, and communicate my question again, and the cat crawls into my lap, and I pick him up, and we walk together towards my home. But the cat seems uncomfortable in my hands, and he starts to squirm, so I set him down on the ground, and then I kneel and wait. He seems to understand what I am suggesting because then he leaps from the ground onto my backpack, and secures himself a seat at the top of my back. And I know that it all seems absurd, that there would be a cat that would know that it could ride on the back of my backpack. There was a man who came through town on the train a few years ago in the summer, who had five dogs that would follow behind him without leashes. And that man seemed so absurd that the police arrested him, and gave his dogs to the shelter because secretly, we want animals to think of us the way we think of them, as simple and adorable and adaptable and constantly seeking the security only stability can provide. And some of them probably do, and I think this particular cat is of that type.

And so, we walk to my apartment, but when we get there, I can tell that the cat does not want to go in right away. He wants to wait outside, and get a sense of the building, and the neighbors and the neighborhood, and so I sit outside on the steps and we wait. The cat jumps off of my backpack, and sits down next to me on the steps. As we wait, I see Donald walking down the street carrying his museum guard's jacket, and moving with the little strut that must have been very convincing in his youth, but now looks vaguely like a limp, and when he reaches us he says,

“Don't that just figure”

“What?” I say

“You get to keep a cat in here, and I don't”

“I think they would let you keep a cat.” I say

“Not without paying an extra thirty five bucks a month, they won't. Here, you probably don't have to pay anything, and here you're the one who filled these building up with all these damn kids”

“They're students. That's who moved into this neighborhood” I say

“I've lived here my whole life. All these students wasn't around when I was young.”

“Maybe more of them stayed with their parents back then” I say “Plus, you haven't lived here your whole life. I remember when you moved in”

“Man, I meant the neighborhood. Not this building” Donald says

“I still bet they would let you get a cat.” I say

He reaches his hand out, and the cat immediately extends his head towards Donald's slim fingers.

“Oh, you friendly, huh?” Says Donald

“Yeah, he is a nice cat, I just found him” I say

“You found him?”

“I've been feeding some strays” I say “and this one was hiding in a piece of old drain pipe. He came right out after I called to him”

“No shit?”

“I bet he would stay with you if you wanted him to.” I say

“I can’t keep no cat in my place” Donald says, as he sat down to pet the cat some more

“I could talk to them about the fee. You’ve lived here a while. Half of the time when these kids move out, they end up having to replace the carpets, and fix a bunch of stuff, they haven’t needed to do any of that with you. They would probably make an exception”

“I don’t know” He says

“Why don’t you see if he wants to go inside with you?”

Donald sat for a moment, and thought about it, and then he reaches out and gently picks up the cat.

“I have some extra food in my apartment.” I say “Why don’t you take him in to your place, I will go upstairs and get the food”

I follow Donald into the building, and he carries the cat into his first floor apartment. Then I go up to my apartment, and call the management company. When I get the property manager on the phone, the person who was ostensibly my boss for half of the year, I say. “Hey I was talking to Donald Thigpen from apartment 1A, and he got wind of the fact that a bunch of these apartments have had some renovations done”

“The kids have no respect for anything” says the property manager

“anyway” I says “he and I were talking about it, and it turns out that he’s been wanting to adopt a cat, I was thinking maybe we could offer him a compromise... maybe waive the pet fee and get him to forget about the renovations for a little while”

“You think he would go for it?”

“I could talk to him about it.” I say

“Look at you all of the sudden, willing to go the extra mile” the property manager says

“He talked to me about it” I say

“Does this mean that you might consider the onsite manager thing again” He says

“I don’t really know how to fix anything, Ron”

“You just fixed the problem of having to renovate a whole apartment” He says

“..But if a toilet breaks”

“If a toilet breaks, you plunge it, if a light bulb burns out you twist a new one in... anything else, you call the other maintenance guys. It’s a piece of cake.”

“Then why do you want me to do it?” I ask

“Because I don’t want to send someone all the way over there every time some dumb assed kid realizes that her mommy never taught her to flush a meatloaf down the toilet”

“If you put it that way, it sounds pretty good” I say



“Think about it, would you? You’d still be able to cover the rentals in the summer, and we’d take care of your rent”

“I’ll think about it.” “Will you send Donald Thigpen an amendment to his lease about the cat?”

“Sure, if you handle the renovation thing”

“I will do it right now”

Then, I go downstairs with the cat food, and tap on Donald’s door. He opens and let me in. His small apartment is spotlessly clean. Overtop of his slip covered couch is a huge print of a pride of lions. He also has a rug with the face of a lion, a gold painted stone lion next to the door, and an afghan with a picture of a reclining cheetah draped over the back of a chair where his new cat is sitting.

“The cat sort of completes the theme” I say

“Don’t be thinking you can start coming down here now that you found me that cat”

“I’ve never been in here before”

“And you probably won’t be in here again. This is my private place. I don’t want all kine’a people coming in here”

“So, you don’t want a new carpet then?” I ask

“Man, no. I don’t want a carpet. I want those people to respect my sanctuary”

“I talked to the property manager. He said that he would waive the pet fee”

“Really? I was just thinking I could pay it.” He says

“Well, I talked to them; they said that they would waive it. I called when I was upstairs”

“Why would they do that?”

“Probably because I asked, and I’ve been keeping this building filled up for the past ten years, plus a bunch of their other buildings too.”

“I didn’t ask for no favors” Donald says

“I know you didn’t. I just thought that he needed a home”

“That cat ain’t no ‘he’. She is a lion-ess” Donald says

“Oh” I say... “Here is the food I had”

He takes it, and looks at the bag. “Oh, this is that cheap food. I’m about to go buy some of the good stuff, and get a litter box too”

“Maybe the cat prefers to be outside” I say

“Man, look at that cat.” He says. Gesturing to the cat sleeping on his chair “That cat don’t want to be outside, she came in and went right to sleep. She knows she ‘home”

“Well, good.” I say “I will get going”

“Hey, thanks, man. For calling them and all that” he says

“I’m glad the cat has a place to live” I say

I walk out of the apartment and into the hallway. Through the door, I heard Donald say, "I still ain't helping you with that girl"

Back in my apartment, I feel good, and happy, and finally a little bit tired. I check my phone. I still had not gotten a return call from Ben's social worker, so I try to call her again, but for the second time, the phone rings to voicemail, so I leave a similar message to the one I had already left. Then, after I eat a little, I fall into a long dreamless sleep.

I wake up at 5:30 in the morning, and thrilled that I had actually managed to sleep for a normal amount of time, decide to try to press my luck, and lie in bed for a little longer. I could not fall back to sleep though, for some reason, my thoughts kept cycling back to the library, and Ben, and all of my books. I think for a long while about taking the superintendent job, and how that might allow me to buy some of the books that were now mostly out of reach, but then consider all of the time that I would be off of the streets and the fate of all of the unhidden heads, and so I then try twice as hard to put that out of my mind.

And for some reason, my expulsion from the library, which really hadn't bothered me before, pulses in my brain like a drum, and I lay in bed and think about how I could never again stand in the stillness of the stacks and smell the books, or hide a face where it could be found by someone who was already actively searching for wonder. And I think of how the tables feel, the huge wood tables with the sturdy legs, and the way that the serious books feel with their bindings raw from the hands of readers. And I think about Brian Folz, who loves books, who loves books so much that he has made them his life, and somehow his life has ceased to be about books, and is now about something else, like the priest with his first parish who has found that his pastoral duty now chiefly extends running the finances of a disorganized social club, and has a lot less to do with shepharding a flock. And all of those thoughts build on each other, and fall apart, and build again into new and stronger buildings considerate of the faults of their predecessors.

So, I think about making some heads, but when I do, I notice how many I have to give, and I can't make any at all, and in frustration, I turn to the quiet of the earmuffs, and lay on my bed, and breathe and wait to dream. And I do, and it is dawn and I am in a field, and it is already unbearably hot. In the distance I see a woman crouched down with her colorful dress pulled up around her using a corner of the field as a latrine, and as I gaze around, I see others doing the same, each one alone in search of a little privacy. Then I walk with them back to a hand pump well where they wait to bathe. And I watch as the bathers walk quietly to homes where they sit or crouch together near their doorways and drink small cups of tea with a pleasing smell that I cannot place. Then, I walk with some men to the field where I arrived; they talk a bit, but cannot see me. I follow one man, as he walks into a low crop of some sort of broad leafed grass, and he crouches down and begins to pull out small weeds. I crouch with him, and even though I can feel the heat in the air, and the humidity collecting against my skin, my hands cannot pick the weeds, so I just watch. As he works, the day becomes hotter and hotter, and the man's pace slows. At the end of one of the rows of his crops, he pulls a weed, and when he does, he upturns a rock about the size of my fist. He picks up the rock, and holds it in his hands. I stand, and walk behind him, and watch as he cleans it off with his thumb. As he does, I see the face appear. It is hairless, and eyes are gone, but it is a head all the same. He stands and walks to his bucket where he drops the object in and returns to his work.

In the afternoon, I follow the man to his home, where his wife waits near a low open kitchen. He hands her the bucket, and she looks through it, and removes a few things that I assume to be

onions. As she prepares the lunch, I walk to look into the bucket. There is no trace of the head, and I cannot see it among the foods laid out for preparation. So, I watch as the woman cooks, but there is still no evidence of the head, so I return to the field to look for it. As I walk to the field, I start to notice that my heavy boots are leaving deep marks along dirt trail. A trail that is used to the gentler traffic of bare feet. I also notice that I am sweating. I am no longer just hot, I am actually sweating, a deep stinking sweat that rolls into my eyes and collects onto my shirt, and am holding my eyebrows high to divert the sweat, while at the same time squinting to fight the sun, and then I pass a group of men. And those men... Those men can see me. And they look at me with a mix of confusion and disgust and I walk past them sweating and overdressed in my heavy boots, and long pants, and one of them says something to me, but I cannot understand him.

Then a second group of men come along the path, and those men see me as well, and those men know exactly who I am, a spoiled alien walking in a dream, and one of those men pulls a dirt clod that was stuck onto the bottom of his hoe, and he throws it at me. It misses, but I don't run. I stand there, and that seems to make the men even more frustrated because they reach down to the path, and come up with rocks and stones, and throw those at me as well. And finally, I am hit. Hard in the face, by something solid, and I bring my hands to my face just as I am hit, and in doing so; catch the object that hits me. And I look down into my hands, and the blood from my face runs onto the clay head that I am holding... and then I rip the earmuffs from my ears.

In the mirror, I am not bleeding, but my face still hurts. I touch my skin gently to feel for injury, and in a few places it is tender, but there is no real evident sign of being hit with anything... I force myself to eat something, and then, I think of the library again. Without any other reasonable solution to the library problem, I call Ben's case worker, and once again, she does not answer. So, I pack my bag. Very gently, I collect every face that I have, and I go out into the street. I consider walking up to the library to see if they will let me inside, but I decide against it, and walk to St. Paul's instead. The cathedral is cool, and smells of incense. I walk along the aisle and run my hands across the wood paneled walls as I go. The sounds of my footsteps echo through the building as I walk. I sit for a while, and watch the windows diffuse the light, and I think about all of the workers who built this building and wonder if any of them donated their craft. I would wager that a lot of them did, and that is as good an argument for religion as any, as far as I am concerned, or at least the ones that value great craftsmen. So, then I look around for a place to hide one of my heads, but even in looking, it starts to feel like an insult to all of the other people who donated their art to build this building.

So, I go back out to the street and walk around the building looking for a place to put one of the heads, but nowhere on the building makes sense. In between the cathedral and the rectory, I come across a small koi pond presided over by a statue of St. Francis of Assisi. The rocks surrounding the pond are about the same size as one of the heads, and there, I find a place to hide one. Then, I sit and watch the pond for a while. From my seat, I have a view of the steps and I can see people trickling into the church. I watch them for a while and wonder how many of them really look at the art, or feel the walls, and I'm sure that some of them do, and some of them don't, and then I see a priest exit the rectory building, and begin a slow progress down the stairs. He is heavy and old, and he seems uncertain of the quality of his joints, and I look from him to the statue of St. Francis, and wonder at how different they look, with the young St. Francis magnetic to creatures of the earth, and the old priest gingerly fighting the forces of himself. So, I stand up and walk over to him.

“There are a lot of people already inside, father” I say

“That’s good” says the priest

“Is it some kind of Saints’ day?”

“No...Not a major one. It is always some saint’s day” he says

Then, the priest takes a few more gentle steps and says, “the 25th of October, yes. It is technically the feast of St. Crispin, but that is no longer on the liturgical calendar”

“Like the battle of Agincourt” I say

“You like Shakespeare, do you?” Says the priest as he continues on, paying more attention to his footing than to me.

“Then he will strip his sleeve and show his scars and say, these wounds I had on Crispin’s day”

“Ah...impressive” says the priest “are you planning on joining us inside?”

“I was enjoying the pond” I say

“Well, enjoy it, then.” He says, and he continues into the church without me.

So, I go back and sit next to the pond, and the fish start to collect themselves in front of where I sit, and I look under the bench to see if someone had possibly decided to store a container with a bit of food for them there, but there is nothing. So I move to the other side of the small pond to try to indicate to them that I have nothing, but the fish follow me again, and I wonder if they know about what happened with me and the cat. If maybe, I had somehow managed to hold onto what the man with the dogs had, or St. Francis carved in stone will always have, and I decide that it would be best if I go to the zoo to find out.

Getting to the zoo requires taking the bus, but the stop is close, and after I ask a few people, I manage to identify the proper one that will take me there. The rhythm of the big vehicle is soothing, and I rest my head against the window as we drive, and feel the vibration of the road course through my body. The people who advised me what route to take, however, were slightly wrong, and I ultimately discover that I am only on the bus that goes close to the zoo, but not directly to the gates, but the driver is understanding, and ignores the sign insisting that she not be talked to, and explains a lengthy transfer process that would allow me to be driven directly to the front. But instead, I decide to get off of the bus, and walk the rest of the distance myself, but before I do, I leave one of the better clay heads in the separation between my seat and the wall.

The critical aspects of the zoo are unchanged from my childhood; the entrance is basically the same. There is still the same impossibly long escalator that used to fill my heart with expectation and joy, and for a moment, I even consider taking a ride on the train that I loved so much, but am disappointed to find that it is closed for the season. I walk while to the first exhibit, a habitat of tigers, and watch them for a long while. I try to still my mind and breathe, but there is a young man and his date to the left of me, and she is suffering through a lengthy monologue about a television program he saw about a man with a pet tiger who was eaten by the tiger, and while the story is, in fact, somewhat interesting, I am a bit disappointed that I cannot concentrate enough to make any kind of contact with the tigers. So, I walk a little further, and try to repeat the process again with the lions, and for a moment, one of the sleeping lions lifts its head and looks at me with its bored eyes and yawns. Then it stretches itself out further and expands its paws so that I can notice the articulation of each claw, and then rolls to its side in a dramatic return to sleep. I

pass a few more exhibits, and watch an ostrich for a while, but I decide against trying to telepathically communicate with the ostrich because it looks deranged.

Then, I walk to the area where the elephants are kept, but none of them are in the outside enclosure, probably owing to the slight chill in the air, so I proceed to the huge building that serves as their winter home. The first large pen is empty save for a young woman who is very efficiently pushing a wide broom. Beyond her, though an enormous door, I can see the shape of an elephant patently waiting to be returned to the space. I can see that there is an elaborate system of massive steel doors that allow the elephants to be moved from room to room without endangering the trainer, and a system of troughs that allow for easy cleaning. The room is painted a dusty yellow, and around the top is a border of geometric shapes intended to read as an African motif. In the next pen there is an adolescent elephant who is slowly pacing around. Behind that elephant I can also see another door that reveals the same network of passageways that I could discern in the first enclosure. The juvenile elephant is separated from an even larger enclosure that is about the size of an ice rink by a gigantic prison door made of steel tubing. In that enclosure is an even younger elephant who is vainly reaching his trunk through the bars into the adolescent elephant's enclosure while its mother paces the perimeter of the concrete ice rink.

I am alone in the building except for the trainer in the empty pen, so I stand and watch the adolescent elephant. I start to calm myself. I breathe gently, in and out through my nose, and try to match my heartbeat to the rhythm of the room, but the thump of the trainer's broom and movement of the mother elephant in the next enclosure make it difficult, so I watch the adolescent elephant for a while instead. I try to look into his eye, and he walks along the bars in front of me, and I notice something of an equine quality in his glance, and then I am struck by how unusual it is that something this large could be a prey animal, but it is true, and I realize that my intense stare is a distraction. So, I look to the ground instead, and try only to sense the elephant in the room. I close my eyes for a moment and breathe, and when I do, I start to feel the deep pulse of the elephant's heart in my body. I try to stand very still and radiate calm. After a minute or two, I can feel the elephant's heart start to slow, and I watch as it moves along side of the bars. Directly in front of me, at the end of the bars, at about eye level with the elephant, there is a large metal link chain that was presumably hung there as some kind of diversion for the animal. The elephant stops pacing along the bars, and gently lifts the end of the chain with his trunk. Then, he drops the chain. Then, he picks up the chain again, and feeds it into his mouth, and turns towards me.

