

PLEASE!

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of English

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

By

Thomas Cardamone

May, 2018

PLEASE!

Thomas Cardamone

APPROVED:

Chitra Divakaruni
Committee Chair

Mat Johnson

Jennifer Brice
Colgate University

Antonio D. Tillis, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences
Department of Hispanic Studies

Acknowledgements

My sincerest gratitude goes to the following journals, in which some of the stories in this manuscript first appeared, sometimes in earlier versions:

Lunch Ticket: "Warmbloods"

Moon City Review: "Stormy Skies on the Galactic Front"

Necessary Fiction: "Say"

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
A Sort-of Opportunity	16
Say	33
A Brief Affair	41
Ian (I)	62
Stormy Skies on the Galactic Front	70
Ian (II)	74
Warmbloods	88
Warning Signs	97
Ian (III)	102

INTRODUCTION

During any semester I'm teaching, one of my favorite lesson plans is the one during which my students and I discuss the story "Clay" from James Joyce's *Dubliners*. As we begin discussing their impressions of the character of Maria, I can see immediately that they have settled on a reading of her as a helpless employee of the Dublin by Lamplight laundry, a woman so mired in the routinized details of her work (in the cleaning of the kitchen till "you could see yourself in the big copper boilers"), in the obsessive planning of her evening out ("[f]rom Ballsbridge to the Pillar, twenty minutes; from the Pillar to Drumcondra, twenty minutes") that she cannot carry off the most simple impromptu conversation on the train without losing the prize cake she was taking to the party, ultimately bringing herself to "nearly cr[y] outright" (309, 313). In deconstructing the narrative to arrive at this interpretation, my students frequently overlook other, more subtle details of "Clay." For instance, if Maria was merely some simpleton employee of the laundry, why did she need to be "given...leave" to visit Joe and his family that evening? They read over some lines – for instance, "[t]he barmbracks seemed uncut; but if you went closer you would see that they had been cut into long thick even slices...Maria had cut them herself" – and think of them as containing only insignificant details when really they are clues pointing towards a reading of "Clay" entirely different from the one they initially arrived at (309). As the barmbracks suggest, things in this story may not be as they seem. If Maria was merely an employee of the laundry, she would not need permission (would not need to be "given...leave") to see Joe and his

family in the evening, implying that her residence in Dublin by Lamplight may not have been wholly voluntary, that she may actually be one of those women that the laundry was seeking to “reform.” From there, a new narrative begins to take shape, one in which Maria’s relationship to Joe is not simply one of wet nurse to young charge but, possibly, mother to son, drawing renewed attention to one of Joe’s favorite aphorisms: “Mamma is mamma but Maria is my proper mother” (311). Rather than naïve laundry worker, Maria becomes in this reading a woman who crossed the boundaries of social norms, carried a pregnancy to term out of wedlock, and is now suffering the consequences. And we haven’t even begun to discuss how Joyce’s personal life could further complicate readings of “Clay”...

When I teach this story, I am always sure to emphasize that the initial reading my students have of Maria is not incorrect, but that it is not the only reading available to them, and that to ignore other avenues of interpretation would be to oversimplify a nuanced and complex piece of literature. That said, “ignore” may not be the best term to use. “Clay” is the type of story that encourages readers to engage in the creation of meaning: it presents readers with an established series of events, but if readers choose not to take on the role of active participants in the creative process, the story becomes a husk of what it could otherwise be. Maria becomes a simpleton employee instead of a woman paying the consequences for a violation of social norms. It is this richness of possibility that I aimed to emulate in my collection, *Please!* I wanted to write stories containing events and characters that would allow readers to come to different interpretations of who my characters are and what motivations drive them. I wanted to give readers the opportunity to seize the creative “reins,” so to speak, something that I

strived to make possible not only within the context an individual story, but also “between” stories, as well as through the use of the surreal and extended metaphor.

On Individual Stories

Please! consists of nine stories, and while I feel the stories play off of one another well, I wrote each piece with the intention that it should function as a complex story on its own (with the exception of the final “Ian” story, the closing piece of the collection, which may draw on too many previous events and characters to be coherent to a reader not familiar with the works that precede it).

Consider the second story of the collection, “Say.” It revolves around the life of an unnamed middle-aged woman struggling to balance the responsibilities of her various roles (mother, money-maker, and wife to abusive spouse) all the while dealing with the mundanity of her daily life and her disappointment in the disparity between her current life and what she wished it to be.

The turning point of the story comes when the protagonist’s sister, aware of the main character’s struggles, offers her “a large amount of money. Thousands of dollars,” presumably meant to serve as a means of escape. What interests me most about this piece is how the protagonist responds to this opportunity: immediately she zones out; she imagines opening her own business in Japan – a spider crab fishery – into which she will shepherd her daughters and “loung[e] about with buckets of melted butter.”

A reader might interpret this response in a number of different ways. First, that this is merely a flight of fancy for the protagonist: she is not serious but is using this fantasy as something to distract herself from her otherwise disappointing life. On the other hand, perhaps the protagonist is naively serious (opening a fishery of any kind is

not a venture of mere thousands of dollars) and is therefore doomed to fail. Then again, maybe a reader may think the protagonist is sincere and *does* have a chance to carry off this dream of hers. (This last reading may rely on a reader simply accepting the text at face value; in other words, this reader does not question the text or think of the logistics of the protagonist's proposed undertaking.) Regardless of whether or not readers are conscious of it, this is a moment in the story when they are more or less forced into making an interpretation of the protagonist's intentions.

This interpretation is complicated further at the end of "Say," when the protagonist learns her daughter will need to receive orthodontia treatment in the future ("a venture of several thousand dollars," according to the doctor), information that the mother responds to by observing a fracture line in the ceiling. She traces it down to the floor, thinking that "it probably reaches the very foundation of the building, which explains why [her] world is now shaking." Does this represent the discarding of the protagonist's self-indulged fantasy and a return to her everyday life? Or perhaps the dissolution of her naive plan – it ends before it even has a chance to fail. Or maybe it's neither—representing instead a moment of indecision at which the protagonist must choose between the welfare of her daughter and the fulfillment of her own ambitions. Through a process of reasoning, or possibly a projection of the self into the protagonist, the reader plays a large role in the construction of meaning in "Say."

Play "Between" Stories

While I wrote each story with the intention that it should be able to stand alone, I also believe the stories play off of one another in ways that add to the reading experience. Some of the stories are linked implicitly; others feature reoccurring secondary

characters; while the “Ian” stories follow the development of Ian from childhood into early adulthood.

The more subtle links between stories – the implicit connections – may not necessarily be made by all readers, but they do (at least in my mind) act as sort of “Easter eggs,” allowing perceptive and / or imaginative readers opportunities for a series of “ah-hah” moments and the opening of new doors of interpretation that may otherwise have been inaccessible. For instance, Paulita Paulo from “A Brief Affair” is the younger daughter of the mother from “Say.” Be it through sacrifice or mishap, the mother’s Japan-dreams didn’t materialize; she instead has to settle for House Hunters International – Japan Edition. Those teeth (“such beautiful, beautiful teeth”) she bought Paulita, however, seemed to have snagged her daughter a man, albeit one of the worst kind.

A reader might also consider “Warning Signs” to be a sequel of sorts to “Stormy Skies on the Galactic Front.” The former child-Star Wars fanatic, now a parent himself, finds his own son has non-gender-standard interests, and he reacts by trying to steer his son towards more typical boy behaviors. This stands in stark contrast to the support his mother showed for his own nerdy interests, begging the question: is this the result of a lack of empathy: an inability to see that he now has a chance to be the supportive figure his mother was for him to his own son; or is he reacting negatively against his mother: he wants to do for his son what his mother “failed” to do for him, namely, “save” him from himself.

Some secondary characters pop up in multiple stories, occasionally even getting to star in a story of their own as a protagonist. Under this category is Kevin, who opens

the collection in “A Sort-of Opportunity”; he then goes on to feature as a trickster figure in both “Ian II” and “Warmbloods.” Another example is the character of Sharon, who first appears as a child in “A Brief Affair,” where we learn she dreams of owning her own horse ranch; sadly, as we come to find out in “Warmbloods,” this dream does not come to pass.

Lastly, there is one character who steals the limelight over a trio of stories—Ian. The reader traces Ian’s growth from childhood in “Ian I” to young adulthood in “Ian III,” a journey during which Ian looks for (and fails to find) meaning in a variety of places: the people around him, consumerism, work. I imagine Ian as the figure that anchors the collection and embodies several of the themes at play, including issues of loneliness, sexuality, and the allure of capitalism.

The Surreal and Extended Metaphor

As I continue to reflect on my manuscript, I’ve come to realize how much Haruki Murakami’s “Super Frog Saves Tokyo” influenced the writing of *Please!* In Murakami’s short story, Katagiri, the protagonist, returns to his apartment one day to find Frog, a giant “real frog,” waiting for him (94). Frog tells Katagiri he needs his help to save Tokyo from an impending earthquake that will be caused by “Worm,” a creature that lives beneath the city, where Worm sleeps, absorbing “every little rumble and reverberation that comes his way... storing them up... [until] through some kind of chemical process, he replaces most of them with rage,” resulting in a massive earthquake (97-98). Katagiri tells Frog he will help him defeat Worm and agrees to meet Frog several days after their initial encounter, when together they will descend into the Tokyo underground to confront Worm. Before the appointed time, however,

Katagiri is hospitalized after being shot in the street. Upon waking in the hospital, Katagiri learns that he has missed his rendezvous with Frog; that despite this there has been no earthquake; and that he had never been shot but merely found lying unconscious in the street. While still in the hospital, Frog appears to Katagiri again, where he insists that Katagiri did indeed help Frog defeat Worm. Frog passes this information on to Katagiri before succumbing to injuries incurred during his fight against Worm and dissolving into, among other things, “maggotlike worms” (113).

The above summary is an accurate description of “A Super Frog Saves Tokyo,” but it is also only the most superficial reading of the story: a brief play-by-play of what happened. In the above retelling, the story has been reduced to a weird meeting between a man and a giant talking frog, and for some readers, that reading of the story will be enough. However, such a reading is reductive and ignores the metaphorical value of both Frog and Worm. The later might be understood to represent that part of our interior lives that absorbs and stores life’s disappointments and disturbances, while Frog is the courage needed to weather and continue on in the face of those difficulties.

Like Frog and Worm in “Super Frog Saves Tokyo,” the zombies present in *Please!* are meant to stand for more than just bodies of rotting flesh (though they are that as well). They represent an outward manifestation of the internal damage people may suffer in a culture that values money and consumer goods over everything else; they function as a metaphor that both speaks to *and* makes visible a threat that is normally invisible. As the stories suggest, I believe the process of “losing” oneself to a consumer driven culture can be a process that is insidious in nature: in “A Sort-of Opportunity,” Max’s initial intention was to make a quick sum in order to meet the

wants of his partner, Cindy; at the end of “Warmbloods,” we learn that Zombie is actually Sharon from “A Brief Affair,” an earlier story during which Sharon tells us her dream is to become a horse rancher. Yet somewhere along the line, presumably in pursuit of their respective interests, these characters lost their way and fell for the allure of money and consumerism. The use of the zombie metaphor (the “zombification process,” as it were) is a way of externalizing and characterizing one of the dangers of modern society that in the real world is intangible but nonetheless real.

Other Notes...

Story “Types” in *Please!* / Perceived Changes in my Writing

When I first began my studies at UH, I could only write stories like “Say,” pieces that typically fell within the 1,600 to 1,800 word range. The second “Ian” story was the first longer piece of fiction I wrote. (I finished it over the summer between my first and second years at UH.) It is over 3,900 words. “A Brief Affair,” written over the summer between my second and third years, is over 5,600 words, a length that would have been unimaginable to my undergraduate self. For some time I wondered how I accomplished these stories (let’s be clear: to me, they were a feat), and I didn’t want to settle for an explanation as unsatisfying as “Well, for one story I put more words on the page; for the other story I put fewer words on the page.” For now I’ve come to the conclusion that I had different goals in mind when I set out to write the longer stories versus the shorter stories; they are two different “types” of projects.

The first “type” of story would include stories like “Say” (1,807 words) and “Ian I” (1,764 words). “Say” might be described as a story about a woman who comes to terms with a life unlike the one she ultimately wanted, while “Ian I” might be

characterized as a piece about a young boy who is unable (and / or unequipped) to express his feelings for a fellow classmate. The aim of these stories, I think, is to capture the psychology of a character in the moment depicted.

The second “type” of story might include pieces like “Ian II” (3,913 words) and “A Brief Affair” (5,660 words), each of which is arguably more complex than the aforementioned shorter stories. “Ian II” might be described as an exploration of grief: Ian and his mother are grappling with the sudden and unexpected loss of their father / husband and ultimately turn to radically different outlets for the expression of their loss. “A Brief Affair,” on the other hand, revolves around the everyday life of Paulita and how she responds when that life is disrupted by the twin whirlwinds that are David and his father Julian. It is about learning to accept who you are as a person, even if the life of that person is somewhat banal; and in that way, “A Brief Affair” might be read as an extended version of (or at least in conversation with) “Say.” Rather than illuminating the psychology of a character in a moment, these stories seem to be about the exploration of identity on a larger scale; they depict the lives of characters tangled up in more complex narratives.

Last semester, I taught an introductory class on fiction and poetry. For their final project, students had the option of writing a six to ten page story or a series of poems. The fiction writers generally fell into one of two camps: those who only wrote flash fiction and felt daunted by a project of this size; and those who only wrote novels and felt cramped by a project of this size. If I had those same students again, I would advise them to think of an idea for a story that they feel would align with the first story type

described above and then use that idea as the scaffolding around which to build their six to ten page story.

Please! The Construction Process

I never intended to write a “linked” collection of stories. At least not initially. “Say,” “Warmbloods,” and “Waking” (the last of which was renamed “Ian II” for the purpose of the collection) were the first stories completed in the project. They were written in that order, and when I finished them, I thought of them as independent stories (at the time, that was the only kind of story I had ever written—the stand-alone story, that is). Then I began working on a fourth story, “The Day of the Party” (later renamed “Ian I”). It was the first piece I wrote with the intention of revisiting some of my characters from previous works. At first, it was only Ian (and to a lesser extent, James) that I couldn’t let go of – I felt like I wanted to get to know these characters better. But as I continued working on “The Day of the Party,” I saw I could pull in more characters as well, including the cast from “Warmbloods” – Bonnie Bonnie, Greg, and Sharon AKA Zombie. I enjoyed the process of writing this story; it was something new for me: I was excited at the prospect of getting to work with the same characters across multiple stories, to get to know my characters at different stages of their lives. I think that excitement was the genesis of what eventually became ***Please!***

In *How Fiction Works*, James Wood describes fiction as a “house,” an idea I kept in mind while working on ***Please!*** When I began building my own “house,” I was lucky enough to find that three of the rooms of that house had already been more or less constructed (see “Say,” “Warmbloods,” and “Waking”). From there, I threw myself into the project: I imagined myself in an unfinished room; my goal—to build that room into

the best room it could be. And if I thought about that room as existing in relation to any other room in the house, it was only to make sure there was a door, or at least a hole in the wall, so that one could pass from that room into the next one. While I like to think my house is made up of a number of nice rooms, I fear a person touring my house may find themselves passing through a series of consecutive bathrooms (albeit, in my opinion, very nice bathrooms).

I still think I'm a novice when it comes to the writing of "linked" stories, but I feel confident when I say that the approach I took to writing such a collection is not the best one. I built my house from the inside out, one room at a time, when it would have been more effective to be working from a master plan: a document or outline of the full project that would have given me more of a bird's-eye-view that I could have kept in mind and referred to as I worked. This is something I'll remember should I ever begin another project like *Please!* and it's also the advice I'd give to other writers looking to take on the challenge of writing a "linked" story collection.

Models for *Please!*

While working towards the completion of the first draft of this manuscript, some of the literary models I referenced included Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad* and numerous George Saunders stories, most especially *Sea Oak* and *The Semplica-Girls Diaries*.

Once I had decided on ("stumbled onto" may be a more appropriate choice of words) the linked story collection as the form for my thesis, *A Visit From the Goon Squad* was one of the first books I looked to for guidance. Primarily I was interested in the structuring of the "novel" / story collection: it features a wide cast of characters that

it moves between freely. A character who is secondary in one story may star as the protagonist in the next. I felt this format not only kept readers on their toes (like me, did others wonder who would be in the limelight next?), but also allowed me to become better acquainted with a character by enabling me to see him / her through a variety of lenses. For instance, we meet the character of Sasha in a variety of contexts throughout the collection: as a woman in her 30's struggling with an addiction to stealing; as an assistant to a music producer; as a teenager fled to Europe; and even as a wife and mother to an autistic child.

For lessons in humor and absurdity, I looked to stories by George Saunder's, with particular attention given towards stories like *Sea Oak* and *The Semplica-Girls Diaries*. I was interested in the surrealist premises of these works (a dead relative returning from the grave and the horrifying use of women as lawn ornaments, respectively): how these stories could elicit laughs and sympathy from readers all the while remaining coherent literary works in their own right. This is a matter that I'm still exploring, but as of now I'd say these stories derive much of their narrative power through the presentation of the absurd in a matter-of-fact manner. Explanations are neither given nor asked for when Aunt Bernie rises from the dead; the logistics of how a wire is run through the brains of living women are not provided. I think the product of readers' recognition of the absurdity of these situations, coupled by the less-than-hysterical manner in which characters react to these events, results in the tension and humor these works are known for.

Moving Forward / Looking Ahead

As of now, my work on *Please!* is not done yet. The *Nashville Review* has expressed interest in seeing a rewrite of “The Day of the Party” (“Ian I”), so that is the project I’ll be tackling in the immediate future. Beyond that, there is a tenth story I plan to write for the collection, though my plans for it at the moment are vague. In terms of placement, it will be the sixth story in the collection, falling between “Stormy Skies on the Galactic Front” and “Ian II.” The main character will be James, and the aim of the story will be to get at how James devolves from the state we see him in in “Ian I” to the state we find him in in “Ian II”—“The Fall of James,” so to speak (that is not a working title; it is not even a *non-working* title.) How this “fall” takes place, I haven’t figured out yet. Maybe James goes into some kind of free fall after moving away from home? (In my mind, I can see Ian playing a role in this story, though only an off-stage sort of role, in which the readers see emails Ian sends to James; in these emails, Ian suggests the reason James is struggling away from home is that he [James] has not come to terms with his [James’] sexual preference for men.) But as I said, these are only fragments of ideas for another story, and there are other projects I’d like to finish before throwing myself into this tenth story.

In terms of revisions on a larger scale, I plan to overhaul the trio of “Ian” stories for reasons related to character development. The character of Ian changes too drastically from story to story: by the time we reach him in “Ian II” his obsession with environmental issues has all but disappeared; his relationship with his parents also seems inconsistent. If Ian and his family are to serve as the “anchor” of this collection, their stories need to be reshaped to form a more streamlined, coherent arc. (Drawing

up that “master plan” mentioned earlier will likely be crucial in this stage of the revision process.)

All this is to say that *Please!* as it stands now, is still a draft rather than a final product, but I believe the process of bringing it to this point has not only given me a plan for how I’d like to shape the collection in later iterations, it’s also expanded my sense of the different types of writing projects I might take on in the future.

Thank you for reading,

TC

Works Cited

Joyce, James. "Clay." *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Dubliners*. New York:

Barnes & Noble Books, 2004. 309 - 315. Print.

Murakami, Haruki. "Super-Frog Saves Tokyo." *After the Quake*. New York: Vintage, 2003.

91 - 114. Print.

A Sort-of Opportunity

Prologue

So I tell you this now so you might come to some sort of understanding – however partial – of how things turned out the way they did. Just do not tell me, afterwards, *Well, you made a choice. That was your decision.* I am not the sort of man who, when faced with a series of options, says to himself, *Well, I guess this is it. It's either A or B; it's either C or D.* If you really want to talk about decisions, we may as well talk about the only one that ever mattered—the day I decided I'd never golf par again in my life...What I'm about to tell you is a story about a certain kind of person living under certain conditions...A story about my youth at a time when I thought (at least initially) that I was the recipient of a blessing from on high; that I had finally come out on the other side of some prolonged trial, or that the universe had turned on some pivot and decided (at last!) that it was *my* time. And it all started with the words *you're hired...*

* * *

“You’re hired”

Sitting in Julian’s office, I was certain there were no two words in all the English language as beautiful as these, not to me anyway, drowning as I was in every possible kind of debt: student loans that had tracked me down from the 80’s; medical bills from a brief stint in the ER (acute appendicitis—in my defense, I told them I was fine, that I preferred it that way—painful, like the rest of my life); not to mention a credit card debt worth more than two grand (on which I was pleading victim of fraud).

So there I was, suddenly with prospects and in transit, it seemed, to a future bathed in a cathedral of light and money, so distracted that I nearly missed Julian saying, “Kevin. Kevin, are you listening? I haven’t even told you about the end-of-year bonus yet.”

* * *

The Bros

I shared an office with Theo and Max, who took it upon themselves to take me out for drinks during my first week – to give me the skinny on my new job.

“So what do you know about futures?” said Theo.

I said I didn’t know a thing about futures.

“What about the bond market?” said Max.

I shrugged.

Exasperated, Theo agitated his whiskey lowball. He wanted to know how I even got this job in the first place.

I said that I may have told a few fat ones, that I was hoping they might help me push through a bit, but that there wasn't single Greek tragedian with whom I was unfamiliar.

"That's great," said Max. "Really. The clients will love when you open with that. You can sell them on that all day."

"That's great advice, Maxwell," chirped Theo. "Great advice."

"For the thousandth time, *Theodorus*, I told you only Cindy calls me that."

"Man, that's like not even my name," said Theo; and then: "The point is, Kevin, you sell them on the mutual fund. When they say, 'What about a bond index?' you say, 'The mutual funds are where it's at. That's where you wanna be.'"

"And that's how it goes on and on," said Max.

Theo raised his glass. "On and on forever."

* * *

The End of Forever

A year passes. I sell the mutual funds. When in doubt, I sell the mutual funds. I dream of them in my sleep. There they take on the appearance of multiplying boxes, boxes inside of boxes, like those empty Russian dolls... The company recognizes my efforts – *best new employee!* They put that on a silver-plated placard. As he hands it to me, Julian says, "Good work," and returns to his office. Every morning on my way to work, I stop to

buy a large coffee. Arriving at the office, there is a seat for me. (There is always a seat for me.) There are several calls for me to make: several clients would like to expand their positions in the market. I am thinking that this isn't so bad. That I might do this for some time.

On this morning, we are all at our desks. Theo is checking his clients' FaceBook profiles while Max has his legs up on a nearby bookshelf, nursing a hangover from the night before.

"What would you say my chances are of, say, getting with Eileen from marketing?" Max wants to know.

"Dude, she knows you're still with Cindy."

"Not an issue." Color is returning to Max's face. He is the sort of man who appreciates a certain type of challenge. "Besides, Cindy and I are cool about stuff like that."

Sensing an opportunity to fit in, I am contemplating a joke when Julian sweeps through the door. He tells us that Jay will be dropping by shortly – tells us to make ourselves presentable, tells us to get our shit together. I have not seen Jay, but I have heard of him.

"Julian is the boss, but Jay is the big boss." This is an adage Theo coined himself.

Max agrees. "Jay is, like, a total god," he says.

Max is hardly finished tucking in his shirt when Jay kicks in the door. This is not an overstatement: he literally uses his foot to kick in the door and promptly storms in. Though not physically large, Jay's presence demands attention. Imagine a predator bursting into a glade full of fluffy and dazed herbivores. That is what Jay is like.

He wastes no time with introductions. “We need to increase profits,” he says and begins stalking the space. “Our fees are at one percent. You know this. Next month, they will be two percent.” He takes a spreadsheet from Theo’s desk; makes a show of considering it; drops it on the floor. “Your jobs – sign clients onto the new terms. Simple, no?”

Theo squirms in his chair. “We’ve grown by nearly four percent since last year using our current model, though.”

This was a mistake.

Grabbing the front legs of Theo’s chair with two hands, Jay sends Theo sprawling onto the ground. He stands over him, looming. “There is so much that I have,” Jay says. “And yet I live in fear that at any moment, someone, somewhere might have more than me, and that is the one thing I cannot bear. That is the one thing I cannot stand. Have I made myself clear?”

In unison, we nod. Never had anything been more clear to us in all our lives.

“Good. Julian will outline your individual expectations. Failure to meet them will mean the forfeiture of your annual bonuses.” And just as quickly as he came in, Jay exited, leaving the room feeling empty and airless.

* * *

Initial Reactions

Jay was not gone fifteen minutes before Max was bent over the wastebasket, vomiting. An odd reversal had been set in motion. Apparently, he had been counting on that

bonus to help him out of some personal troubles. “I’ve been promising Cindy a trip to Melbourne all year,” he said. “I’m afraid she might leave me.”

In the name of solidarity, Theo and I kneel beside Max and, in turn, shake our heads and wring our hands; wring our hands and shake our heads. “Yeah, it’s not looking good,” says Theo before returning to his desk. A few minutes later, I follow suit.

Looking back, I don’t think either of us are to blame for what happened to Max. At any given moment you can only work with what you have, and at that moment, I really think that was all we had to give.

* * *

I, too, am afraid

We receive our new quotas from Julian. Theo’s reaction: Wow.

I spend the better part of the week wondering what will become of me. Though I had been making good money, I had not been putting it to good use (e.g. – paying off creditors), using it instead on evenings out on the town with Max and Theo—my colleagues, my friends!—who seemed, at the time, successful in so many ways (especially in relation to myself). I think it is safe to say there was not a bar we had not been to...Sometimes, I wonder why I couldn’t bring myself, back then, to say, “You know, I think I’ll just head home tonight.” But then I remember that it was a time of exploration: I was testing the limits of a new life; a life so unlike the one I’d been living only months before and to which I’d sworn I’d never return to, that is to say, one of couch-surfing and dignity-crushing phone calls: *Hello? It’s me, Kevin...Your second*

cousin?...I was wondering if I might spend the night?...I felt there was so much to make up for. I felt I'd been missing out for so long.

So when Jay dropped this unexpected obstacle into my lap (*that bonus would go so far in fixing so much!*), I developed a new understanding of abrupt and calamitous events. I think of Chernobyl; I think of Pear Harbor; I go, "Ah, I get it now." It is becoming more and more difficult to breath. I cannot joke my way out of this. I, too, am afraid.

* * *

Epiphany:

We all live in fear.

* * *

The Solution

In my sleep, the solution comes to me, and the following day, I share it with Theo and Max. "So we're on the phone with 'em, right?" I say. "They say, 'two percent fees, say what!?' and that's when we hit 'em with it – we sell them on *advanced protection*."

"Advanced protection?" says Max.

"No," I say. "*Advanced protection* – who doesn't want that? We say, 'This money is everything, right? It's your lakeside bungalow at fifty-five; your son's BA at USC, with a spring break in Barcelona. Isn't two percent worth protecting that from, say, a hacker in Taiwan or some greedy fuck in the Caymans?'"

We mull this over for all of two minutes: we troubleshoot; triangulate; then troubleshoot again before agreeing that this may just work. But in my mind we have

already succeeded; we are already wildly successful: Max and Cindy are still together but now, somehow, with children, to whom Max regularly says, in a sweet Papa-voice, “And you guys wouldn’t even be here right now if it weren’t for Kevin.”

I am glowing.

* * *

The Change

After that, Max attended to his work with a sort of energy that, at least in my time of knowing him, I’d never seen him give to anything. He cradled an office phone in one hand, his cell phone in the other: “No, I wasn’t talking to you, Bernie; hold on a sec. Ester, how much can I put you down for?” Even Theo looked up from his work now and then, his expression a cross between one of awe and disbelief.

Then there was the food. He started having it delivered to the office three—four—five times a day: rolling masses of bratwurst and sauerkraut, vermicelli and pierogi by the pound, chicken prepared in every imaginable way. As they arrived at the office, he would load these meals up in his arms and carry them to the corner, where he would throw them down and consume them with much noise and aggression. We did not interrupt him. It was like he could never get enough or that, in all he was engorging, some fundamental additive or nutrient was missing, and he was determined to eat until he found it.

At the same time, Max began to disintegrate—I’m not sure what else to call it. His fingers started to yellow and his hair began to gather in clumps at the edges of his

workspace. Despite all he was eating, he seemed to be wasting away. One day I saw Julian and Jay peering in from the doorway. It's possible I'm mistaken, but I think Jay said something like, "For fuck sake—again?" before walking away.

After all this time, I still can't say, exactly, what came over Max back then. All I know is that, if all this at first had something to do with Cindy, somewhere along the line she became secondary, or maybe even lost altogether, and in her place grew this aching, insatiable sense of want. That's the impression I got one morning when, after hanging up the phone, Max turned to me, his hair reduced to sparse patches, and said, "You know, it's never as bad as when they're just about to cave in, to give me absolutely everything, but then they hesitate, and in that moment, I want to reach through the phone lines—the air waves or whatever, and bite them."

* * *

A Private Meeting

Quickly now we are screaming towards an ending – arching towards the climax. Hang on. Things may get ugly...

I am at my desk one afternoon, on the phone – "Have I mentioned the *advanced protection* package yet?" – when Julian appears at my shoulder. Jay would like to see me, and I am thinking, *a private meeting? With Jay?* I feel torn, unable to decide whether I should be feeling thrilled or shitting my pants. I take a look at Theo and Max, the later of whom is in an absolutely frenzy and even now is on the phone, saying, "You *will* buy into this account. And you *will* put down five grand to do so... You will? I think that's,

like, a great decision, a really smart move on your part.” Meanwhile, Theo is eyeing him warily, which is how we engage with Max now, which is to say, not at all.

Stepping into the hallway, I am glad for the fresh air — Max had started to smell and there were not windows enough to cycle out the stench. *Thank god*, I remember thinking. (Though perhaps I would have felt differently had I known that that was the last time I’d ever see Max...)

I follow Julian to the elevator, which I take to the top floor. There, I am sashayed across a lobby by a meticulously groomed man who raps gently on a door before easing it open. Inside, it is dark, the primary sources of illumination a lone, open laptop and several recessed light fixtures that cast everything into shadow. A desk separates me from a high-backed leather chair, from behind which comes a voice: “That will be all for now, Phillip. Thank you.”

As the door closes, Jay turns slowly to face me, his expression indecipherable in the half-light. He rests his forearms on the desk, makes a steeple of his hands, and begins: “That’s actually why I asked you here as well, Kevin. To thank you. You have been here only a short time, and yet I feel you understand the values of this company completely.”

He pauses here, though it is unclear if this is to give me a chance to speak, or if he is merely catching his breath. Just beneath the surface, there is a sense that I have entered into the acting of some kind of script, but one in which I play only a limited role: a piece of furniture for Jay to reflect on as he delivers a speech.

“At the heart of this place is the mutual fund. So many people out there are working their fingers to the bone and doing little more than running in place. By

investing with us, they finally have a chance to make some money. *We* have a chance to make some money – everyone is happy...And you—you have been doing such great work, Kevin. There will always be a place here for people willing to think outside the box – people like you – and these are the people I keep in mind when certain opportunities come up, as has happened just recently...What—you didn't think I actually called you here just to say 'thank you' did you? Who really has time for 'thank you,' and 'your welcome'? Certainly not me, and I suspect not you, either. You have debts to pay, am I right? Wouldn't it feel like a burden had been lifted from you if they were, say, just gone? That's the sort of opportunity we're talking about right now. That's the sort of opportunity I want to give you. Would you be interested—of course you're interested. I don't mean to waste your time. It's like this: first— ”

Just then the door behind me opens, flooding the room with light, disrupting everything. It is Julian. He sounds out of breath. He sounds un-Julian. “Jay,” he says, “we have a small issue – we have a problem with Max.”

And just like that, I am irrelevant, completely worthless; I'm a “*We'll continue this later, Kevin*” on the way out the door, with Julian following closely at Jay's heels, leaving me alone in Jay's office, silent now except for the whir of a softly glowing laptop. For the life of me, I don't know what I was thinking – that I would catch Jay in the middle of some illicit activity, perhaps? That I'd say to Theo, later, “You'll never guess what Jay gets it up to when he's in his office”? – but I was not alone more than ten seconds before I was pouring over the contents of the monitor and feeling, at first, deeply disappointed: it was exactly what you'd expect – an overview of Jay's personal holdings, assets valued in millions of dollars. I remember thinking, *Really, Jay, no need to brag*; and then, only

moments later, it was nothing like you'd expect – not a single company holding; not a cent in any of the company funds. *Am I reading this right?* I thought. *I have to be missing something.* After all, I myself had what little money I had tied up in company funds (albeit exempted from one or two select fees...)

Back in the elevator, I wondered what Jay knew that I didn't. What piece of information could be so important, that it could lead to such divergent paths, and if it was so vital, why didn't he share it with me or Theo or Max? Or maybe Theo and Max already knew, and I was the only one not on the up-and-up. In a way, wouldn't that make sense? Did I not occupy the lowest rung on the totem pole – who, in fact, was lower than I? The schmucks downstairs in mailing? If I told him what I saw, what would Theo say? *Say what, mothafucka?* Is that what he'd say, and if he did, could I believe him? Maybe he'd say, *Ah, you finally figured it out. Now you really are one of us.*

I am wondering how I will broach this subject when the elevator doors open and I step out just in time to see Theo, down the hallway, turning the corner on the back of a gurney, screaming and clutching at his face. Max, meanwhile, had long since fled the scene.

* * *

Possible Futures

By the time I make it to Theo's hospital room, it is too late: he is gone – deep in a drug-induced sleep. But if we're being honest, I'm grateful he's asleep. The flowers I brought him had wilted in transit. Moreover, I had no idea what I'd say if he were awake. What

does one man say to another when he finds himself, unexpectedly, in such a situation: bandages damp with red and yellow fluids cover the left half of Theo's face – not even his eye is spared. I feel the contents of my stomach lurch and reconsider the flowers in my hand. They seem now so grossly inadequate.

As I circle the bed, more so than the bandages, more than the open-wound smell lurking beneath the overtones of disinfectant, I am surprised at the barrenness of the room. Everything is an uninterrupted shade of hospital-white. I mean—there are no balloons or boxes of chocolates. I mean—there are no relations: no bedside nephews or nieces, no aunties in the corner thumbing their rosaries. Surely, I thought, Theo must at least have his own Cindy. But no – the room is empty.

Where is everyone?

In my mind, Theo – men like Theo – had always existed apart from myself, detached from my own reality by a halo of radiance, an aura the product of a lifetime of accomplishments, something that surely excluded me from whatever plane of existence he occupied. I assumed he returned to some kingdom, after work, to be summarily smothered in an excess of love at the hands of some unknown (but unquestionably beautiful) spouse. How could that not be the case? Theo—with his money and his job and his 401K—is this how men like Theo end up? I think of Max—is that how men like Max end up? And if that's so, what did that mean for me? Who was I to expect any different?

I am sifting through possible futures when my eyes catch on a cream-colored card resting on the windowsill. Nearly invisible against the off-white palette of the room, it could not be more unobtrusive. On the exterior, "Theo" is scrawled in fine

penmanship. And on the inside...a few words crossed out – “~~Thank You~~” – followed by a message:

Get better soon—your desk is lonely without you.