The elephant lets the chain fall from his mouth again, and puts his trunk through the bars. I can look at him directly now, as he extends his trunk to me. I consider reaching out to him, but even if I could, there is a low concrete barrier that prevents any of this sort of interaction. So, I stand and watch him, but I don't think to communicate with him because there is nothing I can really say to encapsulate everything that a person should say to an elephant when he looks at him though a cage built by his own kinsmen, so I just stand there instead. And then a family comes in. A wonderful happy family, who are solid representatives of everything that is worthwhile about my own species, and the elephant's heart races again, and nothing I can do will convince him that they aren't hunters, so I leave.

And I sulk through the monkey exhibit thinking about trained monkeys, and lonely forgotten dogs living lives at the ends of chains, and the lives of the people who put the dogs onto the chains, and I think about finding a place to hide a head, and then I hear a voice behind me.

“Luke? Luke Kolbe?”

I turn towards the sound, and a smiling face topped by a red heat that says Slazenger is inches from me, and the man is taking my hand in his and shaking it.

“Holy shit, man. How long has it been? Ten years? At least ten years...”

The man puts his arm around me.

“Honey, this is Luke Kolbe. You remember I told you about him? He used to be one of the bartenders down at Hailey’s Tap Room”

The man introduces me to his family, his wife, his two children, and I smile, and shake their hands, and say nice things about the children, and laugh along with the man as he tells them of great times that we had apparently had that I have absolutely no recollection of. And then the man asks his wife if she would be willing to take the children “up ahead a little bit” while we catch up, and she seems a little bit annoyed, but agrees, and she tells me that “it was nice to finally meet the legendary Luke Kolbe” and she seems sincere, so I thank her sincerely, and watch as they all walk away, and when they are out of sight, the man grins and says to me, “man, what are you doing here?”

“I came to look at the animals. “I say

“Oh shit, you never change, man. ...” He reached out and grabbed my shoulder “I miss that. We used to laugh our asses off”

I smile, but can’t think of anything to say

“So what about you? Last I heard you were in real estate, huh?” He says

“Yeah, in the summers mostly”

“So, what like residential, commercial..?”

“No, apartments. I’m an agent for Reinhold management”

“They have a bunch of agents there, or what?”

“Actually, I’m the only one” I say

“No, kidding? So, I bet you get all the listings huh?”

“I guess so, they have about six hundred units, I keep them rented”

“I bet you do. “He says “hey, actually, it is kind of lucky that I ran into you. A buddy of mine from the club, Chip Brady... do you remember Chip?”

Off to my left, a little boy is running with one of those rectangular boxes of popcorn and a look of unrestrained glee on his face. Then, because is watching the popcorn instead of where he is going, he runs directly into the leg of a woman who is replacing a bag in one of the trashcans, and he falls, and the popcorn spills everywhere.

“Sucks to be that kid” my companion says. “Anyway, him and some other guys set up this company where they are renovating some of these old churches and schools and turning them into condos”

“Sounds interesting” I say, still watching as the little boy’s mother comes over to comfort him over the loss of his popcorn

“Oh, yeah. These guys are cleaning up to. Making piles of cash”

“Good for them” I say

“That’s what I’m getting at. They said they were looking around for their own agent. I guess the broker's fees are killing them”

“It can be expensive” I say

“I’m going to tell them about you. You would be perfect. Perfect. You have a card or something?”

“A business card? No. I think they are all at home”

The man reaches into his wallet, and takes out one of his, and hands it to me “well, here is mine. Send me your contact information, and I will put you in touch with these guys. Man, talk about coincidence. That is fantastic; he was just telling me about that”

I look at his card “Thanks” I say

“Hey, I better catch up with everybody, or I am going to hear about it all night from the wife, but seriously, e-mail me about that. It was great to see you” he says

“Good to see you, too” I say

“Enjoy the animals, you fucking lunatic” he says, grinning at me.

I smile back “I will do my best.” I say, and the man laughs loudly, and slaps me on the shoulder again, and then jogs away.

After the zoo, I don’t feel like trying to navigate the bus schedules again, so I decide to walk home. It is a long walk, but manageable for a person without a schedule, and it gives me the chance to think of something other than terrified elephants and chance encounters with ghosts of my past. There would also be many places to hide the heads along the way. And so, I walk. And I hide a head in a tree, and at an old synagogue that is now a community center, and at the foot of a statue. I give one to a guy on a bicycle who doesn’t ask any questions, just solemnly puts it into his pocket, and rides away. Then, I go and eat alone at the noodle restaurant, but the old woman isn’t there, and I leave one of the heads along with the tip. After I eat, I’m not tired at all, so I consider walking to Ben’s apartment to see if he is home, but it is already too dark to walk in his neighborhood alone, so I decide against it.

I go back to my apartment and look through my notebooks for a while, but nothing surprises me, and anything that was decent, I have already committed to memory, so I put on the radio instead, but before I do, I checked my phone to see if I had received a return phone call from Ben’s social worker, but I had not. So, even though the office is closed, I call again, and leave her another message to remind her that I am still expecting a response. I listen to music for the entire night. It is fantastic. Every note is like a bite of food, and every pause, like rest for my body, and I sit in the chair and listen, and watch the dawn arrive again accompanied by song, and then the morning show programs begin. And they are inane and base, and frantic, and full of obsessions about traffic and politics and scandal, and they turn the food of my soul into something hard and stale and worthless, and the announcers are so full of answers and so empty of questions that weren’t secret accusations, that I want to run into the street and hide heads in every hiding spot I could find. But the heads are gone. I had given them all away, and I could make more, but it

would mean time, and being confined to this room, and this noise on the radio, so I go out on the street despite it all, to visit my heads.

It is 7:30 when I leave my building, and within a few hours, I could check a lot of the heads, and hopefully find that most of them were gone, and their absence would fill me with the energy to make more, and then maybe I could rest. So, I walk first to the woods, to the stand of trees where I had hidden the face to keep watch over the place in my dream. And I am happy to find that one, even though it is damp and its little glass eyes are accusing, it is fine that that one should stay to keep watch for me if I am to turn back into a tree, and discourage any opportunistic hawks that would seek to build a nest in me. But, most of the rest are there too. The ones in trees and behind benches, and in graveyards, and under statues, most of those are there. Some are gone though, and that gives me solace. By 3, I have made my way back to the cathedral to check the face by the pond, and it is there too, but it has been turned over. It had been found and hidden again, so I move it. Then, with nothing more to do, I walk to the library to wait for Ben, but he is not outside when I arrive, so I change my mind about waiting, and walk to the office of his social worker instead. When I get there, it is ten minutes to five, and the woman at the desk has already collected her things to leave for the day and arranged them on the counter top to signify her intention of escaping as soon as she is able, and I ask again for Maria Olson, and the receptionist tells me that she has already left for the day without even checking her extension, so I walk out without saying goodbye.

At home, with nothing to read, and no energy to make anything, I fight to stay awake. I know that I should sleep, but I know too that when I will do, I will dream. And the dream will be the devil's second favorite story, about what might have been. About a man named Luke Kolbe who put away childish things and moved on to Slazenger baseball caps and outings with the family at the zoo, and discovered the mechanisms for decency where normal people do. But the shoe that fits one pinches another. It was Carl Jung that said that, and he went crazy, too. Incidentally, I know that is what you are thinking. I have known that all along, but I did not have a choice. There was a time for me that there were no clay heads, no endless walking days. But this is my compromise. Because there was once an endless envying thirst where all this used to be. And then there came a time that I realized that it is only evil things that really cling to you, that hunt you, that always require your feedings and attention and only grow more to wear your body like a suit of clothes, and then, when you have fed it so much that it can no longer fit inside of you, it escapes, and gives you back a shell. A big vacant house with no heat, and no furniture, and unpaid taxes, and a million problems that you didn't make and can't solve. But I shouldn't have said any of this because I don't know any of this to be true, no one does. Morality is a police force that could stand to have far fewer deputies.

And when I do sleep, my mind awakens into a tailor shop and a little man is fitting me for a suit of clothes, a fine black tuxedo with a cummerbund and a velvet stripe on the pant leg and neat lapels. And the man explains that I will need very few alterations because the suit that he had in stock will fit me almost perfectly. A previous customer had neglected to pick it up, but I am insistent that the pants are too short, and the tailor argues with me, and explains that my complaints are without merit because I am shoeless in a dressing room, and the suit is to be worn on the street with a fine opera slipper. And so, I run across the shop and snatch a shoe from the display and sit down and insist that he prove to me that the pants are correct. Then, the little tailor kneels down and places the shoe on my foot, and when he does I say "you must take me to the ball now". The tailor looks up at me quickly, and then his face becomes the face of the man



from the theatre and he smiles theatrically and says, "So it was you all along". And we laugh together at our stupid joke and the man from the theatre smiles and explains that he will be unable to attend the performance tonight, and asks if I could take the stage in his place, and buoyed by our camaraderie, I agree without question.

And so, I go the playhouse, and when I arrive the actors are in disarray because the director is nowhere to be found, and I explain that I have only come to fill in for the man, and one of the actors explains to me that I am to be tasked with the narration of the performance, but none of them have a script, and they intend to perform whatever I explain to the crowd. So, I search the entire building for a script or an outline or a suggestion as to what I am supposed to say, and I find only a dusty old book full of scenes in a familiar poetic form, but the actors revolt and demand I improvise and present something more contemporary. So, I ask for their suggestions regarding a theme, and they decide that we will perform a play about a thwarted bank robbery.

And as I tell the story, the actors perform my tale about a simple man who has a loving family, and a stable life, who while waiting in line at the bank, becomes a victim of a robbery that involves a lot of shooting and angry words improvised by the actors, and the man decides to stop the bandit by nobly risking his life to protect others. The crowd cheers wildly at the crescendo and the actors take to the stage and bow, and there is whistling and flowers and everybody is very satisfied with the performance as the actors exit the stage. So, then I gather all of them together to suggest a second act where the man learns to live as a hero, and wrestles with why he alone was chosen to thrive and survive while others perished, and all of the actors get mad, and they force me onto the stage to see that the audience has gone. Then the man from the tailor shop, and the man from the theatre who are the same man playing the same role in different places comes and asks that I return the shoes that I borrowed, and I do, and I walk home alone in the tuxedo without my shoes.

And when I get home, Ben is there. The real Ben. And I am wearing my real clothes.

"Your feet are bleeding" He says

"I was wearing slippers, but I gave them back" I say

And I stand for a while and watch the dawn rise behind Ben and he says to me "you have to take this back" and in his hand, he is holding the small box that I gave him

"It was a gift, Ben. I gave it to you, because we are friends"

"I can't keep it. I don't want to keep it"

"Why?" I ask

"Because when people are friends they try to see each other. You don't come around anymore; you just gave me this so that I would go away"

"No. No. that is not it at all. Not even a little bit. They kicked me out of the library"

"They wouldn't kick you out of the library" He says

"No, they did. They said I was causing a problem because I was hiding those heads there for people to find"

Ben lights a cigarette and draws deeply on it. "Stop. That doesn't make sense. They don't kick people out of places for giving things away...for giving things away. It doesn't make sense."

“I know. I know, Ben, but that is what happened. There is a guy there, his name is Brian Folz”

“Do you think I am stupid...I know who he is. I know what you are saying. I know people do that. They make up things, and then, when they want people to believe the things they make up, they put something true in the thing that they say. I know Brian Folz. Fine. That part is true. There is a Brian Folz, that doesn't make the rest of it true”

“Ben, please. I know. I know what it sounds like, but it's true. He gave me a warning about it, but then I had them there anyway, and so they banned me” I say

“If they gave you a warning, why did you do it?”

“Because it is my art, I guess. I don't know. It is a different thing. When you have something that you have to give away.”

“I don't have an art” Ben says

“You could. You could if you want to. Do you want to come inside? I could give you some clay”

“I also talked to Maria about it”

“Maria who?”

“The lady I talk to. The case worker. I told her about the head, and you, and how you haven't been at the library, and how you came to my place, and how you were out there talking to that guy who drinks the mouthwash”

“What did she say?”

“She said that she thinks that I should stay away from you. She says that I should be...cautious about your motivations” Ben looks away, and searches his pockets for his cigarettes and lighter. He lights another cigarette.

“You can't believe that. Look, I know that sometimes, for you, things can seem a little...”

“No. Fuck that, no. Don't start on that shit with me. Look at you. Look at yourself. You are standing here with your feet bleeding all over the ground, talking to me about...”

“Ben, honestly, there is a good explanation for...”

“It used to be the trumpet” he says

“What did?”

“My art. My art used to be the trumpet. I was in honors band in high school”

“Well, then you know what I mean... Do you still have one?”

“No. Maybe at my parents I do, but I don't know” he says

“You could get another” I say

“Ok, so what if what you are saying is true? That they kicked you out. Kicked you out for giving something away for free that wasn't hurting anyone at all...why would that happen?”

“I don't know, I guess because people want simple answers” I say

“Do you think that the devil is after us?” He asks

I laugh “No Ben. I don’t. Not even a little bit, do I think that the devil is after us”

“Why would he be?” Ben says

“Exactly” I say

“No, seriously, why would he be?” Ben says, looking at me pleadingly.

“He’s not, Ben”

“You don’t even want to answer the question, do you? You don’t even want to think of a possible reason. Here, just take this. “He shoves the box at me, and I take it, and Ben turns to walk away

“Wait!” I say, and Ben faces me again “Ok, hypothetically only, not any kind of real reason at all, just me humoring you, the only possible reason the devil is after us is because he has exhausted every other single person on the earth. There is not one shred of influence between either of us. If there was a devil, and if that devil was after us, he would have fully had his fill of every pimp, and drug pusher, and war lord and crooked business man, dirty politician, and wife beater, and..”

“Or, maybe he thinks he can get his hooks into one of us and make us do something really fucked up that will turn good people bad without them thinking about it too much...did you ever fucking think of that?” Ben shouts as he throws his cigarette into the street

“No, Ben. I never thought of that at all, and you shouldn’t either.”

Ben points one of his thick fingers at me “Don’t tell me what to think, you mother fucker” and he steps from the sidewalk and into the street.

When he reaches the other side, I shout “You should buy a trumpet!”

Ben waves his hand into the air, but doesn’t say anything. I watch him walk away, and when he is out of my sight, I look down at my feet. They are filthy, and bleeding, and in terrible condition. I search my pockets for keys, but my pockets are empty, so I sit down and wait. And think, and try to reconstruct a way that I would have left my apartment, and where exactly I could have gone in the course of the night. For the first time, probably ever, I actually consider that there may be something seriously unfixably wrong. Everything else outside looks normal. The street, the stray racing cars of morning commuters, the cold air, maybe it is only me that is different. After about an hour, a young woman exits the building on her way to class, and I race up to the door, and grab it before it closes. She recognizes me and smiles, and then looks down at my feet, and I can see a trace of shock cross her face, but I quickly explain that I had got locked out taking out my trash, and had been trying to get back into the building for a while. We share a little laugh over my predicament, and I hope that she does not look closely enough to see that I am bleeding. After she is gone, I race up the stairs to my apartment tracking blood and mud as I walk. When I get to my door, it is mercifully unlocked. I walk inside, and notice that nothing is disturbed. My bed is orderly. Everything still shows signs of my rush organizational efforts a few days earlier.

I scour the apartment for my shoes, but they are nowhere to be found. The only other footwear I have is an old pair of shower sandals, and so, I wash and bandage my feet, and put on the sandals. Then, after a bit more searching, I find my keys in one of their normal places, and walk to the basement maintenance closet where I retrieve a mop and a bucket. I carry the mop back to

my apartment, and clean the entire floor, and after that, I move onto the hallway and stairs where I diligently remove the evidence of my shoeless nocturnal sojourn. As I am finishing the lobby, I hear a key in front door, and after a brief delay, Ron Reinhold, the building's owner and manager, and my seasonal boss, walks in. When he sees me mopping, he smiles broadly and says "Well, well, does this mean that you have finally decided to take me up on my offer, Lukas?"

"I was just doing a little bit of cleaning up." I say

"And to think, all you have to do is say the words and your 'little bit of cleaning' can turn into a superintendant's title and a nice discount on your rent."

"Ok. You've worn me down, Ron. I'll do it" I say

"that a' boy. I knew this was going to turn out to be a good day. "He says, and he reaches out to shake my hand. And as he does, he looks down at my bandaged feet

"Holy shit, man. What the hell happened to your feet?" He asks

I look down as if I hadn't noticed the bandages that covered each one of my toes "have you heard of this barefoot running thing?"

"No, but it sounds like some kind of kooky bullshit, perfect for a guy like you" he says laughing, and I laugh too. "I was just thinking that you were looking pretty thin. Is that the culprit? Running around with no shoes?"

I look into Ron's pleasant smiling face, "I have been getting quite a bit of exercise"

"That is the sign of a true professional. Staying fit in the off season"

"Spring will be here before we know it" I say

"Well, don't overdo it there, star quarterback, god knows I'm not can't rent all these apartments myself" He says

I smile at him, "Don't worry coach."

"In the meantime, I already have your first duty as the new super." He reaches into his briefcase and removes a large envelope and hands it to me "the lease amendment for Mr. Thigpen in 1A...I was going to slide it under his door, but if you could get him to sign it and bring it by the office, I would appreciate it"

I take the envelope from him "Sure thing."