–Jay

* * *

ESCAPE

After that, my mind went strictly primeval, as in, like, 100% flight: I was all ESCAPE all the time. I didn't even wait until morning to return to the office, where I began compiling a list of my most senior and well-meaning clients. Over the phone, I described a market at once volatile and fast-acting (“you know, like Xanax”); I told them the window of opportunity was short, but that we were talking about a chance to make some *real* money, an investment the windfalls of which would reach down to their children's children. “Think of how much they'll love you,” I said. “Think of the shrine they'll build in your honor.”

That's how it started.

And that's how it continued the next few weeks, with me collecting and transmuting money from one commodity to another: what started as a collection of stocks became a portfolio of bonds, which in turn became a series of condos in Vancouver. But I didn't stop there. At any given hour, my clients may have been the partial owners of a dozen bulldozers in California, one half an English countryside estate, or a litter of Nepali tigers. For thirty minutes they controlled a majority share of

a small chemicals plant in Japan (which I later gave up for a limited holding of a soccer stadium in Munich). I can't say how much money was gained or lost, only that my total commissions grew larger and larger. I collected on fees of purchase and sale, wrap fees, assessment fees, advising and management fees, fees of retainer and cupidity. (I made that last one up.)

During these weeks I kept up my normal routines as best I could, arriving at work with coffee in hand and manning my desk at the usual hours, all the while siphoning money into my accounts and planning for my eventual disappearance (FYI – disappearing is really the only thing you can do after a stunt like this – it comes with the territory; it's in the job description)... As all this went on, I told myself, *I bet they'd think Peruvian rugs are cool. I bet they've always wanted their very own newspaper press* – I was helping my clients fulfill desires they had or didn't yet know they had but certainly would if they only considered these things but for a few moments. Gradually, however, these thoughts started to fade—because they lost their efficacy, perhaps? Or maybe they just couldn't hold out against what, in time, came to replace them.

Namely numbers.

Increasingly, I came to understand that I lived in a system of valuation. And how can one better understand the value of anything than through its financial, numerical value. Like duh. And to escape the system, one's valuation had to be so high – so absurd – so as to exist apart from the system altogether, at which point, one no longer had to worry about things like debt and rent and extravagant trips to Melbourne. (Talk about “double P,” aka Plebian Problems). And slowly my experience of the world began to change: at the taste of my coffee—I was drinking money; at the whirl of the air

conditioner—I was breathing money. Then, suddenly, like an explosion in the brain, a revelation: *this is how Jay thinks...*in numbers and numbers and numbers and numbers and numbers...

Then, the night before I vanished, a dream: I am with Jay. We are alone together in an elevator, though whether we are going up or down I cannot say. Eventually, the doors open onto a windowless room, empty, save for the presence of Phillip, who stands before a padlocked door. As before, Phillip is exquisitely dressed, but this time everything is slightly off – his tie skewed to one side; his shirt wrinkled and spotted by flecks of dirt and soot – like he'd been nailed by a hotdog cart on his way to work, and this was the best he could do.

Advancing towards him, Jay says, “The door, Phillip, if you would,” and together we enter into a darkened space, more a cavern than a room, with a low-hanging-ceiling and an uneven rock floor. At first I can only hear them: the familiar sounds of shuffling paper and feet, but also, alarmingly, an insistent moaning, like an aching wound that will not be ignored. And then from the dark they materialize: so many gaunt and wasted figures in various states of dress and undress; some missing limbs, others eyes or ears. Nevertheless, they mill about, burdened with various charts and analytics, data plans and projections, which lie in twin heaps in two corners of the space. These documents they shovel up by the armload and truck from one corner to the other, where they are dumped unceremoniously, only to be picked up again moments later and returned to their original source...Dropped sheets litter the middle ground; these are swept into a furnace along the back wall, together with any errant fingers or toes, and are regurgitated in the form of smoke and the stench of burning flesh.

It is a wrenching scene, both in terms of sight and smell. I gag. I heave, but I cannot look away. They are too frightening, too gripping, like personifications of our very worst selves or ugly ideas externalized. That is what I'm thinking when, from among the crowd, I see Max, or what is left of Max, now footless, dragging himself along the floor by his hands. I step forward, am about to call out, but suddenly it becomes clear that the figures are all, in fact, Max—dozens of Max's in varying stages of degeneration—and I am frozen, as if stuck in those moments that precede a tragic accident, only the accident never comes but instead looms—is constantly looming—and all I can do is watch.

I turn to Jay. He smiles, gestures back towards the crowd. I look again—only to find a vision more horrific than the first: gone is the myriad of Max's, and in their stead have appeared versions of myself, their bodies so corroded, so filled with rot, they are barely recognizable even to me. Yet there I am...I watch as one of my selves bumps into another, dislodging an arm, which falls to the floor with a dull thud.

I scream. But instead of my voice, there is only Jay's; and instead anguish, there is only laughter, like he'd been lording over some secret for so long, waiting for just the right moment to reveal it, and finally that time had arrived; like he was saying, *Behold, your futures.*

Say

What do you say when your child calls, from over 500 miles away, and says, "I am not happy here." And you do sincerely want this child to be happy, but you cannot say, "Your life is just beginning; this is only the beginning," because you cannot run on the same slogans two campaigns in a row. And your child says, "Why did I ever work so hard?" and you try to tell her that she's in a good place now, but how do you substantiate your claim? Where is your empirical evidence? You have not distributed any surveys, nor have you performed any observational studies. You could say, "Well, you do not have leukemia, nor are you diabetic. You still have all your limbs and your colonoscopy came back normal," but you know this will not be received well, so you refrain. Your anxiety is building. You sense oncoming defeat. Say, "Call me again tomorrow," and hang up.

The four o'clock showing of *Law and Order* has not yet ended when you hear him pull up in his car, and you think, Is it not enough that he comes home? Must he come home early? You've hardly finished pouring the soup when he appears at the landing on the

first floor. He sits, and you're beginning to feel relieved when he throws the TV remote on the ground and says, "How can I eat this without a soup spoon?" You examine the place setting and say, "I seem to have forgotten your soup spoon," and scurry back into the kitchen.

He is like a child, you think. He is essentially a child, albeit with an unusually large penis. In bed later that night, he will say, "My father once kicked me across the floor. His father nearly killed him with an ice pick." You pretend to sleep, and in the morning you make his coffee too sweet and burn his toast black.

It is Halloween, and your youngest is supposed to go trick-or-treating in an hour. She wanted to be a Powerpuff Girl this year, the green one, and you made the costume yourself; a feat, for you. You're thinking everything will go off without a snag when you hear her calling from her room. "Mom. Mom." On her bed, she is naked. Beside her the costume is laid out, pristine.

She points to her white panties and says, "Powerpuff Girls don't wear underwear." You can see where this is going. Try to head it off. Say, "Darling, but of course Powerpuff Girls wear underwear," as if you know, as if you dress Powerpuff Girls every morning. She becomes frantic. "They do not. They do not wear underwear." She cries and screams and throws her underwear on the ground.

Downstairs, he is watching kickboxing with a bag of chips in his lap. You can expect no reinforcements from him. On this mission you are solo. "Please," you say, "it's

hygienic.” Her wailing is a blasting cannon. Say, “Fine. Don’t wear any underwear.” (You’ve recently read an article on reverse psychology; to your dismay, it does not work.)

Watch your daughter flounce off, sans underwear, with a caravan of masquerading nurses, witches, and Las Vegas show girls. On one hand, you saved yourself; you saved time. On the other hand, you saved yourself; you’re a coward. Say, “The worst is yet to come,” as if this is one of those failed horror movies, and put yourself to sleep.

Your other daughter has called again, the one who is over 500 miles away, and in this instance you are glad she’s five hundred miles away, because she sounds very angry. She’s in that phase where she feels the need to place blame, and of course she blames you. It works like this: It’s your fault she grew up in a culturally impoverished shit-land; your fault she went to horrible schools where the children were stupid and mean, which caused her to develop low self-esteem and hindered the cultivation of her social skills, and this in turn explained why none of her relationships ever worked out and why she’ll be a cashier at Panera Bread until she dies. You are mortified by the idea that this might make sense. And you think, Okay, maybe you should have said something when he kicked her out of the house. Something like: “Please, that is our daughter.” And maybe you shouldn’t have told her that she doesn’t love anybody and she never will. But really, you were busy, and you know what they say about hindsight. She tells you

that you're stupid, and before you can tell her that you don't appreciate that, she hangs up.

Remember. You actually graduated fifth in your high school class. They called you SOHOAWA, which stood for Sure One Hell of a Woman, Amazing. You received a scholarship to Penn State, and in a class called Mediation and the Mind, you met him. On your first date you ate Chinese and he told you that your eyes were like two lanterns on fire. You said, Wow, thanks. In bed he kept asking, How is this? How am I doing? You said, This is wonderful, even though it was not wonderful at all. Think, It was the 60's, and a voice in your head says, The employment of even occasional excuses can stunt your advancement towards your teleological ending.

Wonder: will you ever get to watch the entirety of any one TV show? Will you ever write read a novel? You used to think it would be nice to travel to Japan. You still think it would be nice to travel to Japan. You think kimonos are sexy and you love sushi. Right now, the most exotic recipe in your repertoire is lasagna. Your career is largely a matter of paper work – filing, insurance forms, bills, billing. If someone says, "That sounds like it can get tedious," say to them, "I'm built to bill." Somewhere between college and the age of forty-five, something went tremendously wrong.

Your youngest comes home today and tells you that Billy called her a pukey-face. Say, If Billy ever tells you that your eyes are like two lanterns on fire, tell him he can use his hand.

Before your daughter went to college, over five-hundred miles away, you arranged it so that you, he, and she could sit down and talk. You thought it would be nice if everyone left on a positive note. But as a quiet settled among you three, he said, "My father once kicked me across the floor. *His* father nearly killed him with an ice pick." Your daughter said, "So what you're saying is that I come from a long line of abusive parents; that one day I'll say to my children, 'My father once kicked me out of the house; his father once kicked him across the floor; *his* father nearly killed him with an ice pick.'" And you thought, Well done, my girl.

Despite the fact that your daughter is over 500 miles away, she is not doing well. Judging from her phone calls, you think she is not showing any signs of improvement, and you are ashamed to say that you do not always take them, the calls, that is. You're

sure you're breaking some Mother-Protocol, but you have not looked at the handbook lately, and the details have gotten fuzzy over time.

If you had to say, you'd say her last call somewhat frightened you. She started by telling you about the classes she is taking. You asked how she was doing. She told you that she can be anywhere, reading, working, or doing anything, and suddenly she feels like if she turned around she would see him, sitting in the corner, reading his newspaper or something. Try to think of relevant statistics or psychological studies. Say, "You know, this is simply a function of time," when you really don't know anything at all.

Mental Note: Five-hundred miles is not far enough.

Your sister is coming to visit you today. She visits only when he is at work. When she arrives, she steps inside, looks around, and says, "He's working now, isn't he? Just checking." She called ahead to tell you that she has big news. At the dining room table, you sit close together; she clasps your hands and says, "I have come into a large amount of money. Thousands of dollars. I want to give it to you." Her hands are resting on your shoulders now; she shakes you lightly. "This is your chance. Is there something you want to do?" You are not listening. You are thinking of things you want to do. You will buy a plane ticket to Japan. There, you will captain a fishery of spider crabs, and every

Christmas you will send your sister a spider crab, dead and on ice of course. And you will invite your daughters to come and live with you. The three of you will stand around a table and you will show them how to unshell spider crabs. You will lounge about with buckets of melted butter, and on Fridays you will go out for sushi in your finest kimono.

Say, "I know what I want to do."

You are at the doctor's. It is time for your younger daughter's yearly checkup, and you are in the waiting room, passing the time until they give your daughter back. You are rehearsing greetings in Japanese when the doctor appears and motions you towards him. He says, "You'll be glad to know that your daughter is perfectly healthy, but I wanted to talk to you about her teeth."

"Her teeth?" you say.

"I feel it'd be best to start in on the orthodontics immediately. Otherwise, we'll be looking at some hideous teeth come three or four years. We're talking bionator, transpalatal bar, fan type expander, upper and lower retainers, separators, and of course braces." He's ticking these off on his fingers as he speaks. "It's a venture of several thousand dollars," he says. Suddenly, Japan is shrinking back into a blue distance. That night you will dream you are far above the earth, overlooking the archipelago of Japan, and you will watch as the islands are eaten by so many mouths of crooked and misshapen teeth. You throw up your hands and say, "Life is so full of hardships." You see that in the ceiling there is a crack that branches out into a series of

cracks. You notice one of them makes it all the way to the far wall, where it travels down to the floor. You think it probably reaches the very foundation of the building, which explains why your world is now shaking.

A Brief Affair

Every weekday at four PM, a small piece of Paulita Paulo died and went to heaven. At this time, she would be returning to her classroom after dismissal. After another afternoon of admonishments and anemic commands: “Don’t just *run* into the street!” “You see that yellow line? Keep behind it!” It was all so different from when she, Paulita Paulo, was young. Back then, when the bell rang at the end of the day, the children were simply set free – not unlike an ant farm dropped abruptly on the ground. But now – now kids had to be handed off to parents in a sort of bizarre and unspoken economic exchange, communicated through the eyes, with which parents liked to say, My taxes paid for this.

So it was with great relief that Paulita Paulo returned to her classroom at the end of the day: to clean the markings from the chalkboard; to straighten the picture books on the shelves; to right chairs upturned and askew. It was just that time of day – the sun angled in just such a position – that light passing through the windows illuminated bits of dust suspended in the air, and Paulita Paulo liked to imagine herself dancing through them as she worked, as if dancing through a fine mist, a few treasured moments of silence in an otherwise chaotic day. Why, just earlier this morning, Paulita Paulo had

had to confiscate a notebook from Bonnie Bonnie and say to her, “Paper is not something that is meant to be eaten. We do not eat paper here in the second grade,” prompting Bonnie Bonnie to cry and Paulita Paulo to suspect that she would have to repeat this lesson again tomorrow. And yet (mercifully!) the day marched on; and still now (abhorrently!) the day marched on. *Ah, thus is life.* That is what Paulita Paulo thought as she picked up her coat, turned off the lights, and closed the door behind her.

* * *

Paulita Paulo walked both to and from work everyday. She did not do this for the sake of exercise, nor did she care about the environment more or less than anyone else she knew. She did this because, just last spring, she sold her car, an old, beat-up Subaru Outback, for two thousand dollars. This had seemed reasonable at the time – where were these so-called outbacks in which she sojourned? The post office, the grocery, and the school demarcated the boundaries of her life; and her own legs could transport her to these places as well as any car. But now that the days were growing shorter, the weather colder, she was beginning to rethink her decision.

By the time Paulita arrived home, the day had largely collapsed into night, the sun almost wholly concealed behind the crests of nearby houses, casting the yard before her own humble cottage into a shady gloom. Mounting the stairs to the front door, Paulita noted that though the blinds were drawn, the sounds of hammers and demolition seeped through the windows into the chill of the evening air. In the past,

Paulita had been alarmed by these sounds, but now she would be more concerned were they absent upon her return.

Dropping her keys in a basket by the door, Paulita crossed from the entrance into the living room, where HGTV had been left playing on the television, across from which slept Paulita's mother all snuggled up in her Lazyboy recliner. The repository of much of Paulita's two grand, it came programmed to perform a range of acrobatics; could produce both heat and vibrations; it even came (curiously) with a built in GPS tracker. Paulita suspected that, in its past life, it was likely a transformer or some incarnation of the Terminator. It was in this contraption that Paulita's mother spent the majority of her time.

The move-in had been precipitated by a nasty fall during the winter of last year (black ice – broken hip); complacency had made it permanent. But rather than returning to good health, Paulita had the sense that her mother was only getting worse, perhaps even a bit confused. Chores might go inexplicably unfinished, or items absurdly relocated: hair dryer – oven; TV remote – bathtub. It was not a life wholly unlike Paulita's pre-move-in life, if in her old life she'd had to constantly guard against innocent sabotage.

As she prepared herself an assortment of microwavable dishes, Paulita paused to wipe away a length of drool slipping down her mother's chin. She would let her mother sleep here tonight, and after finishing her dinner, Paulita would retreat upstairs to review her lesson plans for tomorrow.

* * *

And now... a moment of clarification. It was not that Paulita Paulo disliked her job. Paulita Pualo was a teacher. Therefore, Paulita Paulo taught. Let's talk examples: on a given day, Paulita might be standing at the front of her classroom, pointing at a map and saying, "This here is France. Its capital is Paris. Capitals are central locations of government." And her students might murmur, "Yes, France; yes, Paris; gover-mit, right." And it was – right, that is. Because on a given day, there was really nothing much else Paulita Paulo would rather be doing.

Which is not to say there were not moments of disillusionment – for instance, that time Greg collapsed, his inhaler nowhere to be found; for instance, that morning Sharon threw a stapler through the window, afterwards wailing, "I only meant to pass it to Bonnie Bonnie!" – moments when Paulita railed against herself: *I could have been a doctor. I should have gone to law school.* But ultimately these sentiments were short-lived, materializing and dissolving in nearly the same instant, for how often did the reality of life ever live up to what one imagined it to be? E.g., could Paulita ever, in meeting someone, imagine herself saying, "Hello, I am an engineer... Everyday I engineer..." No, some things were best left in the abstract.

But this teaching business – this was her life. (Her real life.) And these kids were her kids, despite whatever she might say to the contrary now and again. That said, things *were* getting harder with each passing year, and this was something that Paulita felt confident was not just in her head. Since beginning her career as a teacher, Paulita's students had called her many things: the appropriate – Ms. Paulo, Ms. Paulita, Ms. Paulita Paulo; the affectionate – Mrs. P, Double P, YoYo P; the illogical – Double D; the

subversive – PeePee, P-Tree, P-Face; and most recently, perhaps most heartbreakingly, PussyPaulo.