"The beginning of a beautiful partnership" he says

"I always thought we already had a beautiful partnership" I say

Ron laughs "a more beautiful partnership, then"

"I will bring it by the office as soon as I get it back from him" I say

"No rush. "

Then, he shakes my hand again and says "In the meantime, you might want to consider getting some rest. You are looking a little worn down"

"Too much exercise"

He looks down at my feet again “It looks like your body might be agreeing with you there, pal”

I say goodbye to him, and watch as he leaves, the heavy front door slamming behind him. Then, I return the mop and bucket to the maintenance closet, and go and knock on Donald’s door. There is no answer, so I return to my apartment and write a note on the front of the envelope asking him to sign the enclosed documents and return them to me, and go back down stairs and slide the parcel under his door. Then I go back up to my apartment. I search the entire place again for a sign of my shoes, but I still cannot find them. Cleaning the hallway had given me a bit of time to clear my head, but back in my home, the panic over the event of the previous evening returns. I consider seeking out some more minor projects around the building to occupy my time, but decide against it, and turn on the stereo instead. I cue up some Fugazi, and let the sounds of 80s hardcore drown out my thoughts for a while, but it only works for seconds at a time, so I turn the music louder, and then louder still until I can feel the beat inside of my body. After a while though, the music loses its effect, and I turn it off, and lie down on the bed and try to rest. My resting body causes my mind to revolt, and soon, my thoughts are racing even faster than before as I imagine dozens of horrible scenarios that could have resulted in the loss of my shoes and the black hole of my memory.

I put on my earmuffs and try to mediate for a while, but my mind will not let me relax, so without any other options, I seek the only universal refuge for the tormented and collect my keys and wallet and put on my shower sandals and leave the building. Fortunately, the only bar on my street opens early, and as I walk into its cool stale darkness there are already two other lost souls occupying the stools. I sit down and order a beer, which I drink quickly and order another. The service is prompt, nonjudgmental and impersonal. I sit and have three beers in the presence, not company, of the other two men, as they drink silently, and blow their cigarette smoke towards the television showing the morning news. The alcohol hits my empty stomach quickly, and I bask in the familiar cloudy headed comfort of the beer for a while, and am happy that no one wants to talk. By noon, I am earnestly drunk, and the bar begins to welcome some noisier patrons who mostly ignore the skinny man in dress pants and shower sandals with his eyes fixed onto the television. When the bartender’s shift is over, another equally efficient one replaces her, and she makes me the mayonnaise and tomato sandwich which will serve as my dinner. Slowly, the early regulars drift away and are replaced by the afternoon patrons who give way to small groups of students, who drink quickly, talk loudly and are prone to the overt friendliness of novice drinkers. A few of them recognize me as the person who rented them their apartment, and try to start conversations with me that I do my best to reciprocate, and I find myself elaborating on my fabricated story about a barefoot running injury.

After a while, I am coaxed into a few games of pool that I play poorly but enthusiastically, and I work hard to make myself into a pleasant unobtrusive companion. Then, I get a flash of panic that I will say too much outside of my own will, so I excuse myself, pay my tab and walk home. As I exit the bar a rush of air provides a cold reminder of the world outside of the tavern, and I walk home slanting my body into the wind, and trying to maintain my failing balance. My sandal fails before I do and the separation of the thong before the sole causes me to fall hard onto the sidewalk. I sit on the ground for a while and try to repair the sandal, but my motor skills decide against it, and I resign to walking home with one functional shoe.

In my apartment, I drink a glass of milk and fall into a deep dreamless sleep. I wake in a heavy sweat at three in the morning and manage to drag my tired body to the bathroom where I am too tired to stand to urinate. I sit on the toilet and fall briefly asleep and lose my balance, and again

return to my bed. I wake for good at nine in the morning to a flash of panic about another forgotten night. I make myself something to eat, and try to reconstruct the events of the previous day, and am happy to discover that I mostly managed to conduct myself normally, and for a few blissful moments, I sit and eat and remember the inside of the bar and companionship, and then my memory catches up with me again and points out the broken shoe, and the broken shoe recalls its missing cousin, and its missing cousin is a memento of a missing day, and I am back in the place where I began.

And I sit and think about all the times where alcohol was only a delay, and not a solution, and so I resolve to do something productive. So, I shower and shave, and with some duct tape, reassemble my sandal into a partially functional piece of footwear, and collect a pair of socks and go out into the street to the bus stop. I get on the first bus that comes, and ride it for a long while through neighborhoods I don't know until finally it stops at a small promising looking shopping center. I get off and walk around the small outdoor mall in my tired sandals with my feet aching, and am disappointed to find that there is no decent shoe store. I try on a few pairs at a retail big box store, but all of them pinch my aching feet, so I return to the bus stop again and wait. The next bus finally does take me to a mall with a good variety of shoe stores, and I find a durable pair that will tolerate a lot of walking and look respectable enough for the springtime rental season.

It is late when I get home, but I am satisfied with the new shoes, and am happy to sit for a while and confuse acquisition with accomplishment, and I look over my worktable and consider making some new heads, but my mind feels genuinely ready to rest, so I start to prepare myself for an early slumber when I hear a knock at my door. I open it, and Donald is standing there.

"You don't have no robe, or nothing?" He says when I open the door. And I look down at myself and realize that I am without a shirt, and I invite him inside, and turn around to find one

When I return, Donald says "where's all you stuff?"

"This is all my stuff" I say turning to look at my apartment

"Here I thought you were doing all right" he says

"I am doing all right. I just don't like to have a lot of stuff I need to keep track of"

"To each his own..." Donald says looking at me a little strangely "Here's that paper for the company"

"Oh, good. I will take that over to them. Did everything look fine to you?"

"Yeah. It's fine. It all looks fine" he says

"Well, good. I'm glad they could work something out. How is the cat doing?"

"Yeah, fine." Donald says "Look, I can't believe I'm telling you this, especially after looking at how you live, but that girl works on Mondays"

"I know" I say

"And she takes her break at 1:30"

"Ok" I say

"...a normal man might try to figure out a way to run into her on her break when she actually might want some company instead of just hangin' around trying to look at 'er"

“Oh...I see what you are saying”

“All right, so if you do bump into her down in the cafeteria, don't go saying something stupid like ‘Donald said you would be down here’”

“Do you think I am that stupid, Donald?”

“Man, yes. I do. But you hooked me up here on this other thing... so no we even”

“We didn't need to be even” I say

“People always need to be even. Now, don't say you know me, don't say you knew she'd be on break, don't do nothing strange”

“Oh, come on” I say

“And if it does go right, and it probably won't, but if it does...don't try to bring her back here, you can't bring no woman back to your house where you got a bed and table and that's it”

“I have a pretty nice stereo” I say

“And you need to keep that turned down, too. Not just then, but in general. You play that shit too loud”

“Did you hear that I am the new super in this building?” I say

“Well, I ain't gonna need anything fixed, so that don't matter”

“Ok. Well, thanks, Donald” I say extending my hand to him

He doesn't shake my hand. As he walks away, he says, “We even. If I need anything else, I'm gonna call the company”

“Ok” I shout after him. “Either way, thanks”

I go back into my apartment happier than I had been since the day I spoke to the elephant. Donald is wrong about my place too, I am certain the girl from the museum knows the difference between minimalist and spartan. All of the sudden, I did not feel tired at all. So, I decide to make some heads, and plan on making one really nice one to give to the girl from the museum. Then, as I reach in the desk drawer to get out my clay, I find the small handmade container that I had fashioned for Ben. I pick it up, and gingerly open it. Inside, the head is still just as it was when I made it: the glass eyes, the eyelashes that took forever for look just right, the hair styled into a little fifties milk man buzz cut, the whole thing is perfect, a tiny masterpiece. Then, I decide that I cannot top this rejected sculpture, at least today, so I sit and try to listen to music again, but the head reminds me of Ben, and my missing shoes, and the indulgent day wasted in the bar, and it eats all of my energy away. And the music sounds terrible, just pointless sounds, and outside, it starts to rain. And I imagine all of my forgotten heads languishing unfound in the rain, little kernels of wonder free for anyone, becoming distorted and wasting away forgotten in the sodden preoccupied world outside my window. My mind performs a play for me, where the girl from the museum throws away the head I gave her again and again, and I think about the heads in the library and try not to imagine their fate too. I try to imagine one surviving, and serving as my proxy reading all of the books I am forbidden to read. So, I force myself to remember Emerson and his maxim that the one opinion of the world is a confession of his character, and so I make myself stop.... Stop being another scared pessimist obsessing over the negative.

And so, I lay on my bed and put on my earmuffs, and control my breath, and gratefully, concentration comes easily, and the rhythm of my breathing takes me to the grove of trees where I once lived as a tree myself, and there is a wedding there with a bride in a white dress and a man in a tuxedo, and a healthy oak tree as the presider. It is a beautiful ceremony. The music is traditional, but the service is ecumenical with hand fasting, and a Chuppah, and a formal reception of Holy Communion by the couple. And then it is me, the groom. And the girl from the museum is bride, and I can feel my heart swell at the realization of this wonderful possibility, and I know now that I am dreaming and not flying, and I can relax even more because the man from the theatre will not be invited to the reception.

And the bride and I are turned and presented to our audience of trees and they all erupt in joyous swaying. So, she and I walk to a small wooden box, and kneel together, and turning a single key, we unlatch the lid, and lift it open, and from it flies a dozen white doves, and the trees sway even more grandly. Then the hawk, the uninvited guest of the groom, retrieves one of the doves from the air, and flies it to his nest lined with medical letters, and proceeds to prepare it with unrestrained zeal, but my bride does not see. She only notices the little bits of down that float gently from the sky, and she turns her face up like a child catching a snow flake and opens her mouth. A tiny feather from the departed dove lands gracefully on her tongue. She turns to spit it out, and the hawk moves to edge of the nest and cocks his head to the side, and looks at me fiercely with his accusatory eyes, and I am awake.

Outside my window, the rain continues. A steady, determined late October rain, but I get dressed to go out anyway. I lace my new shoes, put on my coat, and take the umbrella out of my closet, and then I walk out into the weather. It is a long walk, and I have a bit of difficulty in the dark, but ultimately, I manage to find the stand of pines. By the time I get there, the rain has slowed a bit, and in the near total darkness, I check the earth for signs of the dove feathers, but I find nothing. Then I try to search out the head. I find the tree where I had left it, and dig around the base searching for the head, but I cannot find it. So, I conclude that I must have been mistaken about the specific tree, and instead move to another tree, and search around the base of it. I repeat this process around nearly every tree in the grove, and by the time I am finally done, my pants are ruined, and it is nearly dawn. The head is missing.

I am so excited that someone had finally found the head, and even more, had taken it home, that I nearly begin to cry. Then for good measure, I sit on the soaking ground and wait until the light fully comes, and check around every tree again. Still, I do not find the head. The morning chill makes my soaking clothing feel like unnecessary cast, and I notice that I have started to shake. So, I decide to jog home from the park in an attempt to regain some of my body heat. I am halfway down the trail before I realize that I have left my umbrella, and return on tired legs to retrieve it. I search for a while and cannot locate it until I notice something black laying alongside a small patch of bushes at the edge of the pine grove. I walk over to retrieve my umbrella, and instead discover a pair of shoes. My shoes, that is to say, my old shoes, soaking wet and covered in mud, and tucked neatly behind them, my umbrella. I look at the little collection of my personal objects, and feel a flood of relief wash over me. If my shoes are here, I reason, the likelihood that I wandered anywhere truly strange in my fugue is pretty low. Also, I seem to instinctively gravitate to this space by the bushes to hide things. I consider saving the shoes, but they are too damaged by the weather to wear or donate, so I leave them behind, and jog home with just my umbrella.



When I get back to my building, I enter through the backdoor and go to the basement where I take a long time cleaning off my shoes as not to track any mud up the stairs. Then I remember the head. If I was in the grove, and left my shoes there, I may have also moved the head. The hawk that intrudes on my dreams could have directed me to do that, and worse still steered my ship to destroy even more of my creations. The whole idea makes me feel awful, and I am dejected as I climb the stairs to my apartment, but my brooding is interrupted by a happy diversion, a note under my door that says “clogged toilet 4D. Please rush!” My first sincere duty as building superintendent begins with a return trip to the basement to retrieve a plunger, and I walk back up the stairs to apartment 4D. When I knock on the door, I am met by a thin blank faced student.

“You left a note under my door about a toilet” I say, holding up the plunger

“Oh shit, dude. I thought you would never come” He says and invites me into the apartment. The place is a mess and the air reeks of marijuana. There is another young man sitting on the couch letting the glow of the television reflect off of his face.

“The guy is here to fix the toilet” The first man says to the second, and I greet the man on the couch.

The man on the couch says to me, “oh, I’m sorry about this dude, but we didn’t know what to do. It just wouldn’t flush, and I couldn’t find a plunger, and then Craig, flushes it again, and...”

The other man, presumably Craig, says “luckily neither of us has had to take a shit since. “

And the man on the couch says, “can always piss in the sink, you know what I mean”

I agreed that I knew what he meant, and then went into the bathroom. It was, in fact, a pretty disgusting scene, but I was able to fix everything in less than a minute.

When I exit the bathroom, the man on the couch is lighting a bong, and I say “for future reference, I am going to put a plunger down in the basement in the cabinet next to the washing machines. You run into this problem again, the solution will be right down there”

“Oh, thanks so much, bro. Yeah, sorry about that. Like I said, I don’t know what happened”

“Probably too much toilet paper” I say

“You want to hit this?” The man on the couch asks, gesturing to the bong

“You know, I kind of work for the company, and you are using an illegal drug in one of our buildings...”

“Oh shit!” Says the kid on the couch

“No. no. What I am trying to say is, I can’t join you. And if anyone asks you, I didn’t see anything, and it would be a big help to me if nobody asks you” I say

“Oh yeah, man. Definitely. Sorry about that. You almost gave me a heart attack there for a second” he says

“No I didn’t” I say “I just took too long getting to my point...There was no risk of a heart attack” I smile and the two stoned guys on the couch smile back at me. Then, I notice on their low side table, a trumpet standing on its bell with a single wilted rose sticking out of its mouthpiece.

“Is that your trumpet?” I ask

“That is my flower vase” says the man I presume to be Craig

“Clever” I say

“The rose died. I got it from my girlfriend”

“The trumpet?” I ask

“No, the rose. The trumpet is mine from high school”

“You wouldn’t have an interest in selling it would you? I have a good friend who is in the market for a used trumpet”

“No, probably not, man.” He says

“What if I could pay you now? Say, a hundred and fifty bucks, I can go it the money from my apartment right away” I say

“That’s kind of cheap” he says “it’s a pretty decent trumpet”

“Yeah, but it is a pretty crappy vase” I say

Both of the guys on the couch laugh a little too long, and when they finish, I say, “So, what do you think? \$150?”

“Sure, man” says Craig after a few seconds of feigned deliberation.

Then, after a return to my apartment, and a quick transaction, I am the proud new owner of a decent used trumpet. It is still only 11:30 by the time my superintendent duties are complete, and since it is Sunday, and the changes are decent that Brian Folz will not be there, I decide to go the library. So, I put on a baseball cap as a cursory disguise and collect the trumpet into a small gym bag and walk to the library. When I get there, the guard who handled my original eviction is posted at the door, but I walk quickly by him, and he does not notice me. My plan is to seek out Ben, but I decide first to walk around the library for a little bit first in case I am discovered and forced to leave, I do not want to miss spending time with the books. I prowl the stacks for a while, and search out the hiding places of a few of my heads. They are all gone, even the one behind the Physicians’ Desk Reference. I hope that they have been discovered by people who will keep them.

Then, I find Ben. He is where I expected him to be; at the table where we always met at the mezzanine. He does not have any books on the table in front of him, but he does have an opened case of Coke and a few empty cans across the desk. He has headphones on, and seems to be listening intently. I sit down across from him. He looks up at me, but does not say anything, so I sit and wait. After a few minutes, he still doesn’t talk, so I take off my hat.

“I thought you said you weren’t allowed to come here” he says

“I’m not.”

“Then, why are you here?”

“I figured that Brian Folz wouldn’t be here...I am taking my chances because I wanted to talk to you.” I say

“I am leaving anyway”

“Where are you going?”

“Out of the library, I guess” he says. Then, he starts to pack up his things, and collects his cans into a plastic bag

“Can I come with you?” I ask

“Yeah. You can.” He says

So, we walk out of the library together and Ben lights a cigarette, and then starts quickly up the sidewalk

“Wait, Ben. Can we sit down for a second? I want to talk”

“We already talked. I already heard what you had to say.” He says

“Seriously, just for a second. Let's go sit down over there, just hear me out for a minute”

Ben freezes and watches me for a bit, and then he says “Ok”

So, we sit on the bench together in silence while Ben smokes and then finally, I say “I thought about what you said”

“When I said what?”

“Not when...what. What you said about the devil” I say

“...and you think its bullshit, and it is all in my mind and nothing bad ever fucking happens in the world, huh?”

“No, Ben. That isn't what I am going to say”

“That is what you are thinking” he says

“You don't know what I'm thinking”

“So you just want to argue? Is that why you came here, to argue again about how every but you is wrong?”

“No, man. Listen. I came to say, that if what you are thinking about is true, about the devil and all that.”

“The devil is real Luke. I have seen the devil, and he asked me about you.”

“When was that?”

“When I fucking told you. When I asked you for the new head.” He says

“That was the devil?”

“Who the fuck else would it have been. I mean think about it for a second. Who could it have been?” Ben says

“It could have been anybody. Or it could have been nobody. “

“Nobody?”

“I don't mean it like that, Ben. I mean, people get confused about things”

“I am not fucking confused” he says furiously puffing on his cigarette

“Let's not worry about that right now. What I wanted to say is this: If you're right. I am not going to say that absolutely you are anything, not right or wrong, but if the devil is around, and

he is getting people to think about things that they don't want to, the first thing he would really do is try to drive a wedge between people...to make people suspect each other"

"That is what I have been saying. That is what he fucking wants. "Ben says

"So, why let him win? Why let him convince you that your friends are out to get you?" I say

Ben sits silently for a minute, and I lift up the gym bag "I got you something"

"I don't want anything" he says

"You might want this." I say as I unzip the bag and pull out the trumpet

"What is that?"