Excuse me? PussyPaulo?

Undeniably, there had been an increasing trend towards meanness over time, though where it came from, Paulita Paulo could not say. (An older sibling? An angry parent?) These children had not seen enough of the world, had not lived enough years, to be so familiar with the crueler dialects of human interaction; and yet each fall they arrived on Paulita's doorstep (so to speak) increasingly unsensitized, maliciously armed, and primed to fire.

All this is to say, thank god for kids like David, or more precisely, thank god for David, who with his family arrived in the spring of last year from god knows where (heaven, it's whispered; yes, heaven seems appropriate). Paulita had heard about him unceasingly all last semester from first grade teacher Margie Heller (Margie Hell-Face to Paulita's PussyPaulo. *"They're just acne scars!"*) Margie would sit in the teacher's lounge during lunch and explain, wide-eyed: "So last week I handed out this worksheet, right? And I said, 'Now everyone fill this out.' And would you believe he actually did it? The whole thing – front *and* back! And yesterday, when I said, 'Everyone take out your books – quiet reading time'; he didn't say a damn word ... for nearly twenty minutes! Do you believe that?" And Paulita Paulo, seated across from Margie, a crushed packet of French dressing in her fist, would say, "No, Margie, I really can't," not only because it flew in the face of all her experience, but because she couldn't help but feel jealous, and frankly cheated, because when would she, Paulita, get a student who could sit silently for twenty whole minutes, or fill out worksheets front and back? (It's true – there had

been Charles Doyle back in '99, but even he had broken down five months in, when he unexpectedly devolved into a screaming frenzy and murdered Tim, the class tadpole, by biting him in two.)

So even in August, when Paulita found David's name on her class roster, her doubts had lingered. *Hope is for newbs and suckers*, those were Paulita's thoughts on the matter. But how wrong Paulita had been: David was everything Margie Hell-Face said he would be – he even colored in the lines! He made her think again that life really *is* a mixed bag – that it wasn't just same, same, same, same, same, and then you die. More to the point, she had needed David; she didn't even know how much she needed him until he was there, sitting small and quiet at his little child-desk. She needed him for times like this:

Paulita Paulo standing at the front of her classroom. Paulita Paulo leading a lesson on longitude and latitude, and saying, "Alright, now who can tell me which city lies at the coordinates of 50° N, 14° E?"

She calls on James, who perks up in his chair, pauses dramatically, then says, "Pluto!"

Laugh Laugh Laugh

Paulita Paulo responds pleasantly. Paulita Paulo responds gently. *Encouragement...Patience* – this is the mantra she repeats in her head.

Unbidden, Bonnie Bonnie chimes in. "Did you know that Pluto is, like, not even a planet anymore?"

For reasons unclear, this offends James, whose father once told him there were some things you could not take sitting down. He says as much, and stands in such a way that sends his chair crashing behind him.

Bonnie Bonnie tells James that she had just been stating a fact. She wants to know if James knows what that is – a fact. Still in her seat, Bonnie Bonnie's face colors; the corners of her mouth begin to droop. The signs are clear: Paulita can see that the tears are liable to start at any moment, and though she recognizes the need for action, the afternoon suddenly stretches endlessly before her, like middle age, rendering her immobilized and mute. But just when she thought that the lesson was irrecoverable, the afternoon shot, there was David, silent and unassuming, his hand in the air, as if to say, *Look, this is what I came to do.* It's like in the movies, when it seems Brendan Fraser will never make it in time to save Rachel Weisz from being ritually sacrificed by a lonely and undead Egyptian priest, but still he does – he really does! – and arriving on the scene, all he needs say is, "Prague. The answer is Prague."

* * *

And here... a glimpse of purgatory, aka latchkey, aka APIPA – short for A Pain In Paulita's Ass – a program Paulita Paulo crewed herself each Thursday after school and during which she practiced a strictly laissez-faire style of surveillance: at this very moment, Bonnie Bonnie was tearing across the schoolyard, in her outstretched hand an astoundingly long variety of earthworm; before her fled James, a look of terror on his

face, screaming, "Keep it away! Keep it away!"; and spectating this was Paulita Paulo, who thought to herself, *Yes, this is fine.*

She had brought along her knitting to do, and if she was to finish this scarf before Christmas (a gift she was giving to herself), she had best set her priorities straight. After all, Paulita Paulo was by no means a natural born knitress (*knitress?*) so these things took her quite a while to finish.

But today was not to be a knitting day for Paulita Pualo, who had not completed even a dozen stitches before her eyes caught on a peculiar sight: David sitting alone with his back against the perimeter fence, a weighty-looking hardback resting in his lap, though it was not so much what he was doing as what he was *not* doing that drove Paulita's interest. Where was his binder of trading cards? Where were his comics or action figures or other items seemingly so central to the identities of boys his age? Instead he sat there, a black parka wrapped around his shoulders, so engrossed that you half-expected to actually *see* the relay of information in the empty space between the book and his head. It made Paulita wonder: What set of circumstances, what amalgamation of experiences, could produce a child like David?

She was mulling this over when a black Jaguar skimmed into the parking lot by the schoolyard, and from its leathery interior emerged David's father. This was not something Paulita needed to be told. All she could say was that, after so many years of teaching, one started to intuit these connections on sight alone – like each child was a puzzle piece and each parent an adjacent piece that, when combined, formed part of a larger, more intricate framework. And while this small flash of insight was usually enough – indeed, often more than enough for Paulita, who, upon meeting most parents,

reflexively thought: *Please, already I know too much!* – today she felt struck by a sensation that had been absent from her life for some time.

But to her dismay, as the space between herself and David's father shrank, Paulita struggled to think of something she might say. All of the overtures she typically fell back on – *"It's been such a pleasure having [child name] in class."* *"[Child name] has been doing such excellent work lately!"* – seemed suddenly so tired and transparent. So it was a relief, if also rather startling, when he spoke first, saying, "It's Ms. Paulo, yes?" He smiled, leaving Paulita dumbfounded and unsure.

This was not at all how things were supposed to go. This was not how things usually went. Paulita could manage little more than, "Um, yes." And then, recovering, "Paulita is fine, thank you."

Sensing Paulita's confusion (*did she have to make it so obvious?*) he went on, "We've seen you in the neighborhood, from time to time – walking." By now David had joined them. His father placed his hand on David's head. "Whenever David sees you, he goes, 'Ahh, Ms. Paulo!'" David's father started to laugh, a big open-mouthed, throw-your-head-back sort of laugh. "He talks about you all the time."

Paulita couldn't tell if this was supposed to make her feel at ease; she just knew she didn't. "Yes," she said. "I'm trying to reduce my carbon footprint."

"You weren't planning to walk home today, were you?" He removed his hand from David's head; stuffed both hands in his coat pockets. "It feels a little cold for that."

This was true: the wind had picked up since the morning, adding some bite to an otherwise temperate day. Nevertheless, she told him that she was, all the while acting

out her best impression of nonchalance, as if her ancestors were Vikings and she ate crushed ice for breakfast.

But David's father wouldn't hear of it: "We'll wait in the car," he said. "I have some emails to send out, and David has his studies. When you're ready, we'll take off together," and before Paulita could respond, he turned and walked back towards the parking lot with David, leaving Paulita feeling flustered and alone, albeit with a small handful of children, including James, who for some reason was now laying face down and motionless in the mud while Bonnie Bonnie danced around him, laughing.

* * *

His name was Julian. He specialized in banking law. Sitting in the passenger's seat next to him, Paulita could see that he was well-built, not overweight by any means, but clearly he would not be removed from the driver's seat of his Jaguar saloon unless he willed it. He was wearing a burgundy overcoat with horn buttons and a pair of Chelsea boots, both of which possessed that veneer reserved to a class of items Paulita knew she could never afford. David sat in the back, rarely looking away from the window.

"I'd like to start walking more myself one of these days," Julian said. "It's like I've been telling David lately, 'We have but this *one* planet—we have to do our part. But then I always think to myself, what if I had to get somewhere on the fly... say, the airport?' He gave Paulita a wink. "That last part was a joke."

Paulita laughed. She felt a bit caught off guard, but pleasantly so, as if she'd just found out someone was endeavoring to throw her a surprise party. No one had ever thrown Paulita a surprise party before.

When they pulled up in front of Paulita's house, Julian reached over the console to place a hand on Paulita's wrist. "Do you think we could get your number?" he said. "It'd be so nice if we had someone we could call if David ever has trouble with his homework."

Paulita thought this was preposterous. David was not the type of kid who would ever need help with his homework. But still, it was like Paulita had been suddenly transported into space or some strange place where, stripped of all her most familiar ways of being, she could divine no mode of locomotion, and that Julian had appeared out of nowhere to say to her, "This is how you do it. This is how it's done."

* * *

The first messages began arriving only days later, initially impersonal – *fyi watch for rain today* – but on the heels of that ... a rapid and salacious escalation – *I think of you. I need you. Now.*

These messages came as quite a surprise to Paulita, not only because they came in the middle of math class, but also because Paulita had never before received from a parent more than a B&N gift card or, once, a beautifully wrapped assortment of out-of-season citrus fruits. She was made to feel shaken and thought, instinctively, *OMG*, as if she were once again young and juvenile, with a whole world of firsts ahead of her,

which may explain why the first time Paulita slept with Julian really did feel like her first time, or at least a sort of *rediscovered* first time. (That was how hard she orgasmed.)

They had been in the penthouse of a hotel downtown, and afterwards they got into the bath together. Paulita felt giddy and emboldened by the penis knocking at her thigh. She teased Julian's nipple and said, "I've never screwed a banking lawyer before."

Julian smiled. He smiled like he was saying, *That's really cute. You're really cute.* And then, "Tell me more, Paulita Paulo," he said. "Tell me more about Paulita Paulo."

And just like that Paulita was mortified, because what exactly was she supposed to tell him?

Actually, I don't have a car. No.

Or perhaps: *I live with my mother.* Double no.

Eventually, she leaned in so that the water swelled to their chins and her lips brushed the tip of his ear as she whispered, "I'm a knitress."

* * *

The following week, when she wasn't working or picking up after her mother, Paulita was at her kitchen table, newly and utterly committed to her knitting and absolutely swamped in a jubilee of multi-colored yarns. And to show for her efforts – a lumpy and misshapen abomination, a wooly grotesque. And though she had no one to blame for this predicament but herself, to do so seemed cruelly unreasonable, for how could she (or anyone, for that matter) resist Julian when, taking her hands in his, he had said to

her, “Paulita, do you think you might knit something for me?” *Might she?* For Julian, Paulita would have swam the shark-invested waters of Smyrna or braved the coldest ranges of Mount McKinley. What was there to say but, “Uh, sure.”

What followed was a process of discovery and reduction: what was to be a sweater became instead a pair of gloves, which in turn gave way to socks. But even these were proving beyond Paulita’s means. Weighing it in her hands, Paulita’s creation struck her as something more fit to star in an avant-garde craft fair than be worn on someone’s feet. She thought of her scarf, now relegated to a closet shelf, equally crude and grotesque, but intended (crucially) only for herself and therefore a thing of quiet pleasure.

Meanwhile, Paulita’s kitchen had gone straight to hell: the crumbs of several days’ meals were scattered across the floor and plastered to the soles of her feet; a rotten smell rose from the sink; and in the silverware drawer – not a singular clean butter knife. It was like her kitchen had been claimed by the Twilight Zone or, unbeknownst to Paulita, become the setting of a Terrence Davies film. And while her mother was in just the next room, Paulita knew better than to ask for help from her, whose attention was presently captivated by an episode of *House Hunters International (Japan Edition)* and for whom little else seemed to exist.

No, in these matters Paulita was on her own. Much later, she would think back on these evenings as the beginning of the end of her brief affair, and that perhaps a brief affair was the best type of affair one could have. At the time, however, she only felt nagged by a creeping intimation of doors opening and closing, of choices being proffered and decisions being made, and she suspected this had nothing to do with her

question of red yarn versus blue (though if it did, it was a question of Matrix-esque implications). Paulita would have spent more time puzzling these feelings out were her thoughts not then seized by a sudden awareness of a new photo tacked to the refrigerator. Undefined from a distance, upon closer inspection Paulita could see it was a photo of Julian, his arm slung over David's shoulders, the Duomo looming in the background. And while under normal circumstances, Paulita likely would have found such a photo arrestingly beautiful, in the immediate her discovery occasioned only alarm and questions, such as *Where on earth did this come from?* and *What the fuck?*

* * *

By the next time Paulita met with Julian, a number of weeks had passed and the effects of time had begun to erode some of that magic that so often accompanies initial encounters. Paulita could see now that Julian was the sort of man who liked to take the initiative, which was a nice way of saying that he was the sort of man who liked to put others on the back foot. When they arrived together in the lobby of the hotel that evening and been told by the clerk that their room needed an additional twenty minutes to be turned down, Julian said, "Would you care to explain to me why it's not ready now?" And then, leaning across the desk, "I'd like to speak with your supervisor, immediately."

In bed, Paulita began to wonder what it was about herself that could possibly appeal to a man like Julian – certainly not her wardrobe, nor her appreciation for arts and crafts. And for that matter, what explained her attraction to Julian, if but the gloss of

high-end consumerism – she thrilled at the rush of his sports car and the crackle of the exhaust popping like a gun – and the smells of money and bourbon, exotic to Paulita, which rolled off Julian in waves. For Paulita, being with Julian was like sitting in a front row seat of a Broadway show with her knees clutched to her chest, but now she was getting the sense that the performance was coming to an end and that it was time for her to go home. So when she was certain he'd fallen asleep, Paulita gathered her things and made for the elevator.

In the taxi, she thought of their final moments together – him at the precipice of sleep, her hand resting gently on his chest. “Julian,” she whispered. “Julian, how did we even come to be here today – you and I?” And when he answered, she could hear something in the sound of his voice, something like a diminishment or an increasing distance, like he was falling away from the earth, like he was falling back into himself. “Oh god, Paulita. My little Ita. You have such beautiful, beautiful teeth.”

* * *

It was after midnight when the taxi pulled up in front of Paulita's home. There was a dull throbbing behind her eyes, and the arches of her feet ached. So she couldn't help but feel a bit annoyed when, coming through the front door, the basket where she dumped her keys was nowhere to be seen, and she thought to herself, Enough is enough. These things appearing and disappearing...that weird photo that came from god knows where...She thought she would never say it, but it was time for a return to everyday life. That's what she was thinking as she marched towards the living room to

confront her mother. She would tell her that this had to stop, that actions beget consequences and that, failing drastic change, Paulita would pawn the Lazyboy recliner or throw the TV out the window. "Kiss the TV goodbye." That's what she would say, what she was about to say when, crossing the threshold into the living room, there was David, and she felt suddenly like the victim of a considerable theft, or that she'd stepped through a portal into an alternate reality, one that closely resembled in many ways her own, but in which nothing belonged to her. He was sitting on the recliner next to Paulita's mother, who was staring vacantly at the television screen, where Hilary Farr was pitching to a starry-eyed couple a hot pink three-seater that would serve as the focal point of a completely renovated entertainment space.

"That'll never do," David said, shaking his head. Then, noticing Paulita, "Oh, hello Ms. Paulo," as if their meeting in Paulita's living room was the most natural thing in the world, like he was greeting her in class after a weekend's absence.

He slipped off the recliner and moved into the kitchen, balancing himself on the edge of a chair before which sat Paulita's failed knitting project, her erstwhile gift to Julian; and beside this – a book. Paulita recognized it as the one she'd seen David studying in the schoolyard, but at this distance, she could see that it was not a book, but rather a large, leather-bound photo album, the cover embossed with the letters D-A-V-I-D.

He picked up the lumps of knitting and, holding them up to the light, said, "Do you wrap your hands in these? Are they hand warmers?"

"Socks, actually," said Paulita. She felt her mind was racing, but her thoughts could only trip along: How would she explain this situation to anyone? And, more

urgently, what was she to do now with this little boy, sitting here in her kitchen? Then, another thought: “David, did your mother bring you here?”

“My mother?” He set the knitting down and frowned at Paulita. “No,” he said, as if such a suggestion were completely nonsensical and that *that* would be the element of this situation that existed wholly outside the realm of possibility.

Opening the album, he said, “Winter break is coming soon.”

“I suppose it is.” Paulita was unsure of what else to say, though she thought this hardly seemed the time for casual observations.

Flipping to the last page, he seemed to deliberate a moment before removing one of the photos, sliding it across the table to Paulita. “That’s us,” he said. “In Breckinridge last winter. We went skiing with Ms. Heller.”

This struck a chord of disbelief in Paulita. *With Margie? As in, Margie Hell-Face?* But it was true – there was Margie Heller, an oversized pair of ski goggles perched on her head. Posed between David and Julian, she was like an ironically miscast femme fatale to Julian’s James Bond. It was a photo at once sickening and revelatory, but what really caught Paulita in that moment was the look on David’s face as he watched her pick up the photo. Beneath a placid exterior – a sort of menacing glee, like he was waiting for her to break down and was willing to do whatever he could to help this along.

It would have been challenging for Paulita to give a definitive account of her emotions in the immediate, but with the benefit of distance, she may have described a strange feeling of nakedness, a stripping away of presumptions and understandings until all that was left was a conflicting sense of pity and violation. That much, though,

would come later. In the present, it was all she could do to say, "Get out," and stand off to the side, watching David as he tucked his album beneath his arm and ventured out into the dark.

* * *

It was difficult for Paulita to return to work come Monday. Nevertheless, she did. *There are some things in life that are painful but necessary, but in time, if we are so lucky, they may become less painful if not less necessary.* She actually told herself this, and in some ways, Paulita was exceedingly lucky indeed. She found solace in routine and returned to her scarf, pleased that it was shaping up to be warm and functional, if also rather homely. She did her best to treat David like every other child in her class, at times even passing over his raised hand, saying "Let the others have the spotlight too, David." And David, for his part, acted as if their nighttime encounter had never happened, or that it was something that had taken place only inside the confines of Paulita's mind, a prospect that seemed to gain in plausibility over time. By all accounts, it seemed Paulita had emerged on the other side of a tempest, relieved to find before her a seascape at once calm and familiar. It pleased her to think that things would go on this way – that is to say, peacefully, smoothly – and for a while, they did. Until one early spring afternoon.

It was a day when the return of green vegetation no longer seemed an unlikely and desperate proposition, the snow having retreated to but a few withering strongholds – snow banks in the process of collapsing in on themselves. In two or three weeks, Paulita would have to contend with the encroaching whir of neighborhood

lawnmowers, but on this day she had to deal with another matter entirely. It began with an introduction to multiplication, boring certainly, but altogether harmless, Paulita thought. She was explaining the concept of carrying – “You remember this from addition, yes?” – when she noticed Sharon fidgeting at her desk, her hands playing with something in her lap, and Paulita felt that today she could not just let this go. (Earlier she had stubbed her toe on a dresser leg and later forgot her coffee thermos in the kitchen.) “Sharon, what are you holding?” she said. “What did you just hide beneath your desk?”

Sheepishly, Sharon held out her hand, in the palm of which rested a figurine horse. It looked as though it had once been brown, but its paint was so worn its coat now sported gray and white spots.

“Can you solve the problem on the board? No? Please save your games for recess and pay attention during class.” Paulita was ready to leave things at that. She was turning to call on another student when, just audibly enough for everyone to hear, Sharon said, “There goes the Pussy again,” and Paulita knew this was a challenge that could not go unanswered.

She turned back to Sharon, saying, “Excuse me, Sharon? What did you say?” expecting Sharon to balk, to blush and to sink back into her seat. But instead she sat up. “I said, ‘Pussy,’ ” this time more loudly, a smile spreading across her face.

Laugh Laugh Laugh

And at that moment Paulita felt there was nothing for her to fall back on, and even if there was, she wasn’t sure she could (or even would) reach for this unnamed thing, feeling as she did suddenly consumed by a dark cloud, some toxic smog, against

which she was ill-prepared and defenseless. And though she recognized that at the heart of this matter were not the words of a little girl (these represented merely the next cruel step in an ostensibly fixed trajectory), she could not escape the feeling that she had failed in some large way, had allowed herself to be sold on a hot pink centerpiece, only to realize too late that it was simply too much; and though she'd done her best to correct the offending action, she could not deny the fact that it had happened and that, in some corner of her mind, it was still happening, was constantly happening. *PussyPaulo? PussyPaulo indeed.*

Drawing herself up, looming over Sharon, Paulita said, "Tell me, Sharon, do you know what you want to be when you grow up?"

Now, it would be an overstatement to say that this was not the sort of response Sharon was expecting (after all, she was still coming to terms with the relationship between action and reaction), but perhaps as a consequence of biological evolution, Sharon could sense that something was not quite right. She leaned away from Paulita and said, "I wanna raise horses." She hesitated. "I want a whole ranch of horses."

A whole ranch of horses? Paulita snorted, was about to address Sharon again—

"No Sharon," David interrupted. "You should say 'horseman.' You want to be a horseman when you grow up."

And just like *that*, Paulita felt her anger evaporate. She saw David sitting there, as if in a radiance of innocence, and she thought of how much Sharon had still to learn, and how so much of that learning would have to happen alone. *A whole ranch of horses? My god, this child, this silly little girl.* Paulita put her hand on top of Sharon's and smiled

at her. "I think that's wonderful, Sharon," she said. "I'm positive you'll grow up to be a wonderful horse rancher one day."

Ian

(I)

After climbing out of bed, the first thing you do is kneel on the floor, so as to better greet Tony, your polar bear, who is marooned on a white shag rug in a sea of navy blue carpeting. Things are looking pretty grim for Tony: Won't he ever make landfall? Are there no chilly lagoons, as yet unravaged by man, in which he might find solace and innumerable little fishies (to be consumed graciously and only as needed, of course). For Tony's sake, you put on a brave face. Good morning, Tony! you say. Hang in there, Tony! you say, before passing into the bathroom.

Today is a special day and calls for special preparations. First the white jar: a mixture, in equal parts, Amazonian silt and volcanic ash. It feels like black putty in the palm of your hand. It feels like mother earth in the palm of your hand. Exfoliate. Exfoliate. An immortelle facial scrub follows and is chased away by a microfiber muslin cloth (Milan). Your skin feels taut and fresh, as if emerging from a glacial hibernation. Your pores look as though they might issue music at any second. Today will be a good day, of this you are sure.

Downstairs, on the kitchen counter, waits a tuna salad sandwich, plated and on white bread, sans crust. It oozes mayonnaise like primordial fluids. You gag. It comes with a side of notation:

My love, do have fun today. Don't forget an umbrella
and do mind Tim.

– Mom

As if you could forget your Tim. As if Tim could forget Tim. You suspect that by now he has returned from picking up the gift; that already he is waiting for you at the door. You peer around the corner, and there he is – wearing his typical black suit and sporting wide-framed black shades (Stockholm). There exists a valley between his pectorals: Tim is a highly visible man.

You throw the sandwich in the trash. You throw the plate into the sink. Proceeding down the hallway, you take your coat from the closet and say, aloud, “The principal issue with nuclear energy is the resulting radioactive byproducts, which we cannot just leave to future generations, as I do not want to be punched – *in the face!* – by a mob of angry descendants when I emerge from cryogenic slumber.”

“The gift is in the car,” Tim says, without moving, ostensibly without breathing. You wonder if the world glints off Tim's eyes the same way it does off the surfaces of his Monokel eyewear.

“And the problem with wind-generated power,” you say, “lies largely in the mechanism itself. I mean, have you ever seen one of those turbines up close? They are, like, psycho-bat-killers. And the grounds around them – bona fide bat-mortuaries.”

“I wrapped it in three layers of gift paper – Hammerpress.”

You breathe a sigh of relief and wonder if in all the world there has ever been a better manservant than Tim. Even now he holds the door open for you – what a gentleman! – but before you can pass through, your eyes settle on the console table in the foyer, recently erected, upon which rest a customized stationery set and an arrangement of Visconti fountain pens. You pause here for a moment before heading out to the car.

As you settle into the backseat, you say, “James’ place, Tim,” as if this were necessary, as if Tim did not already know, and as you glide soundlessly down the street, you look out the window at a blue sky, cloudless, except for a lone cumulonimbus brooding in the distance.

* * *

Mother,

I believe our best hope may reside in the development of solar power. It’s fair to anticipate some degree of social and economic upheaval during the initial stages of implementation, but displaced workers can ultimately be retrained for the purposes of building, installing, and maintaining solar infrastructures, thereby minimizing the turbulence of the transitional period.

–Ian

* * *

Gym class on an overcast April afternoon. Kickball. It is a close game, you think. You really have no idea what is going on. *Kickball?* The bases are loaded. James is up to bat. *Terminological misappropriation?* The pitch is made. The kick is swift. The ball is like a shooting star, albeit one made of synthetic polymers and not, you know, a collection of hydrogen and helium gases. James runs the bases with the grace of a stag or some other member of family Cervidae – that is what you’re thinking when he lurches midstride and collapses on the ground. Everyone runs to him. James! James! Are you okay? As if in explanation, James points to a nearby patch of ground, where at first there appears to be nothing, but upon closer inspection – worms. A mass of worms writhing and pulsing in flesh-like colors. An absolute orgy of worms.

“I think I count five,” says Greg.

“There’s at least ten, you shit,” says Sharon.

“I value, uh, even the smallest forms of life,” says James.

And everyone is like, Wow. And you are like, Wow.

* * *

Christmas – two years ago. In the mail. A gift.

I call him ‘Tony’

–Dad

* * *

That time you invited James to your house. In the kitchen, you offer him his choice of beverage: Limonade? Citronnade? Baileys & milk? Does your Mom, like, always leave you notes? James wants to know.

You are a perfect host.

In your bedroom, you introduce James to Tony. “That’s a, um, nice toy,” he says.

That night you cannot sleep. An audio loop plays and replays in your head. It’s saying, *Um nice. Um nice. Um nice. Um nice. Um nice.*

* * *

Arriving at James’ house, you are opening the car door when, from the front seat, Tim turns to you. He says, “Sir, about the gift—are you sure?” In response, you step from the car, close the door behind you, and take in the scene: a grey vinyl, two-story prefab with a bleached concrete walk leading to the front door. You cradle the gift under your arm as you ring the bell, and as Tim pulls out of the drive, the door swings open, revealing James’ mother. She is a slender woman with high cheekbones and shoulder length black hair. You suspect she would be pretty if she knew how to dress. In her hands she carries a bushel of bananas; around her shoulders is draped a fuchsia-colored cardigan (Target).

“Ian!” she says. “Welcome!” She waves you through the door like you are a plane descending on the tarmac.

Inside, you can barely make out the white of the ceiling through a blanket of balloons in primary colors. On the far wall, a series of letter cutouts are strung together to read "Happy Tween-Days James!"

You take several steps in every direction; stand on your tiptoes; shield your eyes from the fluorescent lights, but you do not see James, though his mother is at your heels.

"We have cornhole set up outside; later there's going to be a piñata; I thought I'd make fruit smoothies!" James' mother brandishes her bananas like they are talismans meant to ward off evil. Yet she does not stop. "How's your mother? I don't think I've seen her since...When? Last year's production of *A Christmas Carol*? You were the most adorable Mr. Marley." (*Adorable?*) She makes a crescendo of ghost-like noises before saying, abruptly, "Well, you must be anxious to join the others."

Yes, you are anxious.

She leads you to the back door of the house that opens onto a fenced-in yard. There, James is facing off against Bonnie Bonnie and Sharon in a game of cornhole, during which Sharon lobs three consecutive beanbags over the fence and says, "I guess I just don't know my own strength." Meanwhile Greg lays wheezing and lonesome in the middle ground.

"James, look who's here," says his mother. James jogs over and you cannot help but think that everything is happening exactly as you imagined it would (conceding the presence of his mother, of course).

"Happy birthday, James," you say and proffer your gift.

"It's beautiful," his mother says.

“Fuck off,” you want to say, but refrain. After all, she’s right. A complex pattern of yellow shapes on a white background, it is beautiful: it is *Cactus Envy*.

James tears through the gift-wrap and removes the lid from the enclosed box. Inside are four pairs of Eiji Hajiwara chopsticks, hand-carved from the fastest growing variety of self-replenishing bamboo and coated in two layers of urushi lacquer. Someone (*the voice in your head?*) gasps. James picks up a pair of chopsticks, examines them, and says, “You know, I really like soccer,” before placing them back in the box.

The muscles in your throat tighten. You feel an overwhelming sense of vertigo. *You like soccer?* From somewhere far away, a woman’s voice is saying, Ian, are you alright? Should I call Tim? But you cannot answer. You are thinking, James, you skunk. You want to shove the chopsticks down his throat. You want to scream and trample soft things beneath your feet. You see yourself, alone, standing at the edge of a cliff, beyond which lies the end, when James says, “Do you think we can use them to roast marshmallows?” Then, to his mother: “Do we have any marshmallows?”

And you think to yourself, *Yes, we can use them to roast marshmallows. Yes, thank god.*

James’ mother returns inside while you and James engage Sharon and Bonnie Bonnie in an epic confrontation of cornhole, the tales of which will pass into legend and be told at picnics for years to come. You are at match point when Greg stops wheezing long enough to raise his head and say, “Ian, is that your Dad?”

You turn in time to see Tim emerge from the backdoor of the house, a spotless black and white soccer ball tucked beneath his arm, and immediately you are filled with panic: *not yet!* you think. You want to say to Greg, *You fool; you fuck, that’s not my Dad.*

That's my Tim! but there is no time for such things. Already Tim is advancing across the grass. Overhead, the storm clouds, once distant, have rolled in, casting shadows that are creeping across the yard even now, as if to let you know that you are nearing the end. You are constantly nearing the end. You feel burdened by the sudden knowledge that you may never again have the balls to tell James how you really feel. There are tears in your eyes when you turn to him. You say, "James. James, it's lovely weather we're having, isn't it?" You smile.

Stormy Skies on the Galactic Front

On a moving bus – from the hatch in the roof, through the emergency exit in the rear, out the Blue Bird glass windows – there are no forms of egress with which Han Solo is not familiar. You have saved him from mud puddles and snow banks, dog yards and azalea gardens, and at the end of each rescue mission – your Princess Leia (your one and only mother): “Now, what is Han doing out here in Endor? How did he get stuck in the mud of Kashyyyk?”

“It was the Force, Princess,” you’d say. “It was the Force.”

That force’s name was Danny, who was, like, as mean as a Sith lord and as handsome as a Hutt.

“If Han is so great, the Force will, like, totally save him.” Danny does not understand how his thinking is completely peedunky.

You plead with Danny: “That’s not how it works,” you say. “Han can’t use the Force!”

Clank. Clank. Clunk.

Those are the sounds Han makes as he bounces across the roof of the bus.

Lately, you are interested in stories of origin – for instance, how did Danny evolve into his present Danny-ness: was he turned to the dark side, or born into it? Think Darth Vader. *Come back, Anakin!* – but not so much that you ignore present and future scenarios.

When your own sense of the Force matures, you will stand up to the likes of Danny and shield the Princess from the cosmic reach of the Imperial Army. You will gather the younglings to you, saying, “It is all right. I will protect you from all that is base and poodoo.” And knowing they are safe, they will say, “Wow, thanks!”

You feel these days cannot be far off.

* * *

Saturday morning – cooking stromboli with Princess Leia, who has taken the day off of work so as to ensure that everything goes just right. On the calendar, “Russell’s” is inked in big red letters.

“You fold the salami like this. You layer the cheese like this. The meat to cheese ration should be two to one,” she says.

It is an endeavor more trying than Luke’s training on planet Dagobah. You want to know why she simply doesn’t order a large from Luigi’s, as she normally does.

“You wouldn’t just give Chewbacca the first laser blaster you found lying around, would you?” she says.

You love how she explains everything in ways you can understand, but you do not understand her attraction to Russell. “What if he is, like, a Jabba mercenary?” you say. You sulk and whine and hide in your room, refusing to come out, even when the Princess begs you to.

“Do you know how hard it is to be a single-rebel-mom?” she says. “Do you think the Empire treats me with kid gloves?”

Eventually, you relent. Concessions are made – you will take your Millennium Falcon model to work on, out of sight – but not soon enough so as to not be late. As Princess Leia speeds aggressively down the road – *mother of moons!* – you wonder if she has been taking lessons from Han behind your back.

Arriving at Russell’s, the car has barely stopped when she leaps from it and circles around back to pop open the trunk. A mechanical whoosh is followed by a piercing scream, and immediately you are stricken by panic: was this a trap? (You knew it all along!) Would Darth Sidious stop at nothing to cripple the rebel alliance?

Joining Princess Leia, you find her staring down at the stromboli, crushed beneath a capsized Millennium Falcon and oozing marinara from either end: a ruptured and bloody intestinal tract. And you too feel crushed – by the weight of her downturned lips; by the arc of her shoulders, sagging and depressed. You want to say something, something like “It is okay, the Force has not abandoned us,” but before you can begin you are stopped by a raised hand.

“Don’t,” she says. “Not now.” She turns to you, and in her eyes you see something you cannot recognize. “When I was your age,” she says, “I wanted to be a national figure skater. I wanted to be Peggy Fleming.” But this is not the voice of the Princess. You have no idea whose voice this is, and suddenly you feel lost, so that when this voice says, “Let’s go,” and begins walking towards the house, you say, “Yes, mom,” and leave the Falcon behind.

There are stormy skies on the galactic front as your mother knocks at the door. You are waiting with her under the eaves of Russell's blue-gray prefab when she leans down to you and whispers, "Do not despair, young Padawan – at last we have come to the planet Yavin. Here we will be safe." And just then the door swings open, bathing the Princess in a pool of celestial light, and you cannot help but think, Yes, you are the one.

Ian

(II)

When you get high, you are deep, like deep-dish pizza, and say deep things, like “You know, the proletariat really will inherit the earth.” It’s what you’re saying now, as the skies above your condo swirl in gradients of gray and the bars empty onto the streets. “I’m not so sure,” says James. “People don’t bore as easily as they used to. They have smart phones now.” Outside, someone is crying and another person says, “They’ll be open again tomorrow, I promise.” Their voices tug at your consciousness, keep you tethered to the ground. “I suppose you’re right,” you say, “4G networks *do* make all the difference, don’t they?”

Scattered on the hardwood floor around you are the bodies of so many half-masticated French fries and red-gold wrappers: the result of an elaborate reenactment of the Fall of France, 1940. Not that you had helped. For seemingly hours (minutes?) you listened to James as he screamed, “Frenchy down! Frenchy down,” and thrown decapitated fries about the room. In the fog of a hazy and distant memory, you vaguely remember saying, “I told you that history degree would be useful.”

Not that you had not helped.

Sprawled on the sofa across from you, James begins to snore. Five days of scrotal-like hair has grown, in erratically spaced patches, across his neck and jaw line. Everyday he appears less and less prepared to enter the job market. At times, it felt like just last week that he had shown up at your door unannounced, twin duffle bags slung over his shoulders. Had it really been two months?

As you mount the stairs to your room, you ponder the passage of time. You wonder what happens to people like James – people without trust funds – and where they get off treating hardwoods so poorly. You know, James, those are new, right? Climbing into bed, you feel dogged by a fleeting sensation of responsibilities neglected, of tasks unchecked, but before it can resolve itself into any decipherable context, it dissipates, along with your remaining faculties, leaving you mercifully, peacefully empty.