"It's a trumpet"

"I know it is a fucking trumpet, but why is it a trumpet?"

"Because it is for you." I say

"You bought me a trumpet"

"I met a guy who had it, and he didn't want it." I say, as I try to hand the trumpet to him.

He takes it from me, and looks at it. "What the fuck is all this shit?"

"I thought you might want to make music. No pressure, man. It isn't a big deal...just...it is yours if you want it"

"Hell yeah, I want it." He says

"Well, there you go then. You have it. A new trumpet"

"Are you coming tomorrow?"

"Here? No. I can't. They still won't let me in."

"You are serious about that?" He asks

"Yeah, I 'm serious. They banned me, plus I am supposed to meet somebody."

"Who?"

"There is this girl from the museum..."

"Well, that will do it, now you really aren't coming back"

"That isn't why I'm not coming back"

"Yes, it is. You got this girlfriend, and I get the big damn kiss off. Here is a trumpet for a consolation prize" he says

"Ben. No. That is not it. First off, I don't have a girlfriend, and I probably won't after tomorrow. I have an appointment. Second, I got another job. I am the super of my building. Which is where I will mostly be, and you can come there anytime you want."

"Your girlfriend won't like me anyway"

"I just said, I don't have a girlfriend. Plus, you know where I'll be. I will also be around; maybe I can even stop by your place sometime, if you want. I just can't come here"

“Brian Folz?”

“Yeah. Brian Folz. He says I can’t come here.”

“Fuck him.” Ben says

“He doesn’t know what he’s doing, Ben. He is like everybody else, he isn’t bad, he is just confused”

“Still, fuck him.” Ben says, and then he is quiet for a while. “You need me to get you some books?” He asks

“Do you have a library card?”

“No, but I could probably get one”

“That’s ok, Ben. They will probably let me back sooner or later”

“I can get them if you want” he says

“You might be too busy practicing your trumpet”

He looks down at the instrument and says, “This thing is going to make me fucking famous. You watch. Nobody thinks so, but it will”

“I hope you enjoy it.” I say

“Oh, I do” says Ben, and he stands up and walks away.

I walk quickly back to my apartment. The exercise feels good, and even though I have barely slept, I don’t feel tired at all, so I decide to collect the envelope containing Donald’s lease amendment and walk it back to the rental office. When I get there, I am surprised to find it open and Ron Reinhold inside filing some papers.

“Donald Thigpen’s lease amendment” I say, handing him the envelope.

“See, that is just what I expect from my all star building superintendents...going above and beyond” he says

“Is that a real thing? An all star building superintendent?”

“It is now, and it is you. Shit man, you are here on a Sunday”

“So are you.” I say

“I own the damn place” he says, and laughs

“I wanted to take walk, get some exercise. I figured if you weren’t here, I would just drop it in the box”

“Have you had to deal with any maintenance issues yet?” He asks

“I had to plunge a toilet this morning, but otherwise, no”

“We sent out a letter to all the other tenants letting them know you were the guy to go to”

“I was wondering”

“Well, now you’ve solved the mystery....hey, do me a favor, would you?”

“Sure, Ron. What is it?”

“Keep an extra close eye on the place tonight, you never know with these kids.”

“I’ve never noticed any loud parties on Sunday nights” I say

”Not the tenants. The kids in the neighborhood. Its devil’s eve.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. It is isn’t it? My dad used to take us out when we were kids to throw toilet paper in the neighbor’s trees” I say

“Yeah, we did, too, but kids today have no respect. They smashed a bunch of our windows over on Hobart last year”

“I didn’t know that”

“Little assholes. “ Ron says

“It’s funny; I was just talking about the devil with a friend of mine. He seems to think that the devil has been visiting him and asking him about me.”

Ron looks at me blankly, and then says “it sounds like you need to get some new fucking friends, brother.”

I smile “you know me. I am friends with everyone”

He laughs. “Ain’t that the truth? Jack off of all trades, master of none”

I laugh with him “I am probably a master of a few”

“Let’s hope so, now you have to promise me that you aren’t going to go around telling people about your friend who talks to the devil.”

“How do you know that isn’t my secret formula for keeping the apartments rented, Ron?”

Ron laughs “then don’t change a thing. Keep filling the place up with all the prompt paying devil worshipers you can find.”

“I knew you would come around.” I say, smiling

“Seriously though, keep an eye out tonight ok?”

“No problem, chief.” I say.

As I walk home from the rental office, I finally get around to thinking about the girl from the museum. I try to think of things that I might say when I first talk to her, and consider for a while, outlining the auspicious circumstances surrounding how I came to know that I would encounter her on her break. Perhaps she knows Donald, or even better still has a fondness for cats, and I can parlay the discussion about the cat into normal topics that will turn into other topics and then onto a full scale conversation. But then I remember my promise to Donald and try to think of another angle. I try to decide if I will bring a lunch with me, so I can meet her expectantly with a full lunch bag, and thus gain an invitation to sit and eat and join her. But she is probably used to talking with people who eat things other than milk, and cheese sandwiches and apples and oranges, so I decide against that. Then I consider that I might wait for her with a book, an interesting book, something heavy and widely read, The Brothers Karamazov perhaps, and maybe she will have read it three times as well, and maybe she will want to talk about it. But she could also be the type that only reads magazines, or worse still, only the internet, and if that is the case, then I will be relieved because we will have nothing to talk about at all. And I am quite good at talking about nothing, and all expectations will be erased.

At home, I have a glass of milk and sit and think some more, and try to decide if the circumstances of my second chance with the girl are in fact a coincidence or a construction of imagination, so I sit at my desk and make a two sided table on a piece of loose leafed paper where I group each bit of evidence in a category, and then try to outline a realistic counterargument. Ultimately, this proves to be a frustrating waste of time, and I instead decide to comb through my closet to find the appropriate outfit. I subscribe to a fashion philosophy known as investment dressing, which basically means that everything in my closet is too formal, and stiff and in the bland color pallet favored by Presbyterian ministers and accountants. In the end, though, that makes my choice easy. After the clothes are decided upon, I consider making her a head, but instead decide to give her the one returned to me by Ben, which saves me time, but also gives me more free time to think. So, I eat a little of something else, and lay down to try to rest. Which, I miraculously do successfully for an entire dreamless night.

At 9:30, I wake up, eat, shower, and then walk around the building to check for any sign of vandalism, of which there is none. So, I pack my bag and head to the museum. When I get there, the first guard I see is the incredible hulk and the girl at the admissions desk where I show my membership card is some sort of cat, and it takes me a few minutes to remember that it is Halloween, and when I do, I am happy. I decide to avoid the art museum for a little while and go to look at the dinosaurs. In Pittsburgh, the two museums are attached, and while our art collection is a bit middling, our dinosaur collection is world class. The museum's original patron, Andrew Carnegie, funded some of the first major digs, and the staff here has been pretty good about continuing the mission. I am not a big fan of reptiles in general, so the really large prehistoric varieties don't really do much for me, but it occupies my time. I think the earth really started to get interesting once people came along, the great migrations, cave paintings all that stuff. I don't really pay much attention to the dinosaurs anyway, mostly I still think about ways to start up a conversation with the girl. I sit on a bench and watch a dull movie about a dig the museum conducted in Mongolia for a while, and when it is over, it is nearly time for the girl's break. So, I descend to the cafeteria, cleverly named Fossil Fuels, and sit and wait.

At 1:35, the girl comes into the cafeteria. I watch her as she walks to a vending machine and buys a bottle of diet coke, and then she sits down in a booth and drinks her Diet Coke, and eats a variety of things that she pulls from her purse, first some baby carrots, then some crackers, and then something that looks like a cheese stick. If she notices me, she doesn't let on, so I decide to walk over to her.

"That head I gave you...it really wasn't a great example of my craft...So I made you another" I say as I hand her the small box returned to me by Ben.

She doesn't look surprised to see me, and gently takes the box from my hand and sets it on the table in front of her, and removes the lid.

"Wow" she says

"I get the glass eyes from a taxidermy supply company"

"It's very good. Realistic." She says noncommittally.

"Do you mind if I sit with you?" I ask

She looks around the room, and then says "If you want to."

"It is Fimo...the clay you bake in the oven"

“I know what Fimo is.” She says.

“..And the hair is real human hair... I get it from my barber” I neglect to mention that it is mostly my own hair.

“That is a little bit strange” she says

“I guess so, but the fake stuff looks really unnatural”

“Whose hair is it?” She asks

“Mine mostly”

“And the barber doesn’t think it is strange that you want to take your hair home?” She says looking at me with her fantastic dark eyes

“I never asked him”

“You should”

“He probably is happy that I sweep up for him. He is getting pretty old, and I think bending down to use the dust pan is hard on his back”

“Still...” she says, looking down at the head “I have a boyfriend, you know”

“I didn’t know. But that is not why...”

“Yes it is.”

“I guess you’re right.” I say

“I know I’m right, and for future reference. Giving a girl a head made even in part with your own hair...not really a great way to get their attention”

“It got your attention”

“Not in a good way” she says

“I’m sorry”

“You don’t need to be sorry. You seem harmless enough, I’m just saying. The head made with your own hair thing...it is strange”

“You have to admit it is pretty good though, right”

“Oh yeah. You’re a real craftsman. I just wouldn’t recommend going around giving these to people”

“So...are you saying you have a boyfriend because you really have one, or because you don’t want the head?”

“Oh, I’ll keep the head. Even if it is weird. But I do really have a boyfriend, actually a fiancé”

“See, that is why I like you.” I say “I knew you would appreciate that”

“You don’t really know me” she says

“Well, you could tell me about yourself.” I say



“Ok. Well, my name is Alicia. And I have a boyfriend. And I think that this head is strange, which is part of the reason that I am going to keep it, and you should also probably think about finding another girl to like”

“I don’t think I am going to do that. I haven’t really considered another option if you don’t like me...”

“It is not that I don’t like you. I don’t know you...and what I know about you seems...”

“Strange?” I volunteer

“Extremely strange, yes.”

“But not dangerous, right?”

“No, not dangerous. Just very very strange”

“And that disqualifies me?”

“Yes. Actually, no, but I am in a serious relationship”

“How serious?” I say

“Well, we’re having a baby, so ...pretty serious”

“Really? Wow...Congratulations” I say

“Thanks” she says

“See, that is good. I think about that a lot, actually. It is good that you are having a baby. You know, if the Taliban, and those guys in Mali that ban all music are the only ones having babies, the future is going to look pretty bleak.”

“I wasn’t really thinking about it like that” she says

“Yeah, I try not too either. I am a natural optimist. Thinking about what is wrong with the world all of the time is part of the problem”

“No, I mean, I’m not really thinking about the baby and the thing in Mali you were talking about in the same...”

“Context?” I say

“Yeah...in the same context.”

“Well, that is probably for the best too. That kind of thinking can get pretty overwhelming”

“You can have your little head back if you want” she says

“No. I definitely don’t want it back. It is for you. I make them to give away”

“For Christmas and stuff?”

“No, just in general. I hide them for people to find...in the park, on the bus, that sort of thing”

“Why?”

“I like to.”

“You could try to sell them. Why don’t you sell them, do you hate money or something?”

“No, I don’t hate money. I just don’t think about it in that way, just like you don’t think about babies and the musicians in Mali”

“That’s weird” she says

“Not that weird. People spend their whole lives getting excited about selling toilets.... that's weird”

She laughs. “But people need toilets”

“Maybe people need to find little clay heads while they are hiking in the park” I say

“Not more than they need toilets”

“You don’t know that. People need to believe all kinds of impossible things. That is how we give birth to what is possible”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t hide them...” She says

Then, all of the sudden, I had a huge feeling of relief.

“I get it now” I say

“Get what?”

“You and me were never going to get married”

“No, never, not even close” she says

“..I know. I know that now. ..Sorry, this is going to sound crazy, but bear with me, you had something to tell me, and that was it”

“What was it?”

“That I should stop hiding them. You had that message for me”

She laughs. “Ok”

“Seriously, that is good. That is a really good idea. I keep going back to my hiding spots, and most of them are always still there. That is a big sticking point for me. You’re right”

“Oh don’t think I...’

“Well, obviously not, not by your own will, but that was it...That is what I was looking to hear...” I say, and I am really excited. Happy, actually ...not happy, thrilled. The whole thing finally makes sense. The girl, Alicia, isn’t the start of something new; she is a thread, a wonderful, important critical thread in a tapestry.

“That is extremely bizarre” Alicia says, but she also laughs a little bit as my enthusiasm starts to catch on.

So, I jump up and shake her hand, and apologize for my expectations, and thank her for her wonderful bit of information, and she seems a little alarmed, so I also promise that I will not bother her again because now I have a new mission...a better mission, and she accepts all this politely enough for a person who has just shared a meal with a person who is now raving about a burst of inspiration. And I say goodbye, and she thanks me for the head, and I wish her luck with the baby.

“Good luck with your baby” she says

And I smile and laugh, and promise to send her a birth announcement, and she smiles, and I walk as quickly as I can from the museum, and run all of the way home. I finally have it.. a conclusion. Or at least a turning point that is so glaringly obvious that I am surprised that I have never thought of it before. What I need next is a magnum opus, an object that is impossible to ignore and will snap all of the casual destroyers from their routines and make them into creators, or at the very least, wake them up from the cycles of casual participation in all the non-creative endeavors of the city, and make them think about actually doing something worthwhile.

Here, in my city, a city that was once the heart of creation for the whole country. Carnegie and Westinghouse, and rivers of steel, and whole generations of people who went to work and came home knowing that they had actually made something, has somehow resurrected itself with industry the extracts profits from the ends of the lives of those same people and calls it progress. But it isn't anybody's fault. No one can be blamed for what they need to do to survive, but in the age of free information, why do so many people need to be paid to certify that someone has actually learned something? I'm no luddite, nor do I pine for an imaginary past that never existed in the first place, and at the same time that Pittsburgh was teaming with people who created things with their hands, the lower half of the country was still covered in the pox of segregated bathrooms, and restaurants, and schools... the memories of the good old days are a balm for people who want someone to blame, when we are all to blame. We always have been. I never lived in that time anyway. By the time I was born everything in this city was broken, and a lot of good people fixed it, at hospitals and the universities and everywhere else. And there is no such thing as a perfect model, if there was, we would have stumbled upon it by now, but then, there is always too a time for the artists to shout out like that screaming horse in Guernica.

And there is that too, the Spanish civil war, when idealists of every stripe planned their world; it is the artists who survived. The authoritarians and the idealists are gone, but Picasso, Hemingway, Auden, and Orwell, and Neruda still live, not as idealists, which they certainly were, but as artists alone. Do you know who Pope Julius II was? No? But you probably know who Michelangelo was, and what the Sistine Chapel is. When the pope commissioned Michelangelo do you think he figured that his name would largely be forgotten? And that is sort of my point: not about art, but about life in general. With apologies to Gandhi for bastardizing his famous words, greatness isn't retained by any attempt to hold on to it. That point is foundational to the longest running story in Western culture, and still we don't listen. A nondescript carpenter of low birth in some Roman backwater lives his principals to the bitterest ends, and babies for 2000 years get water splashed on their heads, and the primary points of the whole ordeal become generally accepted good ideas, and the details become cause for war. But that is us, that is people. And I make heads from clay, and some tiny part of me hopes that there is something to that, and if there isn't, it doesn't matter because I am going to make them anyway.

In the beginning there was silly putty. The stuff that you use when you're a kid to copy newsprint, and make shapes, and it can be formed into a ball that bounces. Silly putty was originally created by accident during World War II when scientists were trying to create rubber substitutes, and I got it as a secret Santa present from one of the regulars at the bar. And I took it home to my apartment, and added it to my huge collection of other junk that I didn't use and didn't need. And one day, when I was watching my enormous television, I took the silly putty out of the drawer and played with it. And I made a face. And that face was good, so I crushed it, and made another, and so I bought better clay. The kind that lasts. Then one week, my friends

and I took a trip to New York City, and in between the bars and sleeping the day away, there was a woman and her husband on the subway who sang Spanish folk songs and no one else really paid attention, but I cried. I really started earnestly crying. And so, I started looking for things like that, little ships carrying what I was missing. And I read everything that I could find, and I the more I read, the less I knew. And I started to dream, really dream...Joseph Campbell's private myths. When my lease was up, most of what I owned didn't move with me.

Then, a lot of the people that I knew moved on... from the bar and into normal life. And my poor mother was thrilled when I told her that I planned to move on too, and get into real estate, and stop living mostly at night. She probably told all of her friends in the community and the ghost of my father that I finally planned to put the Economics degree that they paid for to use. And I have never had the heart to tell her that it is all fake. Because by then I had long ago stopped thinking about how money works, and moved onto thinking about why money works, why anything works. The world is filled with people who are experts in quantifying a collective delusion. At that time too, came Wittgenstein. So, I started renting apartments, and moved into something that is simple and tangible and harmless, and I started making the heads, and giving them away. The more I gave, the better they became. My little kites, carried like the song of the woman on the subway onto destinations I can only imagine, and now there will be my opus. Anonymous like the rest, but the best I can do, and put somewhere where it will be seen. And then, I will be back at the beginning.