* * *

The following afternoon, you are upstairs at your desk. Before you – your Nile blue Smythson notebook, in which, of late, you have been taking copious notes: your observations on life; the seedlings of maxims to be nurtured and grown for use in future works; your weltanschauung, as it were.

Some examples:

- 1) Stop. Consider the period as the nexus of liminality FULL

STOP

2) Ways of knowing people:

a.

b.

3) Her legs were long and unending, like stories about poverty and malnutrition.

In this endeavor, James has been particularly encouraging: “Historically speaking,” he said, “you’re following in the footsteps of a long line of thoughtful and well-to-do men.” You are buoyed by the thought of this, by the idea of being someone who did something, and feel certain that such a person must surely be the best version of yourself.

You are in the motion of putting pen to paper when, from downstairs, you hear the distinct clatter of silverware on wood, and you cannot help but think, the floors! as if to say, Right, this is who you are.

Arriving on the scene, it is worse than you had feared: chasing James around the dinner table is your mother, wielding a pair of giant salad tongs and wearing a strangely cut orange and red dress. Airport. Mother. These thoughts occur to you like two thunder claps over a picnic on a clear June day. A cruise liner capsizes in your chest.

Noticing you, she stops, throws down the tongs and cries, “Mon amour! Mon chéri! Did you forget me at the airport?” as if your mistake was not abundantly clear. You can’t even remember where she was coming from – Antigua? Jamaica? Grenada? Floating towards you, she wags her finger; faux angry, but fooling no one, like a poorly made Chanel knockoff, which, you suspect, is the point. She briefly drapes her arms over your shoulders before collapsing into a chair. “I had to take a taxi, and the entire time

I'm thinking 'This is it. I'm really going to give it to him this time'; and finally I get here and who should open the door but James. Poor James! I'm afraid he really did bear the brunt of it." She swivels towards James. "Sorry James," she says, and continues:

"Anyway, I was just telling James he really should eat more greens. I mean, how will he ever get any girls with a belly like that? No offense, James. I mean, how do you say ... much love." She casts him a pitying glance and folds her hands into the shape of a heart.

Your mother is a cold woman, you think. She could kill her lover in the Hunger Games and later shop for tote bags. You feel compelled to make a stand.

"Mother," you say, "stop. You know James likes boys," and James, having retreated to the opposite end of the table, forgotten salad tongs clutched to his chest, vigorously shakes his head in agreement, then disagreement, then agreement again.

In this instance, your mother has no need for words. Her thoughts are written on her face. It says, I brook no contests. I give no fucks.

She directs this face at you now. You feel diminished under its gaze. "And you," she says. "You write to tell me all about your new place. I come all this way to see it, and already you've trashed it. Have you seen your living room? Do you know what's in your fridge? Nothing. I've been traveling all day. I'm starved. What would your father say? Wait - don't answer that." She shoves a piece of paper at you - a list of groceries. "And don't forget to pick up some lettuce for James while you're at it."

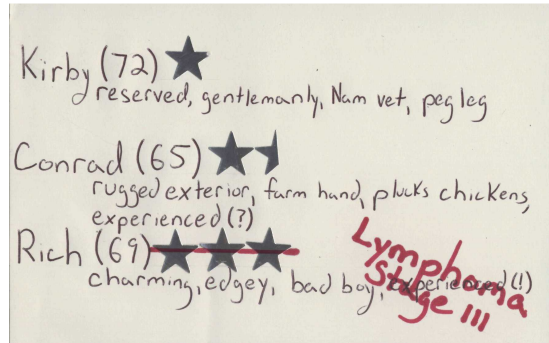
You feel badly for James: how will he contend? As you leave the room, out of the corner of your eye, you see your mother give James a wink.

* * *

On your way to the supermarket, you pass two new high-rise buildings and several storefronts – Oscar de la Renta, Vince, Helmut Lang, Vera Wang, Cartier, John Lobb, and Saks; but you see scarcely a single person. It is midday, but the streets are empty. You are thinking, *What would my father say?* and coming up short. In your memory, your father is the lingering smell of cigarette smoke and pecks on the head after you've fallen asleep. He was the sort of man who could be abruptly, unreasonably called away to London on work. In fact, it seemed he was constantly being called away to London on work, from whence he would send lavish and unwieldy gifts – full sets of tea service for ten, landscapes on canvas, a sandalwood china cabinet. When you were younger, this was a point of pride. "My father is in Lun-Dun," you would say. There, you imagined him presiding over vast conferences and shoptalks, hammering financial abstractions into discernable realities. But you are at a loss for as to what he would say in the face of your new home. "Chaos is the enemy of productivity." Is that what he would say? "You are a disgrace to the family name." Is that what he would say? Your early life was more often characterized by moments like this: your mother barging into your room when you are fourteen years old and flailing through pubescence. Your mother saying, "Look. This is how you walk. This is how you talk." You wonder if that's what love looks like.

After arriving at the grocery, you step out of the car and in doing so drop the list. As you pick it up, you notice there is something written on the back.

* * *



* * *

Some would say your trip to the supermarket was a failure. You, on the other hand, would argue that you are just another victim of the Kobayashi Maru. Conch? Callaloo? Someone ought to remind your mother that this is *not* the Grenadines. As you arrive home, you are preparing to do this yourself but are brought up short by the sight of James slumped over the kitchen table, beside him an upturned bottle of Xanax. At the counter is your mother, your Smythson notebook in hand, reading aloud: “Her legs were long and unending, like stories about poverty and malnutrition,” and laughing. You are drowning in a sea of mortification and debasement, but all you can say is, “They were out of nutmeg” and lay the grocery bags next to James.

Closing the notebook, your mother sets it aside and rises in a flutter of red and orange cloth. “Do you want to know why I’m really upset?” she says, as she begins to rummage through the bags. “You didn’t even tell me you liked my dress. And everyone says it brings out the color in my eyes.”

In this moment, you remember something you learned years ago – that there can be no victories against this woman, that with her it can only ever be one step forward,

half a dozen steps back. It's like James always says, Sometimes life gives you the musket, and then the German machine guns. So you say, "It's a beautiful dress, mother. Please, tell me where you got it."

She examines a bottle of vanilla extract under the light, sets it down, begins to play with James' hair. "Do you know," she says, "I don't think I was half the woman I am now back when your father was around. I mean, last week I was on a beach in Belize; the week before that, I did coke off the chest of a rent boy in Sao Paulo. I could go on. In the future, I will go on. Do you see what I mean?" She ties off a braid of James' hair and looks up at you. "Next, I'm thinking Venice." She leans towards you, becomes distinctly conspiratorial, dangerous. "You know," she whispers, "I've always wanted to give someone a little shove into the canal. I want you to come with me."

But before you can refuse (*shove someone into the canal?*) James abruptly sits up, braid flying askew, slams his fist on the table, and says, "To say the Emancipation Proclamation ended the Civil War is nothing but a gross and irresponsible overstatement, *sir!*" He begins to cry. "Where will I go?" he says. "There is no place for me. I am ruined."

Your mother is quick to wrap her arm around James' shoulders, rearranges the braid on his head. "There, there James," she coos. "Now what do you expect to come from all this crying and bellyaching? All you need to do is get it right; get it tight. I know you can do that."

She motions you towards them, instructs you to help James to his room. As you leave, she calls out from behind you: "You remembered the lettuce; bravo!"

* * *

That evening, in bed, you feel adrift, as if gliding, rudderless, across an endless expanse of Felini bed sheets; lost, so to speak, in the emptiness of your own existence. As your mind tumbles into a dark infinitude – *her legs were long and unending* – a black-suited man enters your room and sits at your bedside. Though initially unclear, his features materialize, as if he were advancing towards you from a great distance, and it occurs to you, slowly, that this man could be your father; then, suddenly, that this man *is* your father; like, duh, who else could it be? In fact, he is exactly as you remembered him, albeit slightly faded, slightly grayed, like a Polaroid left too long in the sun.

You are singularly occupied by questions of location and space: you want to know where he's been and how he got here, but before you can ask, your father raises his hand. He says, "Time is of the essence. I need to talk to you about your father," and immediately you understand the finality of the situation: there would be no future encounters, no additional surprise visits. As in: get your ass to jail. Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200, etcetera. So when he says, "Where was your father on the morning of March 8th, 2014?" you feel let down, because you know that your father was in London that month, on business. But your father, being the formidable man that he is (*are those cufflinks Tom Ford?*), does not back down. "But isn't this your father?" he says. "And isn't this your father?" He lays out before you picture after picture after picture: your father at a club across from the Sultan Abdul Samad Building; your father passing through the doors of the Kuala Lumpur Airport; your father in line to board a doomed flight to Beijing.

And instantly you know this is something you can't come back from. You feel as though strangely victimized; your existence somehow compromised; like the base of your life had unexpectedly given way, and the only place you can go is down. With what logic could you arm yourself against this?

All the while your father sits there, content, as if he had just concluded a successful rendition of your favorite bedtime story; as if bedtime stories was a subject he specialized in. He smiles faintly at you and opens his mouth to speak, when the door to your room swings open, but instead of the hallway beyond, there is only darkness and a shrill screeching noise into which your father is dragged, as though gripped by invisible hands. As he fades into the dark, you can see your father's mouth moving, his arms waving frantically, but you can make out nothing as he passes from your line of sight and the door shuts with a thwack, leaving you alone in the renewed silence of your bedroom.

* * *

The next morning, you meditate. You imagine yourself in the midst of a verdant forest, hospitably lit by dappled sunlight, where you wander from one shrub to the next, gathering your chi. If yesterday was not a day characterized by fulfillment and purpose, then today would be better. There was still hope. There was still your *other project*, upon which you have been working, on the sly, for the better part of a year now. A new dive bar. A dive bar that was and was not a dive bar; a bar for young intellectuals with grunge-like tendencies. There was a market for such a bar, of this you had been assured

by the associates at Boulder & Boulder (WHERE WE GET **BOLDER** AND **BOLDER** SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO), who had been handling the research and marketing; the acquisition and renovation of an old manufacturing plant downtown. It had been a long and arduous journey, punctuated by experiences at once unexpected and expensive: the electrical wiring – shot; the building foundation – compromised. You have been leaking money like a sieve, but at last the end was in sight.

Earlier in the week you had received a call from Kevin, principal owner of Boulder & Boulder. “There’s nothing to worry about,” he said. “All the necessary palms have been greased.” His voice crackled over the phone line; he sounded sick and anxious. “Now, when you meet with the building inspector, it’s going to look like she’s giving you a hard time, but that’s the trick of it – it’s all about the way things look. At the end, she’ll sign off, and from there you’re golden.”

You are scheduled to meet the building inspector this morning, so when your mother tells you she’s making your favorite dish – eggplant rollatini, no less – tell her not to bother: you have other plans for the day, and leave.

In the car, you feel elated, almost as though you’re flying; as though your Maserati is not just a Maserati, but a flying Maserati, equipped with rocket thrusters and a state of the art speaker system. Less than twelve weeks out now, the grand opening looms in your mind. You have already commissioned a team of welders to make a steel sign to hang across the façade of your building, something special to celebrate the maiden voyage of your new enterprise – Celestial Undertaking : Manifest Destiny. You imagine exploding onto the bar scene. You will hit maximum capacity every night, and still a line of revelers will wrap around the block. You will need to hire

extra security to handle outbreaks from overeager, over-stimulated patrons / furious, rejected latecomers. You guess there are some things that can only be achieved in brick and mortar. That's what you're thinking when you arrive downtown.

At the front entrance, you are greeted by a woman wearing a hard hat (with mounted flashlight) and a Batman-like tool belt. When she sees you, she says, "Good, you're here. These windows need to be taken out and lowered six inches. My name is Leslie. Let's go inside."

Inside the floors are stained concrete; the walls exposed brick. At Kevin's suggestion, the second floor had been removed so that the ceiling now rose vacuously overhead, the space beneath it only sparsely furnished, the focal point a simple but immense slab of wood set against the back wall; a bar made of white spruce hand-carved with a butter knife in the mountains of the Yukon Territory. Now that was a bar.

As you bask in the minimalist nature of it all – what sort of place could be more appropriate, more necessary for a generation so deeply mired in a culture of neurotic consumerism – Leslie mills about, a beam of light issuing from her head, in one hand a clipboard, in the other a pen engaged in frantic notation. After nearly thirty minutes of this, she comes back to you; she is breathing heavily and wiping at her face, looking decidedly expressionless. "I saw you have some ongoing electrical work in the back," she says. "Have you taken into account this year's revisions to NFPA Code No. 70E? What about ASHRAE 901.1?"

You laugh uneasily; you tell her these things are in the works and quietly admire the power of her performance, her dedication to her craft. You wonder aloud if life

wouldn't be a whole lot easier without all these mandates and codes and meaningless regulations.

"Tell me about it," she says. "Those wusses at ASHRAE... It's like they think we'd stop living altogether if we tried to make do with any less than 15,000 Btu supply fans. What do they think we are, pansies?"

And with that, she takes off, leaving you holding a sheaf of papers covered in red ink, polluted with phrases like "mandatory minimum Solar Reflectance Index" and "duct leakage in excess of $L_{\max} = C_L P^{0.65}$ prohibited." You feel puzzled and slightly unwell. You think this must be a joke, that Leslie is just outside, will return at any moment, smiling sheepishly while saying, "I couldn't help myself. I'm such a joker. Haha"; and you too will laugh, like you're supposed to, as if to say, "Yes, you truly are something," and subsequently buy her a drink. But really you know that Leslie is gone – won't be coming back – and that you have been left to deal with the denizens of ASHRAE alone, which you would do, but the only thing you know with any degree of certainty is that ASHRAE would make a good name for a punk rock band. In your intestines, you feel a shitstorm brewing. And though your brain registers that action is imperative, the ceiling stretches two stories overhead, and everything feels dull and distant.

* * *

You do not return home until late in the evening, after countless flights of despair; after countless flights of vodka; after a dozen imagined debates (in defense first of yourself; and then, bizarrely, of Leslie); after two Big Macs and a chocolate malt shake; long after

the streetlights have blinked into existence and throughout the neighborhood the windows have been shuttered, the blinds drawn. Finally, you return home.

An ensemble of rollatini dance the tango in your mind, but in the kitchen there are none to be found. Your synapses fire sporadically: James. Mother. Rollatini. Eaten. How preposterous that they could not have left you even one. And for that matter, where were they now – your mother and James – when you are feeling so afflicted and useless.

From the window you can see James' car, a rusted out Chevy, looking sad and accidental on a street of European sports cars, but neither he nor your mother seem to be home. You are thinking that it would be strange – that they might go out somewhere, together, without you, when you hear a noise coming from the guest room where James typically sleeps. Through a crack in the door you can initially make out little except shredded bits of lettuce sticking out against white carpet. Then, as you adjust, the bed comes into view, atop of which sits your mother, her back to the door. She straddles James, whose legs jut out from beneath her at uncomfortable-looking angles. She is saying, "Yes, James. That's it. That's perfect. Are you sure you haven't done this before?"

You return to the kitchen. You snatch your notebook from the counter. You scoop the Xanax off the table. You take the stairs to your room, where you undress before passing into the bathroom. There, you turn the shower knob to *onsen* and step in.

You reflect on the events of the day. You acknowledge that there will be no grand opening in twelve weeks; that there may be no grand opening in twenty weeks or thirty weeks or possibly ever, really. But deep down you know that this is just a setback. You know that, for you – for people like you – there are resources and there are resources.

Despite this, you cannot shake the feeling of having come up against something hard and unmalleable. Is this what an ending feels like? you wonder. Is this what your father felt, during his final moments aboard the plane? You're sure he was flying first class. Do you they tell you the plane is going down when you're flying first class? Do they pass out tissues and sing Kumbaya? Your mind is swallowed by the image of your father sinking into a black abyss. You hope he screamed. You bet he screamed – and not like, Ah, Ah. But like the consciousness of a wild boar had been suddenly and inexplicably placed in the body of a grown man. You hope the sound was picked up by the black box, or whatever, so that when it is found – if it is found – people will listen to it and say, “Christ, what is that noise?” Yes, you hope he screamed...

Later, you would learn that you fainted in the shower, the soft flesh of your ass clogging the drain. You would spend hours mopping up the water that flooded over the lip of the bath and reached out to form little lakes in the center of your bedroom. But in the moment of your waking, you are aware only of the coldness of the floor beneath you and of your mother holding you, saying something like, “Mon amour, lumière de ma vie, you're okay. Everything is going to be alright.”

Warmbloods

My new boss is a zombie. I do not mean one of those overworked and sleep-deprived corporate types; I mean rotting flesh, back from the dead, eat-your-family-at-night sort of beings. Think *Night of the Living Dead*. See *Re-Animator*. She is, however, gifted with speech.

At our first staff meeting, she stood at the head of the conference table and said, "Listen up, pussies. I've read over your performance reports. It's time to get your asses in gear. From now on, no more fondue Fridays and no more pajama-fucking Mondays. Got that?" she said, and slammed her fist on the table, whereupon it snapped off at the wrist and lay there limply.

Overhead, the lights flickered. Bonnie Bonnie shrieked.

"Why are you all still here?" Zombie said: "get to work."

As we scurried from the room, I was certain that not one of us in our entire lives had ever been so quiet. That day we worked straight through lunch and second lunch. And what about wasabi Wednesday, you ask? No, we did not dare. For the rest of the afternoon we worked in silence, disturbed only by the sound of Greg's breathing.

* * *

We do not know where Zombie came from, nor where Kevin, our old boss, went. All we know is that one day there was Kevin, and the next day there was not Kevin. Instead there was Zombie...