When I sit down and start to draw, everything is bad. My sketches are just that, and there is nothing that really feels like it is anything close to what my ambition intends. So, I draw some more, but I am still in a heightened state of excitement from my sudden realization, so I decide to work on some projects around the building. After I have checked all of the hallway lights, and cleaned up a little bit, I get back to work, but my ideas are still stunted, and all of my drawings are constrained and derivative. So, I go out for a walk and try to channel up some inspiration. I walk around aimlessly for a while. Then, I stop into a convenience store deli to buy a pint of milk, and there is a thick fingered policeman there looking closely at a display of small stuffed animals. He gently picks up one of the toys and looks at it closely, and then squeezes it between his index finger and thumb and smiles a bit, but when he sees me watching him, he returns the stuffed animal to the display, and shoves his hands into the snug pockets on his uniform.

And I sit outside and drink my milk and then walk some more, and I start to feel tired, and my mind drifts to the little antagonisms it occupies itself with when I have nothing good to think about. And I think about Brian Folz, and Ben's case worker who has managed to miss my call every time I have tried, and then I start to think that they might be the reason for my block. Not by their intent, but by my own, and so I try to think of something I can do to add their voices to the tide that will carry me through my project. But Brian Folz is a lost cause, and really, that doesn't bother me much. Maria Olson does though, and so I go back to my apartment to make a head. The head, a very good one, but not my best work, takes about six hours. By the time I am done, there is a little face with brown glass eyes and real human hair staring back at me, and I am proud. With four more hours left before her office opens, I then decide to make a box for Ms. Olson like the one I made for Ben.

Then I write a note, it says: "this is all a misunderstanding. Kind Regards, Luke Kolbe". And I wrap the note into the box, and sit and listen to music for a while until it is time for Ms. Olson's office to open.

When I get there, the receptionist does not seem surprised to see me, but she also does not try to call Maria Olson's extension.

"Do you expect her in later today?" I ask

"No, I don't think so" the receptionist says

"Do you think there might be a better time for me to come back?"

"Oh, she is in and out all day. Do you have a message you would like the leave?" The receptionist says as she smiles at me with professional politeness.

Then, the lobby door opens and another woman walks in. She is short and blond haired and dressed in an eggplant purple suit and bright white sneakers. She is carrying a large laptop sized shoulder brief case, and has two more bags, a lunch bag and a shopping bag in her right hand. The receptionist casts a quick glance to the woman, and then looks back at me, and is about to say something when I cut her off, "Is that her?" I ask

Before the receptionist can answer, I walk over to the woman and say, "excuse me, are you Maria Olson?"

And Maria Olson opens her mouth to respond, and the receptionist stands up and says "Wait!" but is already too late

"I am Luke Kolbe" I say.

"Oh" says Maria Olson

"I was hoping to catch you. I've been wanting to talk to you"

"You shouldn't be here, Mr. Kolbe" she says to me

"Why not?" I ask

"For one, because you were not invited" she says in a clinical measured tone

"But I am here to talk about Ben, you see there has been a..."

"Mr. Kolbe, it is outside of the boundaries of my professional responsibilities to talk about my clients with..."

"He is my friend" I say

"One thing I can tell you, is that it is extremely uncommon in my experience for a supposed friend of one of my clients to be in possession of their medical records" she says

As she talks, I notice a uniformed security guard enter the lobby, and as he does, the receptionist very gently replaces the telephone on its cradle and returns to watching the conversation between Maria Olson and me.

"I admit. That was a mistake. And there is a long story behind it..." I say

"I'm sure there is a long story. There always is, but the fact that remains here today, is that you are not allowed to be in this building, and you are unwelcome to return"

I remove my backpack to take out the head that I made for her, and the security guard quickly reaches out and smacks my hands, knocking my bag to the floor. Then he grabs me stiffly under my arm and leads me to towards the door.

“What are you doing?” I ask

“You were going for your bag” says the security guard.

“I have a gift for Ms. Olson in there. A peace offering” I say

And the receptionist says to the security guard, “Do you want me to call someone, Carl?”

And the security guard looks at me, and I say, “You didn’t have to hit me. I would have listened to you”

And he relaxes his grip on my arm and says “No. It’s under control” to the receptionist, and he talks into his little epaulet radio, and in a minute, another armed security guard comes into the room.

“That’s his backpack there on the floor” the first security guard says to the second, gesturing to me with his head. “Check that out for me, would you, Dave”

And the second security guard walks to my backpack, and kneels beside it on one knee and touches the zipper, and then looks up with me with a hard look on his face, and says “you got anything in here that’s going to stick me?”

“Stick you?” I say

“Yeah, pins, knives...needles?” He says

“No” I say

And the security guard puts on a pair of tight black leather gloves and gingerly unzips it, and takes a little flashlight off of his belt and shines it into my bag. He reaches in, and pulls out the box containing the head.

“What is this?” The security guard says to me

“It is a gift for Ms. Olson” I say

The guard turns to Maria Olson. “Did you ask this man for a gift?”

“I don’t think that people normally specifically ask for gifts. It is a surprise” I say, and the guard holding me under my arm squeezes me tighter and says

“You keep your mouth shut.” Then he looks at Maria Olson and says “Ms. Olson?”

And she says that she did not ask for the gift and the guard holding the box very gently unties the ribbon and lifts the lid, and when he does, he gasps loudly and drops the box to the floor. And the guard gripping onto my arm starts shouting “what is it? What is it?”

“Some kind of dead mouse or something” says the guard, and Maria Olson takes a dramatic step back while the receptionist stands up to get a better look

And I say, “No it isn’t. It is a clay head. A little sculpture”

And the other security guard kicks the little head over with his shoe, and stands and looks at it for a while, and then picks it up, and looks at it closer.

“What is this all about?” He says to me.

“It isn’t about anything. Ms. Olson has somehow come to believe that I have a negative influence on a mutual friend of ours”

“..I think it is a little bigger than that” says Maria Olson, and the attention of the room turns to her, but when she doesn’t say anything else, I say,

“Anyway, it kind of hurts me, so I wanted to make her a little something to show that there are no hard feelings on my end.”

Maria Olson says, “I have never met this man. Never. In my entire life”

“Which is why I have been trying to call you.” I say

I feel a slight relief under my arm as the guard eases his grip a bit. The receptionist says, “He calls here all the time”

“I wouldn’t say all the time” I say. “Ms. Olson told a good friend of mine who struggles with some mental issues that I am a dangerous influence, and the only reason that I have tried to call her is because I would like to know why she thinks that”

“...he just showed up here...Unannounced...with that weird thing...” Maria Olson yells

“It is a gift. Look, it was even wrapped...it was my way of saying that, I’m not sure why you don’t like me, but here it is, so you will forget about it” I say, and the guard holding me under my arm very casually lets me go.

And the second guard puts the head back into the box and reties the ribbon, and places the box back into my bag and zips it “What do you want us to do?” The guard says to Maria Olson

“I want you to remove him from the building”

“I can go on my own” I say, and the guards seem to agree because they don’t make another attempt to force me to move. Instead, the second guard hands me back my bag.

“Are you sure you don’t want the head?” I say to Maria Olson

And she says to the guard, “I would like him removed from the building and informed that he is not permitted to return under any circumstances, and if he does, we will contact the authorities”

And so, the guards escort me from the building, and even though I offer, neither wanted to take the head that I had originally made for Maria Olson, but they are also pretty polite, and seem to agree that the whole thing is a misunderstanding. But they still send me off with a warning that I am never allowed to return, so I promise them that I will not.

Walking home, I don’t exactly feel inspired to return to my work, so I walk over to the goldfish pond by the cathedral to check on the head I had left there. But when I get there, there are loads of people going inside, so I walk around the block a few times until everyone is out of sight, then I go and check the pond. The head is gone. I plan to put the new head among the rocks, but then I see an old woman in a long blue skirt and quilted jacket slowly making her way up the stairs of the cathedral. I jog over and offer to help the woman up the stairs, and she casually accepts without objection.

“There are a lot of people already inside” I say

“It’s All Saints” she says

“Oh” I say

“You aren’t going in?” She asks

“No, I just thought you looked like you could use some help up the stairs”

“Well, aren’t you nice” she says as she gently pats my arm

When we reach the doors, I ask her if I can give her a present, and she says “I’m a bit late already” So, I quickly take off my backpack and take out the box that I had intended for Maria Olson and hand it to the woman.

“Oh, it’s a real present” she says

“It’s actually something I made myself”

“And here I thought you were going to hand me a pamphlet. Thank you very much” she says as she drops the box into the long rectangular pocket of her coat “I will open it at home”

Then, she thanks me again, and I wish her a good day, and I start towards home. I guess in retrospect; Maria Olson has a right to be afraid. It wasn’t too long ago that a guy went in to Western Psych and started shooting, and her and probably everyone like her stopped feeling safe. Or maybe they never felt safe, and now they do because they hired the armed guards at her office. I don’t know. I try not to think about it, that was a terrible thing. And things like that happen way too much. The sad thing is the natural human antidote to real fear is imaginary fear. ..Ben is right about that. And so there is my antidote, applied directly to the source, in the only way I can. In the face of an impossible sickness that is too tragic to comprehend, there is me, a lonely man with a simple solution. And it is naïve and simplistic, but it won’t turn me into an agent of what I oppose. Either way, I don’t blame Maria Olson. What I can do is try to create my opus, but the whole episode at her office didn’t help the way I thought it would, and I am finally tired, so my only option is to wait, and hope that inspiration comes.

When I get home I try to draw for a bit. But when I do, everything I make is garbage, and I examine my supply of clay which is has rapidly depleted, and my entire store of eyes and hair is only enough to make two more heads, so I temporarily give up and decide to sleep. And when I do, I dream. I dream that I am outside a white storefront with huge windows facing a crowded sidewalk and I am amongst a crowd of well dressed people waiting to enter the store, and the people mingle and talk and greet each other like long lost friends. And then the man from the theatre opens the door, and the crowd tries to push past him, but he calms them all quickly with a few words. Then he pushes through the mob to find me, and I see dozens of faces turn and look at me, and most of them are regarding me with open disdain. In response to their looks, I glance down at my clothes, and see that I am wearing a filthy tuxedo and waterlogged shoes. The man from the theatre calls out to me and walks towards me grinning with his hand extended. When he reaches me, he shakes my hand vigorously, and escorts me through the crowd to the front door. The rest of the people assembled outside start to whisper and point, and their expressions turn from disdain to eagerness, as I move past them. And when we enter the store, I see that it is not a store, but a gallery with bright walls and a sealed concrete floor. The man leads me around the room and explains to me my own creations, each of them affixed firmly to the wall at eye level and staring at me with their accusing glass eyes.

“This is an example of the artist’s early work” the man says

“I know”

“Oh yes, well, of course you would.” He says smiling at me with perfectly straight teeth.



“Of course, his career didn’t really begin to take off until the emergence of some of his later work, which captured the public’s attention with...”

“I am not trying to become famous” I say

“Oh, of course you’re not. Nobody is” The man says pleasantly, as he strides across the room to the front doors which he swings open with both hands. “But your public awaits”

Then, he steps aside, and the crowd that was waiting outside of the door charges into the gallery where they immediately reassemble into the same groups and resume their noisy conversations. Then, the man walks with me around to the groups of the people and makes introductions, but I know everyone. They are the people I have always known, my childhood friends, people from the bar, people that I hadn’t seen in ages, and I am happy to see all of them. At first, they seem happy to see me, but then, there is something else there too. They shake my hand and smile, but none of them really seems happy, and so I say to the man. “Are they happy to see me?”

And he says “happy enough”

“What does that mean ‘happy enough?’” I ask

“...The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, my friend. The oldest story ever told... Cain and Abel...Let it go; it just comes with the territory”

“I wasn’t planning on letting anyone find out it was me.” I say

“You weren’t planning to, but they did”

“So what about all this?” I ask

“The reception, you mean? It is in your honor. We appealed to your better judgment...” He says

“I don’t remember that” I say

“You will”

“I know what this is, you know. I know this is a dream.” I say

“I know. It is your dream. Your dream is the gallery, and me...and...surprise, surprise, all your friends are here”

“It is not my dream that all this happens” I say

The man smiles, “Of course it is. Why else would everyone be here? I didn’t think of it. You did. You planned your own coming out party...and you invited everyone you used to know to see your big redemption...the vindication for all these wasted years.”

“It won’t happen like that. I’m not looking for notoriety...” I say

“Not yet.” The man says. “But you will have the rest of your life to question your decision”

I wake up in a panic. For the first time since I was a small child, I feel like I have had a genuine nightmare. I have had plenty of strange dreams, weird dreams, scary dreams, but not nightmares. And so, I sit alone in the darkness and think, and the hum of the refrigerator keeps me company until I can’t take it anymore, and I get out of bed and try to draw, but as soon as I pick up the pencil, I can feel it is a bad idea, and so I absentmindedly look through some of my notebooks for a while. And it is there, a poem:

Come! O, human child!

To the woods and waters wild,  
With a fairy hand in hand,  
For the world's more full of weeping than  
you can understand

So, I get dressed in my winter clothes, long underwear, jeans, a sweater, my hat and coat and gloves, and push my blankets into a bag, and I leave the apartment. I walk for a long while, and finally, I am in the pine grove again, where I lie down gently on the ground. The wind blows and the big trees sway, and the darkness wraps its arms around my soul, and I sleep.

When I wake, the ground has developed a frost and I am freezing, but I slept. The mania of feeling like my project must be completed right away is gone, and is replaced by the certainty that it will be completed. But I am not ready. A great project requires great discipline, and nervous energy alone will not make it come true. It is still early in the morning when I collect my belongings and leave the grove, and I am happy not to encounter any early morning dog walkers as I briskly walk away from the park with my duffel bag of damp bed clothes. I return to the building refreshed and happy and put my pillow and comforter into the drier before sweeping the hallways and inspecting the area around the dumpster. Then, I return to my apartment where I pack away my crafting supplies, and tend to the mundane administrative tasks of normal living. After I have paid some bills, and shower and eat, I make a second quick inspection of the building, and then walk to the entrance to the busway where I take the first bus that arrives.

I ride the bus for a while until it finally makes its way down Grant Street and past the main port authority office where I get off and buy a monthly pass. Then, I after studying the maps, I take the bus to the big camping store on the Carson Street where I buy a heavy winter sleeping bag and a mountaineering bivy sack, which is a sort of waterproof cocoon for sleeping outdoors. Then, I ride the bus home and made another check of the building. At dusk, I pack the sleeping bag and the bivy sack into my duffel bag, and walk back to the grove where I spend a second dreamless night sleeping alongside the stand of bushes where I had originally left my shoes. The next days follow the same routine. I would wake in the woods, pack my sleeping bag and bivy sack into my duffel bag and walk home at dawn, check the building, and then I would spend the day on the bus, riding aimlessly around the city feeling the rhythm of the vehicle and watching the neighborhoods pass by the windows. Then, towards evening, I would return home, do a bit of work around the building, and then go back to the grove to sleep. It developed into the closest thing I have ever had to a decent wintertime schedule in five years. It rained hard for a few days, too hard for the bivy sack, and I stayed in my apartment, not sleeping, listening to music, but as soon as the rain was gone, I was back to the woods. When the time came that I would normally apply for the seasonal work at the post office, I let it pass, and continued my routine. It was peaceful; the dreamless nights, conversations with regular acquaintances on the bus, little problems to fix around the building. The only downside is that I was unable to locate Ben. Twice I stopped at his apartment and left messages for him, but I never heard from him, so I could only hope that he had found a peaceful little ritual of his own. It was December 8th, 37 nights in the woods, before I started thinking about the project again.

It happened because the woman from the cathedral got on the bus. She recognized me, but I did not recognize her, I just noticed that an old woman was intent on sharing my seat. Which, itself was not that unusual, because I was sitting in the front, and lots of lonely old people seek out

strangers for company. But when the woman sits down, she says "I was hoping that I would see you again"

"You were?" I ask

"Oh yes."

"Well, I'm glad you found me" I say

"You don't remember me do you?" She says

"I'm afraid I don't" I say

"You gave me a present early last month...at church."

"Oh, yeah. I'm sorry, of course, I remember now. Did you like it?"

"Oh, yes. I like it very much. "

"Well, that's good" I say

"I've had a bit of trouble keeping the cat from playing with it though. She likes to bat at it with her paw, you know..."

"That's funny" I say

"That doesn't bother you?" She asks

"No, why would it..."

"Oh, you know...people can be touchy" she says

"I'm not one of them"

"Well, that is good for you" she says reaching out to pat my arm.

"There is something I have been wondering about since I met you..." the woman begins

"Oh?"

"What does this is all a misunderstanding mean?"

"Well, normally it means that one person has said something, but another person might not be hearing it correctly. Like, for example..."

"Oh, honey, I know what it means. I'm wondering why it said that on the note"

"What note? I ask

"The note inside the present you gave me"

"Oh, well. It is kind of long story, but I guess the condensed version that I originally made it for someone else."

"That was one of my guesses. A girl?"

"Yes, but not a romantic thing. More like a professional disagreement." I say

"Do you want to talk about it?" She asks

"Probably not"

"Ok" the woman says, and she is quiet for a little while

“It is just a long story...I could tell you the whole thing if you have time” I say

“Oh, you don’t have to do that sweetie...you know what my husband used to say? He used to say old friends are called that for a reason...they get old, sometimes people just move on in different directions”

“That’s good advice” I say

“It can be, but he was wrong twice as much as he was right”

“Has he been gone a long time?” I ask

“Thirteen years”

“I’m sorry” I say

“Oh sweetie, I don’t blame you” she says laughing at her own joke “It was cancer of the lung” she smiles sweetly at me, and I smile back at her.