I am at my desk; looming over me is Zombie. She is saying, "So you're at your desk, see? The phone rings – ringringring – the phone's ringing, you shit. Answer it." Zombie smells like a well-used porta potty that's been abandoned alongside a highway on a hot summer day. I am choking; nevertheless, I answer the phone: "1, 2, 3 Delivery and Storage. How can I help you?" I say, and look to Zombie for approval. Her face is a paroxysm of anger; unless I am mistaken, it seems there is a creature living inside her mouth, and my body begins to feel as if it's retreating into itself. "You're supposed to tell them it's a wonderful fucking day, you dumbass," she says. "Again – ringringringring." "1, 2, 3, Delivery," I say: "it's a wonderful fucking day. How can I help you?" There is a slight popping sound; something falls into my lap. I look down – there is Zombie's eyeball, laying in the fold of my crotch. "That's it!" she says. "All of you get out. We're done for the day."

... Bonnie Bonnie, Greg, and I ... we are walking to the vehicle – the vehicle we share – to ride to the house – the house we share – on the other side of town. We walk past warehouses A, B, and C; 2A, 2B, 2C; 3A, 3B, 3C. It is a long walk, long enough to aggravate Greg's asthma. "She made me redo (wheeze) the inventory report (wheeze) seven times!" he says. Poor Greg. He has been working so hard for so long. All he wants is a honeymoon for himself and Bonnie Bonnie, to somewhere nice, like Jersey Shore or Rome (NY). Unfortunately, as she told me last week in bed, Bonnie Bonnie has given up

all hope in this, not to mention all hope in love, generally speaking. “When you think about it,” she said: “what *is* love, actually? Moreover, what is life?” But all she says now is, “Don’t push yourself, Gregory,” as we overtake the last of the warehouses and our rusty, four-door Chevrolet swings into view across a sea of concrete.

* * *

As we pull into the driveway of our split-level home, I am filled with dread – further down the road, beneath a billboard that says *Hoogland Realty – People You Can Trust*, I spot my mother’s compact car, and instantly my mind goes to all the things left undone: the tower of dishes sitting in the sink, the laundry spread in disarray across the floor.

And for once – just this once – I don’t want Bonnie Bonnie and Greg to go quickly up the stairs into their apartment and leave me alone. But what could I say – I had nothing to offer and they had nothing to (willingly) give.

So when I enter my apartment, there she is, on the couch – my mother. “I thought you were going to fix the lock on that door,” she says. She is like a violent force that laughs in the face of all your fortifications and promptly knocks you down. “Have you seen this?” she says, as she rises and advances towards the kitchen counter, atop which rests an old bowl of cereal and milk. She turns the bowl upside down, yet nothing comes out. “Is this how you want to live?” she says.

“Would you believe me,” I say, “if I told you that was part of a magic trick?” and I laugh. My poor mother. Has anyone ever stood beside me as long and as diligently as she? Was it not *she* that paid off my hospital bills and dragged me through my senior

year of high school? And yet not once has she thrown this in my face. She is, like, a fucking mother of grace. So I cannot look her in the eyes now and say, "I'm coming up short on this month's rent, nor do I have enough to make my car payment." Because she will say, "How much do you need?" and I will tell her; and she will say, "You don't have even *that* much?" and I will proceed to bury myself with shame.

I am thinking, "How will I salvage this?" when through the ceiling comes the sounds of Bonnie Bonnie and Greg moaning, prompting my mother to say, "I've had all I can handle today," and leave.

* * *

Not two weeks ago I met Kevin in an abandoned parking lot on the outskirts of town. It was already dark when he arrived in a black Escalade. How does it gleam like that in the night? I wondered. I have dreams about cars like that.

After parking the car, he comes to me, bounding over tufts of grass peeking out through cracks in the asphalt. "Here's the plan," he says, and begins speaking very quickly: "You give me the money. Tomorrow, when the shipment comes – it belongs in warehouse A. Instead, we put it in 3A. When the guys come to pick up at the end of the week, they's all 'Where's our shipment?' We's go, 'What shipment? We aint got no shipment.' Ensee scandal. I vamoose with the money. That's when you step in. You's say, 'Hey, we's check 3A?' And there 'is. You's the hero; you's the new boss. Bam – got yourself a new future; sky's the limit. But first step – you give me the money."

Kevin is out of breath. Behind us menaces the boarded-up storefront of a defunct K-Mart.

“Okay,” I say, and give him the money – all of the money; my meager savings; my poor savings. And at the time I so badly wanted to believe that by the end of the week I would be a manager, maybe even a district manager, because to that point my life had been so full of failures it only made sense that, by some cosmic rule, I was due for something good.

As he drove off in his Escalade, I remember thinking to myself, One day I’ll have a set of wheels like that; and that was the last time I saw Kevin. He did not come to work the next day, or the day after, or the day after that. The shipments came and went without the slightest hitch. To this day what I remember most clearly about that night are the clouds – how they hung low and immobile, as if to say, This is how things are.

* * *

If I had a backup plan, now would be the time for it. Alas, I am not the sort of man who, jumping into action, thinks: What if this? What if that? I saw an opportunity, and I moved to seize it; for that I cannot be faulted. That will be the epitaph on my tombstone.

As I pace about my living room, I think of all the things I will not do. For instance, I will not hold out for the return of Kevin, unbidden and miraculous, who will not show up at my desk and say, “You know, you are a solid and hardworking man. Here is your money.” Such fantasies are for lesser men, and I, for one, do not seek redemption where there is none to be had – that is what I am thinking when there is a knock at my door.

It is Greg – Greg! He is out of ketchup. Of course he can have ketchup! I have always thought of Greg as a sort of father-figure in my life. I tell him as much, and that it is only natural for a son to come to his father in times of need. He will help me! But at a cost.

“I’m worried about Bonnie Bonnie,” he says. “Lately, she’s been so lethargic.”

I follow Greg up to his apartment. The living room is dark; the shades are drawn. There is a singular piece of furniture – a bed, covered in thick purple blankets – positioned in the center of the room. Atop it rests a scantily clad Bonnie Bonnie, laid out like a wife of a Turkish sultan.

“Good news,” Greg says. “He had ketchup.”

“Oh, how wonderful,” Bonnie Bonnie coos.

I am still in the doorway when Bonnie Bonnie waves, and I register, in some corner of my mind, that I’m to come closer. Mortified, I sit on the edge of the bed.

“I should get my inhaler, just in case,” Greg says, and leaves the room.

While he is gone, Bonnie Bonnie leans in. “I’m so excited,” she says. “I’ve read about things like this, you know, in books and stuff.” She takes part of the blanket in her fist and rubs it in my face. “It’s aubergine,” she breathes.

And in that moment I find it so impossible to say, “Bonnie, wait. Before – I was lonely and afraid. It didn’t mean anything to me.” She is already unbuckling my belt when Greg returns, naked, with his inhaler in one hand and the bottle of ketchup in the other; and immediately I am flooded with disgust and regret. I am thinking, Not one *shred* of my dignity will survive this, and the entire time Bonnie Bonnie is squealing: “This is the life. This is how to live.”

* * *

The next day I am ready for a fight. As I charge into Zombie's office, I am prepared to offer her two hundred pigeons (dead or alive), or my cousin's youngest son, who nobody likes, if she will graciously step down and promote me. For just such an occasion, I have been saving up all my powers of persuasion; I am about to unleash them, when I find Zombie hunched over her desk. I believe she is crying – yes, she is crying. Little green tears streak her pocked cheeks.

She does not get up, but says, "What do you want?"

I thought I'd come prepared for every possible scenario – in my back pocket is a flask of holy water; a silver-tipped shank is tucked inside my shoe – but never had I imagined this, and all I can manage to say is, "What is wrong with you?"

Sobbing, Zombie rises and says, "I can't find my arm," and it's true: where her right arm should be there is only a stump. "It was there this morning..."

And at this point it is so unclear to me what the best course of action would be. I hesitate and say, "Well, I guess you'll live without it."

She looks at me. "Is this a joke to you?" She gesticulates towards her stump with her remaining limb: "Do you think this is funny?" She moves out from behind her desk and advances towards me. "I do not have a single moment of peace. My mind is an opera of fiscal confrontations: revenue versus overhead; services versus salaries; inflation versus profits. My home is a veritable collage of P&L statements. Do you think I was born this way? I wanted to raise horses!"

As her stench closes in, my body is torn between the forces of fight or flight; phrases like “moment of truth” and “point of no return” crystallize and take on new meaning right before my eyes; the weight of impending action is bearing down on me, when suddenly Zombie’s leg breaks off at the knee and she falls to the floor.

I feel deflated and robbed. I say, “Listen, Zombie–”

“Not Zombie – Sharon!” Zombie wails.

And looking down at Zombie, I cannot help but feel there is some deeper meaning to all this, but the only thing I can understand is that life can be cruel and rarely works out the way we want it to; and I catch myself thinking, If only I could reach a younger version of myself. I would know exactly where to find me – leaning against a chain-linked fence behind the gas station downtown, listening to Jeff Hoogland, my very best friend, say, “I’m gonna to be an astrophysicist when I grow up,” to which my young-self replies: “Shit. You don’t even know what that means.”

I want to push that kid down and say, “Shut the fuck up. Get your shit together; you’re going to college one day.” And when my young-self says, “You’re not the boss of me,” I’ll say, “yeah? Well, you should know... there are things in this world that you never get back. And Jeff,” I’ll point to Jeff: “Jeff is going to go into real estate. He’s going to be able to afford a house with a door that locks and a car of his own without a spot of rust on it.”

That’s when I notice something smacking my shin, and I am pulled back into Zombie’s office. She has retrieved her leg and is using it to strike me repeatedly from her position on the floor. “Saddlebred, standardbred, thoroughbred, Clydesdale, warmblood, mustang, Jutland, Gypsy!” she says, her teeth popping out of her mouth,

skittering across the floor. “Where do we stand on the next shipment? We need to be ready!”

Warning Signs

Now, it would be inaccurate to say that you had not seen the warning signs: at the age of six, on his Christmas list – a Moana Play-Time Barbie; from the sagging shelves of the elementary school library – a collection of YA vampire lit. For such moments you had been prepared: for what other occasion had you saved a closet full of sports paraphernalia or collected the phone number of every little league dad in town? But each time you moved to action – “Edgar, please, this isn’t the 1950’s anymore.” *Oh Cynthia* – my love, my wife! – *divine as you may be, in this matter you are positively wrong.*

Still, you let things slide. You tried to teach *him* to slide – the electric slide, that is.

Shuffle-shuffle-clap. Shuffle-shuffle-clap.

“This is how you’ll get, like, all the girls,” you said, but he just looked at you as if you were not totally *boss*, your moves not altogether *bangin’*.

Later, you moan to Cynthia: “It’s like I’m not getting through to him at all.”

“What did you expect,” Cynthia says. “What were you like in middle school?”

What were any of us like in middle school?”

You blanch at the thought: at the memory of countless hours spent locked in janitorial closets; of unnamed / unnamable torments suffered at the hands of cretins in boys' locker rooms, where everything remains shadowy and dank...

Which is why, in light of your most recent discovery, you will observe no intercession, tolerate no interference. You see, you had been airing out the mattresses...No, vacuuming the carpets...You mean, laundering the bed sheets – yes, you'd been laundering the bed sheets when, from a deep fold in the duvet, slipped this thing, and you were wondering if he might tell you what exactly it is, though this much is already plain to you: a partially knit green neon sweater; embroidered at its center – the head of a white-pink unicorn (*oh my god*), and instead of thoughts of how or where he learned to do this, your mind instead flashes instantly to an image of yourself walking down a high school corridor, a series of catcalls ringing in your ears – “Here comes Igor! Nice glasses, Igor!”

If in those days you had developed a slight hump in your back, it was only the manifestation of your accumulated denigrations, a burden nearly as heavy as the memories you carry with you now, along with this thing – this sweater – wadded in your arms as you hustle him to an evening-time session of recreational soccer (the latest in a long line of failed extracurriculars) all the while ignoring the presence of Cynthia in the backdrop, from where she signs to you desperately in the universal language of mother-wife code. She is not part of this scene which, when all of this is medieval, will surely pass into tableaux and be acted and reacted in perpetuity. It is a scene that goes like this:

Arriving at the soccer fields, you park the car near a stand of bleachers. Silent, he sits adjacent to you in the passenger seat. (This is where you let him ride when Cynthia isn't around: "Don't tell mum," you say, and wink.) You can see the silhouettes of young boys flexing in the field. From this distance, they look lean and muscular, like so many Grecian athletes girding for a run. You wonder how they got to be this way, and if it has to do with anything you might slip into his food.

You take the sweater from where you placed it on the backseat. "I think this is, like, really great," you say, unfolding and holding it up. "But what if we added, say, a pair of lacrosse sticks, or an image of Terry Crews in full sprint?"

You wait for him to respond, but he does not raise his eyes from the floor mat of the car. It strikes you that there is likely no type of pattern or flooring with which he is not familiar.

You ache.

You tell him that with such skill in manual dexterity, which *this* (shakes sweater) so clearly demanded, that the possibilities for him were endless. Had he considered, for instance, a foray into the sport of bouldering, or perhaps an introductory class in submission-style grappling?

Moments later, watching him trudge into the field, you feel your heart break. You recall that time when you turned away from your own boyhood interests (you no longer use the term "passions"); a time when you confronted the reality that you were not descended from the Skywalker bloodline; that "the Force" would never save you from a single bully or degrading prank and that there existed no form of Huttese dialect or Wookieespeak capable of containing your pain...All of which is to say that you, too, once

had your own vampires and unicorns, so to speak, and therefore understood not only their allure but also the necessity of giving them up. Think, after all, of everything you've gained in their absence: contact lenses, an understanding of bro-talk (like, YoYoYo), recognition among men, and (ultimately) your one and only Cynthia, who, with regards to these histories, knows and understands nothing.

Shifting the car into reverse, you return to the main drag, pleased to know that if things, just now, had not gone perfectly, they soon would – for at home you had been preparing a surprise. Gift-wrapped and done up in a camo-colored ribbon, the latest in toy gun technology: the Zombie Doomsday Judgment Blaster (*limited edition*). There existed no monster (mythological or otherwise) it could not slay.

The only thing left to decide was how you would tell him about it when you picked him up from practice later that evening. You mull over the options as you pull into your driveway: *"I have, like, a massive surprise waiting for you"*; or better – *"I have, like, a manly surprise waiting for you."* It was just the thing you needed to ease the tension in your relationship and set him on the path to happiness and success (e.g. see you); the thing that would make Cynthia say, "Oh, Edgar, I'm sorry I ever doubted you," an apology you would accept with utter grace and humility. *"No, Cynthia, without you there is no me."*

It was perfect. That's what you were thinking as you took in the sight of your house – a two story brick façade with a double-car port – inside of which rested your beloved. How would you greet her? How could you contain yourself?

You mount the front stairs two at a time and fling open the door. You are about to call out – *Cynthia! Cynthia!* – when you are startled to find her already there, watching you

from across the foyer. For an instant you feel touched – *how long had she been standing there, awaiting your return? Such is the power of marital love!* – until you see that in her grip is the Zombie Doomsday Judgment Blaster (*limited edition*), and before you can say anything – *Cynthia, wait! Crink, kark, e chu ta, sithspit!* – she pulls the trigger and shoots you through the heart.

Ian

(III)

6:30 AM

Screeching to a halt in your black Maserati, you slam the car door behind you before keying into the complex. Elevator music tinkles through the hallway and on the walls hang modernist paintings: black abstractions on taupe canvases that gesture accusingly towards you as you pass, a brown package tucked beneath your arm. When you open the door to your apartment, you find Eileen waiting for you on the bench near the entry. (*How long has she been sitting there?*) She is about to speak when you tell her to shut up – “Shut up,” you say, just like that, but without conviction; you are short on sleep and, you fear, a number of other things – and bowl past her into the bedroom, locking the door and throwing the box on the bed before moving to stand in front of the window. Outside, the sun is swimming the crawl skywards, edging the night into some far-flung locale, some *other* place, which is exactly where you want to be too.

The ocean. In your next life you hope to be born in the form of some amoebal creature, one wholly reliant on currents and happenstance to push its way through life;

and when you end up splayed on the backside of a cruise liner, that's when you'll know unequivocally that you've reached the end. Alas, that is not your life. A sad truth.

But not all is doom and gloom. Not yet. A small voice in your head assures you that a careful examination of life choices may lead to the discovery of some obtuse quadratic equation on the far side of which lies salvation. Think, it says, of all the things that never should have been: Penicillin. Velcro. Viagra. Surely you have better odds than these.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Eileen at the door, screaming.

Force yourself to sit on the bed. Wonder where to begin.

* * *

1

The first time you passed through the revolving door of Jay's building (let's be clear, he owned the whole building, and the one across from it, too), you were taken aback by the sight of the lobby. The walls, the floor, the ceiling. Everything was in shades of maroon and burgundy. It was a setting that seemed to detach itself from reality, while at the same time seeking to imitate the substance of reality in the extreme. Picture a sort of science exhibit built to colossal scale. All it needed was a tour guide: "Now this is what the inside of your blood vessels look like..."

Taking the elevator to the top floor, you try to avoid catching your reflection in the metallic surfaces, not wanting to confirm what you already knew you'd find: your

shirt hanging from your shoulders like drapery. Beneath it, you could count the bones of your rib cage, and not in a sexy, body-builder sort-of-way. You knew you had to eat more, but you had no appetite to speak of.

Arriving at your destination, you are greeted by a man you assume to be Phillip, who is also not looking so great: the skin of his face – pinched; his eyes – slightly sunken.

You tell him that Jay's expecting you.

"I'm Phillip," he says, and directs you to sit on one of the white leather sofas that punctuate the room. Minotti. Italian calfskin. "Nice" would be an understatement. The west and east walls are composed of glass panels looking out on a blue sky, a view uninterrupted by any neighboring buildings, being dwarfed as they were by the height of Jay's structure. A door in the far wall is flanked by a series of late Kandinsky paintings. Seated on the sofa, it is like you are waiting on a cloud for some greater presence.