“You know what I have been thinking about?” I say, “A big project...I’ve been...”

“You aren’t getting off at the next stop are you?” She asks

“No”

“I am...but I want to hear about this project of yours”

“It’s no problem” I say

“I could just ride for a bit, I don’t have anything to do” she says “I can miss my stop”

“Don’t do that. I will get off with you, and walk you home, I’ll tell you on the way”

“Or you could come for coffee” she offers

And so I do, I walk with her to her little apartment with the slow elevator and green carpet, and listen as she shows me the shelf where the head I made sits in its box alongside a dying spider plant, a porcelain Virgin Mary and a ceramic sad clown figurine, and she shows me pictures of her children and her husband. And it is where I tell someone else the whole story. Not the dreams part or the part about sleeping outside, but the rest: Ben, the library, the Mouthwash Man, Maria Olson and all of the heads. And she listens like I am telling her the most normal thing she has ever heard. I have found that the generation that grew up without television has a pretty liberal definition of what is normal, as long as you look normal, they let you get away with some kooky stuff, and act like it is no big deal. Then I tell her about the big project, and she says, “You are pretty good at making clay heads.”

“So, do you think I should make something involving clay heads?” I ask her

“Or, you could try to make a big one” she says

“Do you think so?”

“Have you ever tried it?” She asks

And I realized I never had, nor had I even really thought about it. The whole thing is so obvious it is almost stupid. And I want to jump up and start thanking her, but then I remember that there is no good way to bake the clay, and that big pieces of oven bake clay will be expensive, but I

thank her just the same because at least it is a start. And we sit and chat some more, and I eat some butter cookies and drink two cups of coffee, and we are both thankful for the company.

That night, I sleep in the woods again, but I don't fall asleep as quickly, and in the morning I return to the building tired and depressed. I repeat the same pattern for two more nights until I realize that my respite has finally come to an end. After a final restless night in the woods, I wash my sleeping bag and clean the bivy sack and pack them both into my duffel bag for the last time. Then I ride the bus down to the north side where I put the duffel under a railroad underpass a few yards from a homeless encampment with a little note that says "free" slipped into the luggage tag. Then, I ride the bus back to the building and work for a little while. Then, with a little bit of daylight remaining I make two cheese sandwiches and walk to the library. When I get there, it is dark but the building is still open, so I sit outside on the benches and wait. At seven, I see the familiar figure of Ben emerge carrying two large shopping bags. I watch him for a few seconds before walking up to him.

"It has been a long time, buddy" I say as I approach him

"I told you, once your girlfriend came into the picture, you would disappear." He says.

"I tried to stop and see you twice"

"Not here you didn't" He says

"No, I stopped where you live. At your apartment" I say

"If you had stopped here, you would know that I don't live there anymore"

"I'm not allowed in the library anymore, Ben"

"Still with that convenient excuse, huh?" He says, too loudly.

"It isn't a convenient excuse. It is the truth."

"Just like how you went to my case workers office, and had to be hauled out by the guards, too"

"It didn't happen like that, Ben."

"Oh, I bet it didn't. ...just like how they had no right to kick you out of the library, too, huh? Nothing is ever your fault"

"Oh, come on, Ben. That is ridiculous. I made you a sandwich." I say, reaching into my bag

"I don't want a fucking sandwich from you. "

"There is no reason to be angry, Ben"

"There is every god damn reason to be angry. ...I had to move because of you"

"Because of me?"

"Yeah, you showing up. Stirring up trouble with my neighbors. Stealing from me"

"Ben"

"No, stop following me"

"Are you playing the trumpet at all?"

"Don't talk to me about my trumpet, Luke. Don't talk to me about anything. "

“Ben, I’m sorry I haven’t been around, but it isn’t what you think. First off, it didn’t even work out with that girl...”

“Why would it? What kind of person is attracted to a thief and liar!” He screams.

“Ben, I’m not lying”

“Jesus doesn’t share your biases, asshole!” Ben screams back at me

“What are you talking about Ben?”

“I am talking about you. You superior motherfucker!” he yells

Just then, out of the corner of my eye, I see Coats emerge from the library door. When he sees Ben yelling at me, he turns around and goes back into the building and reemerges with a guard. Both men stand there and watch us. Then, the guard goes back in, and I assume that he is planning to call the police.

“Ben, please, I think that guard is going to call the police” I say

“Let him. I will tell them what you fucking did. How you broke into my apartment and...”

I stand and watch Ben, with his rage showing no signs of abating, I decide then to leave. When I walk away Ben does stop yelling, and so, I walk alone in silence into the darkness of the evening. After I am out of sight of the library, I open my bag and take out one of the sandwiches and eat while I walk. The exercise feels good. I missed walking, but walking is always about thinking for me. Not the bus though, the bus is diesel powered meditation...transcendental bus riding. I might trademark it like the Maharishi did, charge a lot of money for classes, and get rich for teaching people how to ride a bus. Stranger things have happened. Like Ben. Ben is a stranger thing, but if he doesn’t want to be friends with me, that’s fine. It is not my job to force people to be my friend. After a while of walking, I decide to stop by the noodle restaurant to see if the old woman has been feeding the cats. The paper plate is there, but there is no food on it. I walk over to check the plate to see if it is new, and when I do, the alleyway door opens.

“Oh, no!” says the old woman as she opens the door and sees me in the alley.

“I’m sorry” I say, aware of the effect and unexpected person in a dark alley can have.

She stops the door from swinging closed, and says to me, “Oh. It’s you. I thought I told you that I didn’t want you back here”

“I’m not really back here.” I say

“You’re back here” she says

“This is actually the first time I’ve been here since I talked to you, I was just walking by and was curious about the cats”

“I told you the cats are fine. I am never going to forget to feed the cats”

“I guess you’ve proved that” I say

“I wasn’t lying”

“I wasn’t inferring that you were lying” I say

“I guess you can be on your way then” she says

“Can I ask you one favor?”

“I’d prefer if you weren’t back here”

“I promise. I won’t be back here again, but I was just wondering...all these newspapers, can I take them?”

“As long as you don’t come back, yes”

“I might need to make two trips.” I say

“Fine. Two trips, then, if I see you here after that...I’m calling the police”

“Don’t worry..It won’t be a problem. I am just going to take these papers” I say

And so, I carry the papers back to my apartment. Then I return, and carry the final huge stack back. After that, I sit and read through them for a while, but for the most part, I find the news, even old news depressing, so I force myself to fall asleep. When I sleep, I dream that I am back in the grove, and it is summer, and I am lying down to sleep. The woman from the bus is there, and as I lie down she brings me a blanket, which warms me, and protects me from the wind, and I sleep, and I dream of being asleep, and when I wake up I feel fantastic because my project has finally begun.

In the morning, after eating, and cleaning up, and doing a bit of work around the building, I have a flash of inspiration that I am surprised has escaped me for so long. So, I walk to the bus stop. After a twenty minute ride, I am at a suburban library. It is a bright open space with simple shelves of hardback best sellers and open desks with free computers. There are a few elderly patrons browsing some low shelves filled with audio books, but otherwise the library is empty. It feels great to be back among the books. I search around for a while and find that the library is mostly free of the literary heavy hitters, but there are still books. I ask the librarian at the desk if my card will allow me to borrow, and she tells me that my card “will work at any library in Allegheny County”. It is a wonderful feeling, but there is one subject in particular that I am interested in. Fortunately, there is a big craft section, and I find exactly what I am looking for, a big illustrated about the art of papier mache. I find a spot at one of the tables and read for the entire afternoon, taking lots of notes.

When I get home in the evening, and sit down to draw, the idea comes right away. I take a long while making a good detailed sketch. Then, I put another piece of paper over my original sketch, and trace the entire thing again. By the time that process is done, it is nearly one in the morning, but I don’t feel tired, so I unfold a few pieces of newspaper, tape them together into a single sheet, then, using a yardstick, I make a grid on the new large single paper. And then I slowly redraw my more simple design onto the larger paper. When that drawing is done, I am satisfied with the size, and start the process of drafting out the armatures that will create the substructure of the frame of the head using the large draft as a guide. It is dawn by the time that process is complete, and so, I get an early start on some chores around the building. When my work is done, I look through the boiler room and maintenance closets for supplies. There is a pretty good store of things. There is a big piece of dry wall, a jigsaw with a serviceable blade, a bucket of joint compound, two unopened tubes of adhesive, a can of marine varnish for some reason, and a whole pile of the old metal screens.

I carry the piece of drywall up to my apartment, and transfer my drafts of the frame of the head onto the drywall using the grid method, but when I cut them out with the jigsaw they are too

brittle, so I repeat the same process again in duplicate to make thicker pieces which I affix with epoxy and then cover in tape. Once that is done, I return the unused drywall to the boiler room, and go out to buy a dozen rolls of masking tape. With the masking tape, I start to draft out the shape of the cheek bones, chin, forehead, and occipital bun using broad taut strips of tape pulled over the frame. Then, in the voids under that tape, I stuff rolled newspaper until I have roughed out the bulk of the face. The process uses every roll of tape that I bought, along with a big chunk of the newspaper I salvaged from behind the restaurant. By the time that work is done, it is nearly one in the afternoon, and I haven't slept for 30 hours, but if I sleep now, I may wake up in the middle of the night with no supplies and nothing to do, so I decide to go and check in the recycling container behind the building for more paper, but there is nothing salvageable there, so I call around to a couple of the local newspapers to see what they do with their unsold papers, and they all politely explain that they have other people who buy their unusable and unsold paper for to resale to overseas box makers, but the people at the Post Gazette recommend a place where I can buy whole rolls printing paper, and so, after a short last minute bus trip, I am the owner of a thirty pound roll. After that, I go to the grocery store and buy 15lbs of flour. Then, after a small meal, I fall into a dreamless sleep.

I wake up shortly after three, and start the project again. With wire from the old screens I start to frame out eyes and a nose and give detail to the chin. Then I start the first layer of the papier mache. By nine, the whole first layer is complete and I stop for a while to do a little work around the building. Over the next week, I repeat the process of adding new layers, and letting them dry. One day, I receive an apologetic call from my mother that she has decided to accept my sister's last minute offer to spend Christmas with her in St. Louis, where she is to be met by a number of other relatives that she has fond memories of, and I cannot recall at all. She seems genuinely upset about the whole thing, but I assure her that there is no cause for concern, and I promise to fly down and visit her in February. That auspicious development ensures not only that my project will not be interrupted, but also that I can plan for a grand reveal without any interruptions. I work constantly, stopping only to eat and nap and shower and shave and make cursory examinations of the hallways and dumpster areas to make sure they are clean. With the joint compound, I sculpt the details of the head, and the true expression of the figure takes shape. The painting takes until Christmas day. Sixty total hours of paint, all inside my apartment with the windows open to the winter chill for ventilation, and the stereo blaring. When the head is finally done, it looks just as I had planned.

It is a man's face with a hawk like narrow nose like Donald's, and a slight stubble grey beard like Ben, and it has small ears with short earlobes like the girl from the museum, and the thin smiling mouth from the woman at the cathedral, and flat heavy eyebrows like Coats, and the receded chin of Brian Folz, and round cheeks of Maria Olson, and little crow's feet by the eyes like the woman by the fountain. But the eyes are my eyes, and they take the longest to paint. Staring into a handheld mirror, it takes almost eight hours to get the eyes right. I am not a painter, but I do my best, and my best is something I can be proud of. The head has no hair, though. I considered it, going to the barber, and asking for a big bag off all the hair he has swept off of his floor, but I ultimately think better of it because all of the sorting would take forever. But the project is done, hours and hours of work, and wonderful dreamless nights falling asleep exhausted. When I look at the face, I am reminded of how long it has been since I had one of those dreams. In the woods I didn't, and now here, with my project, still none. I get a flash of panic like the type a reformed cigarette smoker feels when he considers an event in the future that will test his resolve. The time when this project is done, and I am somebody without



anything again, maybe there will be dreams, or this will be a dream made real, and it will kill all the dreams, I don't know. But there is still a lot to do.

The day after Christmas, I take the advantage of the slow traffic to do a little bit of reconnaissance in Market Square. When I get there, however, I am surprised to find that there are many more people than I had expected. The square has undergone a transformation from the way it was in my childhood when it was surrounded by head shops and occupied by drug dealers and their desperate customers. Now, Market Square actually reflects the class A office space that surrounds it, and there is a small band playing on a stage in the corner of the square when I arrive, and hordes of skaters gliding on the ice rink at PPG place. On New Year's Eve, the square will be filled with people. In recent years, the city has made Market Square a hub for its annual First Night celebration. My plan is this, by 2am on New Year's Day, the party will be cleared, and all of the celebrants will be heading home. After that, the city work crews will come and work through the night, disassembling the bandstands, sweeping up plastic cups, and returning the city to its normal condition. On that morning, when the crews are gone, I will put the head right in the center of the square. Right in the very middle. And hopefully, because the crews will be home with their families eating pork and sauerkraut, and the police will be resting after a long night of policing, the head will survive the day. On January 2nd, when people return to work, the head will be there, and because the square was recently cleaned, the returning workers will think that the head is there by design. And the commuters, and the people who work in the buildings, and the students, and the drifters, and everyone who passes by it, will see it, as just what it is, a free art project. Then, it will slowly come to light that the head was not placed there by any placing authority, no arts organization, no civic club, and there will be some discussion about removing it. Hopefully, by that point it will be so beloved that there will be editorials defending it in the newspaper, and little discussions about it in offices, that take people's minds off of the drudgery of their day and the horror of world events, and it will become some renegade symbol of accidental civic pride, like the Hollywood sign or the Eiffel tower. Something impermanent that people will care about for permanent reasons, and then maybe someone else will do something just like it, or not, I can't think that far ahead. First I need to plan.

Looking at the stage where the performers are playing, I realize that that particular structure is unlikely to be disassembled after the New Year's festivities, and most likely, it will be the main site for activities during the night. I walk around the base of the stage looking for a loose panel, or something underneath the stage that may allow me to hide something there, but in doing so, I run afoul of a sound technician who reprimands me for standing where I do not belong. Then, I walk behind some of the restaurants that surround the square, to see if there is some spot by the dumpsters that I can stash the head, so that I can bring it out in the early morning of New Year's day, but then I have a vision of the head being crushed under the weight of an errant beer keg or thrown into the garbage as forgotten trash, so I ditch that idea, and start to look further afield. I walk down the road to Point State Park, the small spit of land at the end of the city where the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers meet to form the Ohio. There may be a suitable hiding spot here, but the park may also be serving as the larger party venue for New Year's, so I instead walk across the street to the gleaming silver buildings of Gateway center. I notice there, in front of the building that houses KDKA, the station responsible for the nation's first radio broadcast, a small strip of grass alongside the building. In that strip of grass, there is a heavy wooden chest about three feet high with a big steel lock on the front, and I deduce that that chest probably holds some sort of broadcasting equipment or perhaps wiring to be using during the party. It is a

perfect solution, just like the anarchist meetings in Chesterton's *Man Who was Thursday*; the best way not to arouse suspicion is to hide in plain sight.

The next day, I call Ron at the rental office and ask if I can borrow one of the company work trucks for the afternoon. He is eager to help, after I explain to him that I want to haul some materials out of the building. Then, I take the truck to the hardware store and buy the supplies to construct a box. I bring the supplies back to the building, and then, to make good on what I had explained to Ron, I spend a little time cleaning out some of the debris from the building's basement and taking it to the dump. After that, taking advantage of the fact that nearly all of the student tenants had gone home for the Christmas holiday, I spend the night building the storage box in the laundry room using measurements I had taken of the head in my apartment as a guide. After that, I give it a quick coat of paint, and after the paint dries, I paint on some convincing looking official markings to make the box look like something belonging to one of the concession companies servicing the party.

After I sleep for a while, I spend some time thinking about how exactly I can move the box and the head to the site. Ron would probably let me borrow the truck again, but he probably wouldn't let me keep it overnight. Also, I would like to be able to get as close to the site as possible without arousing suspicion, and on New Year's Eve there are likely to be roadblocks in place very early. I cannot think of an acceptable solution, so instead, the next day, I take the bus back downtown again to do a bit more reconnaissance. Ultimately, I decide that the site where I found my inspiration at Gateway center is the most logical place to stash the box. The buildings there surround a central courtyard that has a large fountain. The complex's center plaza may see a bit of foot traffic on New Year's Eve, but it is unlikely that there will be any events there, so the box, if placed correctly, in one of the grassy areas along side Building One, should not draw much attention. From Gateway Center, I will only have to walk a few blocks with the head until I reach Market Square.

After I finalize my plan for the box, I plot my escape. There is a river trail that runs along the Monongahela River starting at Point State Park that goes past the jail, and finally hooks up with the Eliza Furnace bike trail, a trail more commonly known as the jail trail. I walk all the way from the city, past the bike rental concession, and past the jail, and onto the trail which runs alongside the parkway all the way to the point where it ends, and I have to walk across a few surface streets and into Panther Hollow Park. The park runs roughly perpendicular to jail trail and ends in lower Oakland. From there, I can take a set of steep stairs from the lower street to the parking lot directly behind the University of Pittsburgh art building which also happens to be across from the library that I am pointlessly permanently barred from entering. From there, it will be an easy walk back to my apartment.

As I walk along the trail, and try to think of a way to get the box down to the city, the solution to my problem almost literally runs right into me. A woman, dressed in brightly colored winter exercise clothes riding a silver hybrid bike rides directly towards me on the right hand side of the path. Her helmeted head is turned to the side, and she is talking, and when she looks up, she is within fifteen feet of me. She quickly veers, and I notice the object of her attention. Behind her bike, in a low yellow pod with two wheels that looks something like a motorcycle sidecar is her child. The pod would be perfect. A bike would be perfect. I could ride the bike into town on this trail without getting too much attention, and then, ride all the way back, or even better still, rent the bike, drop off the box, and then return the bike before any of the festivities begin. Then, I could take the bus home for a while and wait and rest, and go back down to the city towards the

end of the night so that I am fresh and alert when it is time to put out the head. So, I return back along the trail, and walk back to the bike rental concession, and the woman there happily informs me that they do have that exact configuration of bike available for a multi day rental, and they also will be open on New Year's Eve to return it. And so, after a quick transaction, I am riding home on a bicycle with a nice sturdy child carrier behind it.

At home, I stash the bicycle and carrier in the building's laundry room, and go upstairs to rest for a while. After I wake up and get ready, I go back down to check how the carrier will accommodate the storage box. The box is a bit too large, but I am able to make some modifications that allow for it to be carried pretty easily. However, the modifications require removing the canopy from the carrier; I think I will be able to put it back on, but not easily. So, on the day of the event, I will have to return home first before returning the bike to the rental company. Ultimately, this will mean that I should probably try to unload the box sometime very early in the morning on the 31st, or perhaps even late at night on the 30th. On the 29th, I make a trial dry run with the empty box. The ride is easy, there is only one major downhill section that requires special attention to the trailer, and for the most part, my unusual accessory seems to attract very little attention. The drop off looks like it will be easy too. I am so excited that I can barely sleep that night.

Early in the morning of the 30th, I take extra care to clean all of the building as thoroughly as possible in order to distract myself from the impending task. Then, I go out for a walk to burn off a bit more nervous energy and eat a heavy lunch at the noodle shop. By the mid-afternoon, I am tired enough to sleep and I fall into a dreamless slumber that lasts until 9pm. Then, I wake up, drink a glass of milk, take a quick shower, and make a final assessment of the head. Everything is perfect, as I wrap the head in a thick protective blanket, and bind the blanket tightly with tape. Then I lift the head to carry it downstairs. It does not fit through my front door.

I try several times to squeeze the head or adjust the angle to make it fit, but no matter how hard I try, either the ears or the nose get hung up on the frame. I sit on the floor and look at the wrapped object, and chide myself for my inattention to this major detail, when it occurs to me that I may be able to fit the head out of the window. After some quick measurements, it seems like it will fit, however, I do not have anything to lower it down with. So, I race downstairs and detach the trailer from the bicycle and ride as quickly as I can to the Target in East Liberty, and buy four 30 foot packages of heavy rope. When I come out of the store, my unlocked bicycle is still thankfully where I had left it, and I quickly ride home with the rope. After some experimentation, I devise a sort of upside down parachute basket from the blanket with rope attached to the top in a little pointed tent of knots. After that is done, I tie three of the ropes together at secure them to the blanket. Then, I lift the whole apparatus by the ropes at the top of the blanket to test the strength, and once I am satisfied that the cargo is secure enough to make the trip, I very gently ease it out of my window. Holding tightly to the long length of rope, I slip the head out of the window, and down the side of the building. The bundle bounces against the wall a few times, and is briefly hung up on a first floor window sill for a moment, but ultimately, the whole package makes it down to the ground safely. Then, I drop the rest of the guide rope; close my window and race downstairs to inspect everything. I discover that the head made the trip without any damage, so then I jog around to the back of the building to retrieve the bicycle and the cargo box. I have to spend a few minutes reattaching the trailer, and when I come back

around the building wheeling my bike, I encounter Donald dressed in jeans and a heavy bathrobe inspecting the head.

“Oh. See, now that explains it...here I thought that there was some strange shit going on outside my window, so I come out to check...and now, I know there is some strange shit going on” he says

“Hi, Donald” I say

“I figured you had something to do with all this” he says gesturing to the head

“It is my art project” I say

“When I saw it coming past my window, I thought you was getting rid of a dead hooker or something”

“You really thought that?”

“I wouldn’t put it past you.” He says

“So, your natural reaction when you think somebody is getting rid of a dead body is to go interrupt them” I say

“Man, I ain’t scared of you” he says

“You don’t have reason to be” I say “No one does”

“I wouldn’t go that fuckin far” he says “this aint the most normal thing in the world, standing out here at midnight with a big head wrapped in a blanket”

“It is my art project”

“Oh, so you an artist now? First you the rental guy, then you the super, and now you’re an artist?”

“If you say so” I say

Donald doesn’t move, so I decide to start untying the head, and repackaging it for transport.

“So, you really made that, huh?” Donald asks

“Yeah, I did. From paper mache. Do you like it?”

“Yeah, actually I do”

“Thanks.” I say

“No, really though, I been looking at art forty hours a week for twenty six years...”

“I never really thought of it that way” I say

“You know what I don’t like? When they had that International...you know, the last time? I spent four months standing in front of a cardboard box with a pair of damn dirty shoes on top of it”

“I remember that. I think that guy is kind of famous.” I say

“That guy is proof that rich people is fuckin dumb” he says

“There is probably some explanation for it.” I say

“No kind of explanation that is worth anybody paying any kind of money for. They paid me ten thousand dollars to make sure people don’t touch something that worth about twenty bucks.”

I laugh “I guess I never thought about it that way”

“It’s almost like the guy that made that, he never thinks about a guy like me...protecting his goddamn cardboard box.”

“No, he probably didn’t” I say

“..I don’t care, that shit is humiliating. Good thing I don’t have no family. Have to go home and tell my son I spent all day protecting a cardboard box and a damn pair of old shoes”

Then, Donald reaches down and helps me hold down the blanket while I secure it with tape.

“What are you doing with this? Taking it to that girl?” He asks

“No, she has a boyfriend. Plus, she told me that she is having a baby” I say

“Yeah, you can tell now. I thought you still might be trying...”

“No, I am taking this down where people can see it.” I say

“To a party or something?”

“Kind of”

Then, Donald helps me put the wrapped head into the wooden cargo box. “You need to get yourself a car...that right there is why you don’t have a woman in your life, ridin’ around on a bike...”

“You never know, Donald, there are all kinds of people in the world”

“Ain’t no doubt, you’re all kinds” He says. Then, I shake his hand, and we wish each other happy new year and I ride away.

The ride is easy, and after the stress and unplanned delays of getting the head stuck in my apartment moving through the brisk air feels like a fantastic relief. Panther Hollow and the jail trail are totally deserted and the wintertime isolation feels a bit disconcerting, so I pedal as quickly as I can through the darkness, and soon, I emerge at Point State Park. After a quick pedal through the park, I arrive at Gateway Center. Dropping the box is as easy as I expected, and I do not linger after I am done. I return along the same dark trail that I arrived on, and as the adrenalin of the night’s events wears off, I feel the chill of the night for the first time. I ride fast without the box towing behind me, as I pedal frantically to escape the intimidating darkness of the jail trail, and I start to sweat. By the time I get close to home, the sweat has cooled on my body, and I am completely freezing cold. I bring the bike back into the laundry room, and go upstairs to sit by the radiator in my apartment. As I warm up, the exhaustion of the evening catches up with me. And so, I drag myself to bed and fall quickly into a deep sleep.

And when I do, I dream. I dream that I am in a theatre, but this time, I am in the audience and there is only one person on the stage: the man...dressed in his usual tuxedo, but this time, accessorized with a smart velvet cape...black with a red lining. And the man addresses the crowd, but I am too surprised to have returned to dreaming so soon to pay attention to the specifics of what he is saying. The rest of the audience is noisy anyway...talking to each other, not paying attention. But on stage, the man is a magician and he carries on, undisturbed by his inattentive audience. And then the magician’s assistant roll out a large square object covered

with a cloth that I know right away is the wooden box I made. And this assistant spins the box around, and taps on each side of the box with a hammer. Then very delicately, the magician assists her as she turns the box back on its end to reveal the bottom, which she also taps on with a hammer. Then, together, they swing open the lid, and tip the box forward to reveal its contents, and I have flash of panic that the product of my tireless work will be spilled out across the stage, but the box that the performers show to the audience is empty.

Then the assistant returns the box to its proper position, and the magician and his assistant engage in a theatric pantomime about which one of them will be placed into the box. In the end the dispute is settled by the assistant, who, despite her small stature, lifts the magician up like he is a ballerina and deposits him into the box. And then they pause for a moment to allow time for the audience to cheer their slapstick punch line, but nobody is paying attention but me, and I elect not to clap. So, then the assistant spins the box around again with the magician standing inside of it with his arms folded across his chest like the statue of Christopher Columbus outside of the conservatory, and then he crouches down and is completely concealed by the box. Then the assistant spins the box around a few more times, and once that is done, she knocks on the lid and pantomimes that she is listening for a response by cupping her hand behind her ear and pressing her face to the side of the box. Then she undertakes an exaggerated sequence of being unable to open the box. Then, finally she remembers the hammer that has been set off to the side of the stage, and she returns to smash the lid over and over again with theatrical flourish. When the lid is destroyed, she looks into the box, and with feigned surprise, turns it over so the audience can again see that it is empty. Then, she rights the box again, and covers it with a cloth. After a few moments, the cloth starts to move, and then slowly levitate on its own, and so, the assistant rips the cloth away to reveal dozens of dazed doves. A few of the doves try to fly, but they get distracted by the lights and return quickly to the stage, where they join their associates wandering around the stage like city pigeons.

The assistant pauses for applause, but when no one does, she continues on by frantically pointing to the top balcony. Her pointing finally seems to get the audience's attention, and soon, the entire crowd has turned to look towards the balcony where the magician stands perched majestically along the railing. Then his cape starts to flutter, and there is a palpable sense of nervousness in the theatre as it becomes clear that he intends to jump. And the assembled gasp, as he does jump, and all of his clothes fall gently to the floor. And the magician has become a hawk again, and is perched atop a bank of lights at the top of the room. And the hawk takes flight and makes lazy circles around the domed ceiling of the auditorium, and then, he gracefully flies down and plucks one of the doves from the stage. And the crowd erupts with shocked applause. And soon they are on their feet, but I am glued to my seat in horror, and their cheers are deafening, and then, I am awake....and it is 11:30.

The bike rental concession closes at 2pm, and with almost no time to spare, I quickly get dressed and go to the laundry room to restore the bicycle trailer to its original condition. The repair takes a while, and, by the time I am done, I only have an hour to get the bike back to the concession. I arrive there panicked with only ten minutes to spare, but the return goes quickly, and when it is done, I walk back home along the Jail trail again. Even though the afternoon is cold, there are still a lot of people out on the trail jogging and riding bikes. Tonight though, in the dark, it is likely to be very different. The thought of it actually fills me with a bit of dread, but it is a necessary roadblock in the path to final completion of the project.

For some reason, though, it already feels like it is over. It is what my father used to call “eighty percent syndrome.” It’s the same reason that there are so many professional students with unwritten dissertations. This won’t be my Kubla Khan though; I will walk back on this trail even if it means risking being mugged or worse. I have come this far. There will probably be dreams though when it is done, but for now, I will go home to rest. Then, when it is dark, and the New Year’s party is at its zenith, I will return, and execute my plan. Nocturnal shape shifting magicians be damned.

When I finally get home, I shower and shave and eat and do all of the things I had planned to do in the morning before I overslept. Then, I lay out my clothes for the evening. I selected something relatively formal: my navy winter coat and a dress shirt with a tie, and heavy work style khaki pants. If by some unfortunate chance, I am stopped by the police while I am trying to put out the head, I will look official enough to give a plausible explanation of why I am walking around in the pre-dawn hours carrying a paper mache head. The best explanation that I can think of would be that the head was a party decoration, and that I have been contacted to move it. I think that is enough of an excuse to avert any further inquiry. After resting for a while, I decide to get dressed. I put on my pants and heavy socks and shoes, and am buttoning my shirt when I hear the buzz from the building’s front door. I push the button in my apartment to unlock the door, and wait for my visitor. I presume that the person at the door is most likely Ben, or maybe another tenant who forgot their keys. I wait a few minutes, and nobody arrives. Then the buzzer sounds again, so I repeat the process. After another two minutes, nobody arrives at my door, and I do not hear the front door open. Then, the buzzer sounds again, so finally, I decide to go downstairs.

When I get there, there are bulky men in suits standing on the porch. I open the door, and briefly inspect the latch mechanism, when one of the men says to me.

“Sir, what is your name, please?”

“Luke”

“Luke Kolbe?” The other one says

“Yes.”

Then, the first one, reaches under his overcoat, and frees a lanyard from around his neck. At the end of the lanyard, is a badge with a police identification in a laminated sleeve on the back.

“I’m Detective Kane” says the large sandy haired man “and this is Detective Flowers” he says gesturing to the heavy set bespectacled black man standing to his left. “We’re with the Pittsburgh Police. Would you be willing to take a ride with us down to the station to answer a few questions?”

“I guess.” I say “Can you tell me what it is about.”

“Your name came up in the course of an investigation, and we would like to talk to you a little bit” says Detective Flowers.

“Am I under arrest?”

“No, you are not under arrest.” Says Detective Kane.

“So, I can refuse, then” I ask

“You can, but it would be a big help if you didn’t”

“I’ll need to go upstairs and lock my apartment”

“Ok. “ says Detective Kane, then he turns to his partner and says,”Chris, will you go up with him?”

And so, I walk up to my apartment, and I go inside, and the detective who followed me says, “Where are you going?”

“I was going to get my coat”

“Oh, don’t get anything. The car is already warmed up”

“Will you give me a ride back here when we’re done?” I ask

“We will figure something out” says the detective.

And so, I am lead, coatless, to a running car where I sit in the back with the two detectives. On the ride, I ask several times what the nature of the investigation is, and each time, one of the men offers that I will get more details by the time we get to the station, and they drive in silence until we park in an underground garage and they ride with me in an elevator up to a vacant floor in the police department where a forgotten Christmas tree presides over a bank of unoccupied cubicles. Then, the detectives lead me into a small conference room where I am offered a seat, and the detectives leave. After an hour of me sitting there imagining all of the possible reasons why I would be in a spending New Year’s eve in the conference room of the police station, the men return without their jackets on. They sit down and Detective Flowers places a manila envelope in front of him.

“Do you have any idea why you are here?” Asks Detective Kane

“Actually, no. Remember? I asked you a bunch of times when we were in the car, and you promised that you would tell me when we got here”

The men look at me for a while, and then Detective Flowers takes a drink from a Styrofoam coffee cup. “Can I offer you some coffee?” He asks

“No, but you could tell me why I’m here”

So then, Detective Flowers opens up the manila envelope and removes a large photograph and places it in front of me. “Do you recognize that object?” He asks

“Yes.” I say

“Do you mind telling us what it is?” Says Detective Kane

“It is a wooden box” I say

“..And why do you recognize it?”

“It looks like one I made” I say

The men look at each other and sit silent for a while.

“When did you last see this box?” Detective Kane asks

“Just now. In this photograph.” I say

“How about before that” says the other detective “when did you physically see it last”



“When I left it along side Building 1 in Gateway Center early this morning”

The men look at each other, and then fall silent for a moment, then, Detective Flowers says “about what time was that?”

“I don’t remember exactly” I say “But I can spare you guys a lot of work here. I could just write a statement...give you the whole story, would that help?”

So then, Detective Kane leaves the room and returns with a yellow legal pad and a pen which he places in front of me, and both men stand up to leave the room. “We’ll be back when you’re done” he says

So, I write my statement. This is what I write:

My name is Luke Kolbe. I am a real estate agent and a building superintendent for Reinhold Realty. In my free time, I like to listen to music and read. I also like to make things which I give away. One of the things that I make is clay heads. I have given many of them away, and also hid some in places for people to find. I just completed my largest project ever, a paper mache head. I put that head into a wooden box, which I also made, alongside Building 1 in Gateway Center. Making things and giving them away is my way of bringing a sense of wonder into the world. I have some underlying philosophical reason about why I think that is necessary which I don’t think is relevant to your investigation. However, I fully admit responsibility for the crime of littering for which I am guilty, and I accept all of the potential repercussions for my role in that specific crime.

Then, I sit for a while and wait for the detectives to return, but they take a long time doing so. When they finally do return, Detective Flowers picks up my confession, reads it over, and makes a face, and then hands the tablet to the other detective, who takes a while reading the statement, and then tosses it back onto the table.

“Littering...is that what you think this is?” Says Detective Kane

“Sure... like Alice’s Restaurant right?” I say

“What is Alice’s Restaurant?” Says Detective Flowers

“It is some bullshit that this guy is saying because he thinks he is so much smarter than everyone” says Detective Kane

“You haven’t been watching the news... Have you?” Asks Detective Flowers

“No? Why?” I say

“Because if you had...you would know that your little stunt put a lot of people at risk. An unidentifiable package right before a major event for the city isn’t littering. It is major issue for the police. We had the bomb squad out...a bunch of investigators who were supposed to have the day off. Federal law enforcement...”

“Over a box?” I say

“Not over a box...” Detective Kane continued “a potential terrorist threat, a threat to the safety of the public...”

“But it wasn’t a threat to the safety of the public, it was a paper mache head” I say

“So we found out, we had technicians surrounding the thing for six hours trying to figure out what some asshole hid in a big wooden box...”

“And then you found out it was a head” I say

“It is all a joke, huh?” says Detective Flowers “all those resources. All those people afraid...this is part of the kick for you?”

“No...no definitely not. In fact, if I had thought of it that way, I wouldn't have done it.” I say

“Well, you did...and you must do it all of the time because as soon as word got out that what we had a joint departmental operational situation over was a damn paper head, we got a couple of calls right away saying that it was you that had done it”

“Wow.” I say

“So you are surprised?” Says Detective Kane

“Yeah, really surprised. Look guys, I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to be funny about the littering thing either. I guess I just don't think of things that way”

“Well, you should start” says Detective Flowers

“There were a lot of people scared to death out there today”

“Seriously, wow. I'm sorry. I never would want something like that to happen” I say

The detectives look at each other, and then Detective Kane picks up my statement again while Detective Flowers busies himself with a coffee cup.

“Am I under arrest?” I ask

“Yes.” Says Detective Flowers

“What is the charge?”

“Right now, it is creating a public disturbance, but our investigation isn't complete yet.” Says the other detective.

Then, the men ask me to stand up and I am put in handcuffs and read my Miranda rights and taken downstairs to be photographed and fingerprinted, and finally, a uniformed officer is called, and that policeman takes me in a squad car to the jail.

At the jail, I am told to take off all of my clothes and hand them through a small window to a woman wearing rubber gloves who slowly picks through them while my body is looked over with a flashlight by a uniformed guard. Then, I am called back to the window where my clothes are returned to me. After I put them on, I am shown a small plastic tray containing my wallet, my keys, my belt, and my shoe laces and am told to sign a form verifying the contents of the dish. Then I am led by a guard to large common containment cell where I am told I will be held until I will have a hearing. I ask the guard when the hearing will be, and he informs me that, due to the holiday, I will be in the cell until at least the 2nd, or likely the morning of the 3rd. Then, he puts me in, closes the door and walks away.

In the cell I talk for a while to a polite young junky with a red hands and a runny nose who patently explains what the guard did not, namely that I am not exactly in the “real jail” but rather a part of the jail where people who are waiting to go before a judge are held until bail is set. Then, he advises me to try to rest for a while on one of the benches until the cell starts to fill up

towards the end of the night. I take his advice, and manage to rest. Then, a little later, I feel him shake my shoulder, and wake me up by telling me that “you don’t want to be taking up a whole bench no more”. When I open my eyes, the cell is nearly full, or what I latter discover, at about half capacity, and most of the new occupants are sullen drunks still dressed in party clothes.

As the night wears on, the cell continues to fill up. I get up from my bench to use the toilet, and when I return, my seat has been taken by a large angry looking man with a recently bandaged cut over his right eye. I look for another place to sit, but they are all taken, so I instead elect to stand with a cluster of other prisoners near the front of the cell. Then, I hear from the back of the cell a voice singing the bluegrass classic Will you Miss Me When I’m Gone? “Perhaps you’ll plant some flowers...round my cold unworthy grave”. The version is great, I once saw Ralph Stanley perform it live. He wore a suit and a cowboy hat and pressed his stubby hand against his chest as he sang. It was wonderful. I consider lending my own voice to the low part, and then someone from one of the benches screams “shut the fuck up!” at the original voice, so I decide against joining in. So, I then I start to look around the cell to see if I can find out who was singing, and as I do, I walk past one of the benches, and the Mouthwash Man stands up to greet me.

“Hey...it's you” he says

“Hi”

“Imagine this.... I end up in jail for being drunk on amateur night...of all the fucking days, right?”

I laugh “go figure”

“Yeah, they pulled me right out of the bar, too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, probably didn’t want a regular around scaring away all the special customers” he says

“You are a regular somewhere?” I ask

“Man, I’m a fuckin regular everywhere. I don’t know what the big deal is. I’m a grown man...it’s a free country...If I want drink, I’m gonna fucking drink”

“Did you end up giving that head to your son?” I ask

“I called him, but he wouldn’t come. I guess he figured I was going to ask him for something.”

“Do you still have it?” I ask

“Yeah, I’ve got it. He can have it when I’m dead. He’ll probably feel bad when he finds out I wasn’t lying” He says. “how’d you end up here?”

“I was looking for the guy who was singing?” I say

“You liked that?”

“Yeah...it reminded me of the time I saw Ralph Stanley. For an old guy, he put on a great show...taking requests, the whole bit.” I say

“Well, you’re looking at him.”

“That was you?” I ask

“Hell yeah, that was me. You think it was any of these fuckers?”

I look around to see if anyone noticed his insult, but no one is paying attention to us

“You were good” I say

“Oh yeah, I like all that old country... Carter Family...the Stanley Brothers...”

“I like those guys too...country music now stinks” I say

“There hasn’t been anyone good since Waylon” he says

“Willie Nelson is still out there” I say

And then he starts to sing, “Remember me, when the candle lights are gleamin’. Remember me, at the close of a long, long day...”

“Red Headed Stranger” I say. “One of the greatest concept albums of all time”

Then, from my left, I hear another voice.

“Luke? Luke Kolbe?”

I turn and see a man in a suit missing its confiscated tie walking towards me. His nice clothes are disheveled, and his hair is a mess, but he has a healthy complexion and a look of prosperity that makes him stand out from the rest of the other prisoners.

“Shit, man, am I happy to see you here...” he says “looking around at all the rest of these fucking bums, I was thinking I might need some backup if a riot breaks up” then he laughs a bit too loud, and a few heads turn to look at him and then quickly look away

“You don’t fucking remember me, do you?...shit man, Chip Brady” he says thrusting his hand out towards mine “what they get you for? DUI? That’s what they stuck me with...” “He says.

“Chip Brady. That sounds familiar.” I say

“Yeah, man. I’m Todd’s friend. He was telling me he saw you a little while back, at the zoo or something, says you’re in real estate now”

“Kind of” I say

Then, Chip Brady wraps his arm around my shoulder “well, shit brother, we need to talk” he says

I try to gracefully get out from under his arm, but Chip Brady is still drunk and a bit unstable, so removing myself from him takes some effort.

“I’ll tell you what. You use my lawyer. This shit won’t stick for one second. “He says, slurring into my face “I got picked up a couple of years ago, I got right off. Tef-el-on, baby. Nothing sticking to this suit. You like this suit?”

“It’s nice” I say

“Better be fucking nice. It’s custom. Costs as much as that cocksucker cop probably makes in six months” He says

“You might not want to tell them that” I say, and I notice that a few of the other prisoners are starting to look over at us. “We should also try to be a little quieter. There are probably a few more people here who shouldn’t know about your suit”

“These people?” He says, loudly “these people don’t give a fuck. “

Then, the Mouthwash Man stands up and walks over to us. Standing next to me, he looks at Chip Brady and says “Do you know who this guy is?”

Chip looks at him for a while swaying, but not saying anything, so the Mouthwash Man says, “This guy is an artist. A great artist”

Then, Chip looks at me and says “you know this fucking guy?”

“Sure.” I say

And Chip Brady looks at the Mouthwash Man with disgust and wraps his arm around me and says, “This guy...this guy...is no fuckin’ artist. This guy is the greatest bar tender that ever lived” as he pats me on the chest with his free hand

And then, a voice from the other side of the bars bellows “No physical contact between prisoners. No physical contact...gentlemen...”

And so, I free myself from under Chip Brady’s arm and say, “I think he is talking to you”

“Who. This fucking bum?” He says, pointing to the Mouthwash Man. And the Mouthwash Man takes a step towards Chip Brady and says,

“Say it again, prick”

And the two men, stand inches from each other combatively positioning their bodies, when the heavy metal doors open again, four police officers come in, and wrestle both of them to the ground. Then, Chip Brady starts to yell “No! No! It was him... fucking Luke! Luke Kolbe!” and the guards lead him handcuffed from the room, and also take the Mouthwash Man away, who is patent and compliant as he is escorted away, and when he reaches the door he turns his head to me and says “see you around.”

After that, the next day in the cell is quiet. The drunks start to sober up, and the ones that are loud a quickly reprimanded by the other more experienced prisoners. Three times they come to feed us, but at some point during the night, both of the toilets broke, and the guards tell us to use the sinks instead, so I decide not to accept any of the meals to avoid having to use the broken toilets. The next morning, the guards begin to call the names of prisoners who will be arraigned. When my name is called, I am escorted into a small room to meet with a woman who does not look old enough to drive who explains that she will be my defender.

“They are going to do everything they can to make this stick to you.” She says

“Can I just plead guilty” I ask

“Not now, I probably wouldn’t recommend it any time soon actually. I looked over your file, and the statement you gave to the police. In general, it is never a good idea to give those types of statements.”

“Oh” I say

“Nothing you can do about it now, but the whole thing comes across as a little glib, so I don’t know how that will play to the court”

“I honestly didn’t think...”

“I know” she says “I actually talked to the Detectives. This whole event was pretty big news as I’m sure you’re aware”

“I wasn’t” I say

“Oh yeah, it was the top story on every local newscast the other night.”

“Really?” I ask

“A lot of people thought it was a legitimate terrorist attack”

“That is what the detectives said” I say

“So, you see, that is why that statement is damaging. There were a lot of people who were genuinely shaken up by this whole thing” she says

“Does that mean I am going to jail?” I ask

“Maybe. We will do our best, but what I can say is maybe. You are definitely going to get a fine. I also see here that you make your living as a real estate agent is that right?”

“Mostly during the summer, yes.”

“Well, that could actually help us. We could argue that since you will lose your license, that...”

“Do you think I will lose my real estate license?”

“I don’t know a lot about it, but I would think so...”

“Wow.” I say

“This is quite a serious thing” she says

“So I’m discovering” I say

“All right, for now, they are going to set your bail...”

“Do you think that could be a lot?” I ask

“It could be” she says “you will need somebody to sign for you. Do you have family in the area?”

“Some, but none that I would want to call” I say

“Well, if you can’t find anybody, you will be moved to the jail, and you will have to wait there until your trial” she says

“Maybe I could ask my boss” I say

“We will see what the judge says first” she says

After that, I am escorted into a small courtroom with another prisoner. The judge is polite to both of us, and when it is my turn, my lawyer makes a quick statement, and the judge launches into a long explanation about the risks of the sort “stunt you pulled”, and then he sets my bond at \$10,000. After that, I am lead into a little room where I am given the opportunity to drum up somebody who will come and get me. When I call Ron Reinhold, he is upset, but I explain the whole story to him. For the most part, he isn’t sympathetic, but by fortunate coincidence, he has also been the landlord for a bail bondsman for a number of years, and I manage to convince him that it will a good exercise in customer relations for Ron to make use of the bondsman’s services. Ron agrees, but he also insists that I agree to pay him the \$1,000 he will have to pay to the bondsman with 20% interest. After the phone call, I am returned to the holding cell for a few hours, and then finally a deputy comes, and leads me into another room where Ron and the bail

bondsman sit grinning at me. There, I sign some papers, and am taken into a different room where I am given a copy of a bunch of documents, and have the property that I taken from me on New Year's eve returned. Everything is there except for my shoelaces. I decide not to complain, and instead quickly sign the form verifying that my property was returned, and I walk out of the jail to meet Ron.

It is dark when I get outside, and at first, it is hard to find him amidst the little groups of smokers milling around outside, and then I see him, standing alone in his heavy coat.

"Where did the bondsman go?" I say

"He had to leave...he was having a great old time, laughing. ... Telling jokes."

"See, Ron...like I told you, good customer relations" I say

"I'm not in the mood for jokes" he says

"Sorry, Ron. That is my mistake. Really, I want to thank you so much for doing this for me. The whole thing has been such a mess. I never would have..."

"You are paying me back every bit of that money"

"I know, Ron. I promise. "

"I will take it out of your commissions" he says

"Yeah...about that. The defender said I might lose my license"

Ron throws his hands into the air, and spins around a full revolution on his heel "you have got to be fucking kidding me" he says "then, how the hell am I supposed to get the..."

"I will still work, Ron"

"Yeah, but I didn't bail you out because you are going to go work for someone else"

"I never said I was going to work for someone else, I'm still the super of my building aren't I?"

"You better believe you're the super, and if you can't the rent apartments, I'm putting you to work on the painting crew until you can pay me back" he says

"See, well there you have it, Ron. A solution"

"..It's a shit solution, and I am going to lose a good rental agent too"

"I might not lose my license" I say.

"No, you probably will. This is just great. This is the kind of thing that always happens to me" he says

"If it's any consolation, I just spent two nights in a holding cell with a broken toilet" I say, smiling back at Ron

"What did I tell you about jokes?" He says

"Sorry"

"You're the best agent I ever had. I now, you're going to be a damn felon"

"Does that mean I can't be the super?"

“Every super I ever had is a felon...normally bullshit from when they were kids..stolen cars when they were eighteen, shit like that...people tend to stay longer and work harder when they can't just go out and get another job.”

“See. There you go, then” I say “we're together forever”

“The only one I had that wasn't a con ended up getting popped for stealing panties out of the girl's apartments”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it was a big fucking disaster, Luke. Just like this is.” He says

“But you didn't bail the other guy out?”

“Fuck no, I didn't bail him out...I almost didn't bail you out”

“Well, thanks” I say “do you mind if we get going? It is getting kind of cold out here without a coat”

“We aren't going anywhere...I have dinner plans. ...you are going to have to get another ride home” he says

“Then why were you waiting out here for me?” I say

“To see how you were going to pay me back”

“So, are you satisfied, then?” I ask

“As satisfied as I can be” he says

“On the bright side, this thing could string out...maybe it will be a long time before they revoke my license”

“Or maybe I will just let you show apartments without the license because all those license guys can go fuck themselves. “

“That would work too” I say

“All right, smart guy, no more mistakes, ok?” Ron says

And I shake his hand, and Ron walks away to his car, and I stand freezing outside the jail.

The Jail Trail is the fastest way home, also the most direct. It is dark and freezing. After two days of constant noise and light and smells, the silence of dark bike path is particularly unnerving. In response to my fear, and in an attempt to return some warmth to my freezing body, I try to jog for a little while, but my two day fast and my unlaced shoes make jogging all but impossible. So, instead, I try to move my body as much as I can while I walk. I try to focus on the sounds and lights of the cars and avoid looking into the dark shadows of the trail, but my mind, still fixed in the constant vigilance of jail, imagines danger behind every bush. Twice, I am passed by bicyclists. Commuters most likely, racing by me on bikes with headlights and carrying heavy backpacks. Then, I see a figure moving towards me. The figure walks slowly, and in the dim light, I can only vaguely make out its shape. For some reason the whole right side of the figure is a huge mass, and I imagine that it is a man carrying a body. My tired mind continues this trick on me, and I try to adopt as aggressive a posture as possible and I get closer and closer to the figure. Finally, the man walks by me. By the light of the cars, I can make out his form. The man carrying what I thought was a body, was only a stocky homeless man



carrying a heavy duffel bag. The man mutters something to me, and I am minutes past him before I realize it was a greeting. Finally, I reach the parking lot where the trail ends. It is brightly lit, and in the light, I regain a measure of comfort. Then, I walk from the trial parking lot, under a low tunnel and along the overland streets that will take me to the final dark stretch of my walk through Panther Hollow. I walk for a little while though a mostly vacant neighborhood until I pass by an idling car. The car's dome light is on, and the person in driver's seat is ripping a filter from a cigarette with his teeth, and the woman in the passenger seat looks blankly ahead. As I pass by the car, I look in, and I see that the woman was preoccupied with a needle. She glances up at me, and I see a flash of shock in her eyes. I stand frozen looking at her for a while, and then, her window slowly rolls down. The man in the driver's seat leans across the woman, and shouts out to me, "hey, you lookin' to hook up?" I shake my head and quickly walk into the park where again I am alone in the darkness.

The trail through Panther Hollow is even worse than the Jail Trail. It is wider open, and there is almost no unnatural light anywhere, so every sound sets my nerves on end. I try to jog again for a little bit, but my shoes still won't stay on my feet, and so, I resign to walking, imagining pretend demons at every step. When I emerge from the park, I am so happy to see the lights of houses that I nearly cry, and all of the sudden, the exhaustion of the entire trip catches up with me, and I walk a little further and feel like I have to sit down. I sit for a while and think, about my heads, about the jail, about those desperate people in the car, about a raging Ben, and a cynical Donald, and I realize how long it has been since I ate or slept. And then I walk a little further, to the one final real obstacle: The long steps that span the hillside between where I stand, and the Pitt art building. Even in the day, I have encountered people on those steps: teenagers smoking pot, lonely homeless men drinking, but it is my final obstacle, and so I climb them, and as I do, it starts to snow. Big, fat, slow snowflakes, that gently spill from the sky and land in my palm and immediately melt. And I stop on the landing of the steps and watch the snowfall. And the bare branches of the trees frame a misty sky and I stand and let the snow fall onto my face. And then the snow starts to fall faster, and I watch it fall. And I lean my head back as far as it will go, and the snow falls onto my face, and I don't feel cold at all, and the snow falls faster. And then all I see is the snow, like television static, and I feel like I am flying through the stars. And each flake is a star, and I am a rocket, and they are rushing past me, and then I hear it. It is far away, but I hear it. And in the winter darkness the sound carries, and I listen closer to make sure that it is true, and then I know it is. Bright and unmistakable, a trumpet plays a serenade to the snow.

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For more by Marty Rafter, please visit, <http://www.rafterspurgatorio.com/>. There you will find short fiction, visual art, and a little punk rock for good measure.