Meanwhile Philip shuffles about in silence; places before you a bottle of water (Veen); begins to wipe at invisible dust. He is making you anxious, and you are about to say something, when the far door is flung open and Jay enters the room. Now, you had never met Jay before that moment, but it was clear to you that Jay was not the sort of man who could easily be mistaken for anyone else, carrying with him as he did – in the way he walked, in the way he dressed – his own form of semiotics; and this he channeled to convey a simple message, something like, "I own this space," which he did, but you got the impression he meant it in the metaphysical sense, as opposed to the literal.

“Ian!” he said, like you were the only reason he bothered to get out of bed this morning, like his mind was occupied with a singular thought, and that thought was of you. “Did Phillip take good care of you?” He looks over at Phillip, then back at you.

“We’re working on moving Phillip over to elevator operations, right Phillip?”

“I’m Phillip.” Phillip does not pause in his pursuit of microbial trespassers.

“Uh, Phillip was great,” you say.

Jay is wearing Egyptian linen slacks, flat-front, and a sweater of white cashmere layered with a houndstooth blazer. If clothing is an extension of the self, then Jay is the personification of class, that’s what you thought. And that pocket square... You would have killed for that Cucinelli pocket square.

His outfit lets out a small whoosh as he takes a seat across from you. Then, after taking in the sight of you again, he says, “Jesus, you look like hell.”

* * *

2

No, that’s not right...But how do you begin a story whose origin you are detached from in terms of time and space? You guess you can only work with what you have...

Try again, this time with the phone call from the American consular in Geneva, where your mother fell from the sixth story of a hotel in the Pâquis district. “I’m sorry to inform you that your mother is dead.” You wonder if they practice for this, if they receive training in the relay of death notifications. Do they not know that you are barely getting by as it is? That it takes everything in you, most mornings, just to get out of bed?

In the days that follow, you assemble the facts as best as you can. Your mother had booked a room at the Hotel de la Paix for a stay of five days. She checked in alone and as scheduled. Front desk staff said she came and went frequently over the course of her stay – often multiple times in a single day. On the evening of her fourth and final night, she registered a complaint: “The AC unit is out. I feel like I might die.” (She never did put much stock in overstatement, or maybe it’d be more accurate to say that she put all her stock in overstatement.) Then, the findings of a toxicology report – “gnarly.” “Was your mother, by chance, a sort of performance artist?” The police wanted to know.

You wonder how you are you supposed to make sense of this.

In a way, what there *was* was overshadowed by what there was not – a note, a message, or an explanation of any kind.

* * *

8:00 AM

Let’s return to your present for a moment. Where were you again? Ah, that’s right – sitting on your bed. The sounds of a city shaking off sleep have begun to filter through the window of your bedroom: a garbage truck rumbling down the street below; a chorus of birds wailing and car horns blazing. Somehow, it is a new day.

...You hate that expression, as if days can be shed like articles of clothing. When you get dressed to go out, you are not burdened by the shirt you wore the day before, or the day before, or the day before that. As far as you can tell, your present actions are not informed by the trousers of last week (no matter the quality of fabric or the pattern of

stitching). When you wear your Marni mohair sweater, you aren't thinking about the blazer your father made you wear to your first piano recital. But as far as days go, no, you do not have *new* days.

In the hallway, Eileen has changed tactics. She is promising to fulfill your every sexual fantasy. She describes positions, acts, and props you never before imagined (or thought appropriate). This is something you like about Eileen. Finding a door locked to her, she doesn't keep trying the same failed key. Sometimes, you wish you could be more like her.

* * *

3

At the time you learned of your mother's death, you had been living alone. Your time was your own, and for the most part you wanted for nothing. Despite this, life was grueling. Living was grueling. (A footnote in your weltanschauung: *Life is grueling. Living – also grueling.*) When you woke in the morning, you struggled to find things to do. Your planner was dotted by events such as *Fall Season Release – Chilewich Placemats* and *Music in the Park. Two Cultures Collide: Folkloric Electronica*. But even if such events occasioned some small amount of relief, that feeling was just as quickly negated by the fact that, in leaving and returning to your condo, you had to pass the guest room where James used to stay. For a while, you had been thinking of razing that room and returning it to nature, or renting it out to a talented marijuana farmer.

Then your mother died, and you were alone in an altogether new way. You see, before that phone call – *I'm sorry to inform you that your mother is dead* – you had been alone, as in “living distantly from any known antecedent,” also known as “flying solo.” But now you were *alone*, as in “still flying solo” but also “existing singularly in a world defined by connections.” The difference, to you, is at once undeniable and striking. Indeed, it struck you in the stomach, where it stayed for some time and came with new terms of engagement with the world: your immediate environment took on all the aspects of a Piet Mondrian painting, that is to say, stark, and full of hard edges. Animals, once familiar, became suddenly predatory and dangerous. (e.g.: Did birds, you wonder, always have such sharp beaks and look, in their eyes, like they wanted to eat you?)

You stopped going out altogether and had your groceries delivered to your door. These you moved from your doorstep to your kitchen counter; from your kitchen counter to your trash bin. If your life was difficult before, now it was unbearable. You lived as if in a Finnish landscape, stuck in a period of perpetual kaamos, wondering how you could go on, then going on despite yourself, in this intermediary state, where nothing ever seemed to begin or end. And then, arching across a twilight sky – a sign, a sound, as if from some distant source, some Sputnik life-form three galaxies removed. *Ping*. An email in your inbox.

* * *

Dear Ian,

Good evening. I'm not sure you remember me (you really likely don't, being as you were just a baby when we met). Regardless, I know you. Your father (what a man!) and I worked very closely for a time, and in working with your father, I came to know your mother (what a woman!) So when I heard she had passed, I felt compelled to get in touch. "You have to get in touch with this young man!" that's what I said to myself, and now that I have, I just want to say how terribly sorry I am for your loss. Even now, I suspect you may be reeling from a newly developed orientation with life (with death?) being as you are now undeniably one step closer to becoming life's (death's?) cannon fodder.

Certainly, this can be a period of nauseous transition. That said, it's as I always say, "What is transitional...is also temporary." At last – good news! Allow me to continue: this closing proximity to death is attended by a new relation to life (hence my confusion), which is to say, good times are ahead. Indeed, if I have ever been sure of anything, it is that good times are ahead, and it is my hope that we might share some of these good times together. Therefore, I propose a meeting, a proper one this time. I do hope you accept. More details to come. (Phillip will take care of these; that man is so capable!)

Until then, be well,

Jay

** * **

12:00 PM

The sun is directly overhead now. From the other side of the door, there is silence. You think back on the rainstorm of last night and how, running outside, you couldn't avoid smearing the undersides of your suede Ports shoes with earthworm guts. You marvel at how quickly conditions can change, and think of those worms now, sizzling on blacktops and sidewalks. Contrary to common belief, earthworms do not emerge during rainstorms to avoid drowning. Rather, the rain provides the necessary moisture to allow for temporary excursions to the surface, where worms may search for environs more hospitable than they had previously known or could reasonably find had they stayed below ground. This is something James had told you just before he moved out.

You admire earthworms now, and think they are very brave (if also disgusting) creatures.

* * *

12:30PM

For clarification: just because James ~~moved on~~ moved out, does not mean you do not know where he is, that you have not been keeping tabs. In the back of your weltanschauung, his address is scribbled and earmarked; you have his number on speed dial. You follow him on social media and fear that every girl you see him with is his girlfriend, every boy his boyfriend. He lives in Concord now, where he teaches American history at a small private school. His faculty photo is a simple headshot in which he is sporting circular frame glasses and a lengthy (but now tame) beard. He

looks positively “hipster academic”; perhaps you should say “coolly intellectual.” His quoted advice for students: “Lead the sort of life you want to live.”

Think to yourself: Holy shit.

* * *

5

Jay put you to work at a desk in front of his office. “A man is nothing without his work.” That was something he liked to say. There was a simple arrangement of items on the desk: a phone, a Mac desktop, and an anxious yellow legal pad (presumably for taking notes). Your job was not complicated – incoming calls that reached this phone had already been screened through another operator, and you either forwarded these calls into Jay’s office or, if he wasn’t available, took a message (with great relief, on your legal pad); on the computer, you updated Jay’s itinerary and calendar as needed; you printed weekly agendas to be distributed among the offices downstairs, handled mailings and drafted emails. One day, you realized something: you are an assistant. You had never before thought you would be someone else’s assistant. Assisting was not something you had much experience doing. So you were surprised to find you actually enjoyed this work.

You enjoyed arriving at your desk each morning to find a dozen emails in need of sorting and prioritizing. You enjoyed receiving packages from the post worker, Patty, who stopped by every weekday just before noon and greeted you with a brief (but friendly) “Hello.” You thought that was nice, and did your best to respond in kind. On

one occasion you noticed Patty's shoes were worn and spent much of the rest of that afternoon mulling over the possibility of buying her a new pair; whether or not that would be appropriate; and what sort of shoes she might appreciate receiving. It pleased you to think that you might be the sort of person who liked to please others. You thought this might be, like, a whole new chapter of your life, or something.

Which is not to say there were not things you did not like. Like that time you stepped into an elevator and found Phillip operating the switches. His left leg casted and elevated, he had to balance on crutches and swivel at the hips in order to reach the full range of buttons on the control panel.

"Top floor, if you would, Phillip."

This is something you felt badly about. You felt badly for Phillip. At the same time, you had also begun to eat again and developed a regular routine of visiting the gym. Your time for feeling badly was limited.

Then there were the cocktail parties each Thursday at Benjy's, just down the street from the office. Though your attendance at these affairs was initially optional, it later became required (by mandate of Jay – "It's important we have these social experiences, to mingle and blow off steam").

Benjy's interior was drawn from a gray-scale palette, and being there was like existing inside a 1930's talkie, an experience, you suspected, that was all the more heightened for you, on account of how you had no idea what anyone was saying: you nodded along to critiques of modern portfolio theory and listened to others brag about the rise of their Alpha rating. You thought this sounded like a sort of dirty finance joke, which is to say you knew bupkis, your nickname among a certain circle of particularly

mean and cutthroat company traders. Such evenings you frequently ended up beached at the bar, alone, trying to gauge how long you had to stay before you could acceptably slip out the back door.

It was here, on just such an evening, that you met Eileen. You had just made up your mind to leave – if stopped, you would plead lightheadedness – when she installed herself on the barstool next to yours, ordered a martini (cosmo, with extra lemon garnish), and began speaking out of the corner of her mouth. “It’s like they can’t bear to talk about anything but work,” she said.

At first it wasn’t clear she was even speaking to you, but after the bartender left, there was no one else around, and to your continued surprise, she didn’t just take her drink and leave.

“Quick, I’m in desperate need of company.” (*Was that really what she said?*)

She drank like she was shipping out and came burdened with great secrets. “Honestly,” she whispered, “I’ve always felt that branding was for plebeians.”

Finally, a sentiment you could wrap your head around.

Eileen was excoriating the latest line of handbags from Marc Jacobs when Jay swept by. “This is exactly what I was talking about,” he said. “I approve. My blessing has been given.” Just as quickly he wheeled back around, a drink in both hands.

“If work came with pussy, it’d be the best partner a man could have.” That was also something Jay liked to say.

* * *

6

Your sex was perfunctory, your condoms Kimono. But you did not move in with Eileen for the sex. In bed, she liked to ask you questions – about your day, about your thoughts on any number of things: email versus texting, swimming versus running, walking versus jogging, margarine versus butter, and so on. That someone might care to hear about your thoughts on such matters, or that these were things people actually talked about, seemed strange to you, albeit in a pleasantly surprising way. You wondered if you own parents had had these sorts of conversations. You wondered what kind of sex they had. Comparatively speaking, you seemed to be doing well with Eileen. You seemed to be doing well for yourself. You had left your condo (and all the memories, associations, and trauma that accompanied said condo); you were doing well in your job: recently Jay had asked you to begin sitting in on some meetings. He needed someone reliable he could count on to take notes. When you told Eileen this, she applauded (literally). “He’s letting you into his inner circle of trust,” she said. “That is *exactly* where you want to be.” Eileen did not, however, like to talk about her own job. “I have a strict policy of leaving work at work,” she said. All you knew was that her office was on the third floor; that she worked in Relations, Communications, and Outreach; and that she kept a wheelbarrow, in her office, to remind her of all the money she made and what she would need without the miracle of direct deposit.

* * *

5:30 PM

You have many questions. Questions about friendship and love and loyalty. Questions about a specific witnessed encounter on a certain devastating night, about which you do not like to think but about which you cannot stop thinking. Your need for answers gnaws at your insides like a festering illness, though you are not sure what you would do with these answers even if you had them: Achieve enlightenment? Die in peace? Is life with knowledge any more bearable than life without knowledge?

Outside, the streets are clogged with men and women stumbling home after a day of work. You have many questions.

* * *

6:00 PM

Eileen has returned. You wonder why she sounds more distant, then realize she is speaking to you from the kitchen. "I'm holding your favorite mug now, Ian," she says. "Now I'm about to drop it." Meanwhile you have encountered a new problem: where are you expecting any of your answers might come from? Remember that you are alone, flying solo and searching for your bearings in the vast fog of your life. You are beset by treacherous winds, wary of growing turbulence underwing. You feel there is little you can do but brace for the impending crash.

* * *

Eileen liked to shop. You should be the last person to criticize anyone for this, but isn't everything really a matter of degree? While you had no problem with the wanting and buying of nice things, Eileen was all want all the time and grooved on an aesthetic of constant consumption: Eileen had a Hermes bag for each day of the week, and enough heels and clogs to clad a whole village of female office workers. Still, she wanted more. You once asked her if she ever thought to carry two bags at once.

She looked up at you from across a collage of Tiffany catalogues. "You don't get it, do you?" she said. "That there might be people who were not born into this sort of life; people who, not even five years ago, could not dream of things like these" – shakes wrist of silver bangles – "or this" – topples Keiichi Tanaka mug, spoiling the spread of an Elsa Peretti photo shoot – "or these" – kicks Jimmy Choos onto table. "That each purchase is a reassurance, as if to say, *Yes, this is real*, and no, I am not going back; will never go back, and that I will die on a mountain of designer floral tops before I even consider that stopping might be an option."

With that, she swept out of the apartment, armed with her favorite Fendi clutch, inside of which you knew existed a veritable rainbow of credit cards and charge cards, leaving behind her, in the fold of a catalogue, a young Korean model, now wrinkled and mottled with spots of coffee and suddenly past her prime.

* * *

Over the next two months, you sat in on a number of Jay's meetings. Sometimes these took place in one of the conference rooms on the lower floors of his building; other times they were held elsewhere – the back rooms of classy restaurants, parks on warm afternoons, a private theater box, tucked just out of view. Your notes were meticulous, capturing not only every spoken word but also descriptions of personal auras and atmospherics, sketches of faces in moments of heightened emotion. Looking over these later, Jay might say, "Excellent, these are just what I needed," or his eyes might cloud over; he'd dab at them and say, "Ian, my god, these are the best goddamn notes I have ever seen. Well done."

You imagined things going on like this for some time, until one morning on the border of fall, when the weather had begun to cool and the wind carried in it some aspect of meanness. Clouds clung to the upper floors of Jay's building, obscuring its peak and giving the surrounding structures the impression of so many gossiping neighbors, hunched together in concern. That morning you arrived at your desk to find no emails in your inbox, no memos outlining tasks in need of realization. Having become used to this diet of light labor, to be so suddenly deprived of it left you with a sick feeling in the pit of your stomach, though perhaps that feeling had always been there and that, in the absence of your work, you were merely noticing it again. How might you describe it – something like *I'm sorry to inform you that your mother is dead*. And then, as if someone had been watching you, waiting for a moment of distraction, the phone on your desk rang, jarring you back to your present.

To your surprise, it was Jay. "Ian, would you mind stepping into the office for a moment?"

Recall that, for months now, you had been sitting not a dozen feet from Jay's office, but not once had actually been inside of it, and while normally you might have thrilled at this opportunity (*at last! a glimpse into the inner workings of Jay's mind*), on this occasion you felt only numb or, if anything, somewhat afraid, though for what reason you could not yet say.

Entering Jay's office, you found Jay sitting in a high-backed leather chair, before him a sprawling desk littered with charts and analytics, indecipherable to you. In the air hung the smell of endings and things completed, and cluttered on the walls were a series of Richard Serra prints done in thick black brushstrokes. Most disturbing, however, was the presence of Eileen, seated in the corner, her legs crossed neatly and tucked beneath her chair.

"Ian," Jay said. "Please, sit down."

You took a seat on the far side of Jay's desk, the closed door behind you. The chair was a mesh of wire, pleasant to look at but uncomfortable to sit in.

"I just want to start by saying that we have all been so pleased to have you with us, Ian."

In the corner, Eileen is nodding.

"Do you think you might describe, in your own terms, your experience with us thus far?" Jay leaned forward in his chair, rested his forearms on the desk. "Please keep your response to one or fewer words."

You look to Eileen. You have seen stonewalls show more character than Eileen is showing now. You look back to Jay. "Good," you say.

“Excellent!” Jay says. “That is exactly what we like to hear from our rising stars. Have I ever told you that that is what you are, Ian? A rising star? I see so much of your father in you. I often have to tell myself, ‘No, that is not Julian. That is Ian.’ I spell it out on my palm before pretending to eat it. That’s how I remember. Clever, am I right?” Jay smiles before continuing: “There is something I need you to do, Ian. You might think of it as a sort of test, in fact.”

“Oh, oh, I know he is just the man to do it.” If before Eileen was inanimate, she has now begun to come to life.

Disappearing momentarily behind his desk, Jay resurfaces with an oversized folio pouch. Stretched at the seams, it looks poised to regurgitate its contents at any second.

“You will deliver this tonight,” Jay says, placing it on the desk, “to a man at the station. You’ll meet him at platform eight to make the exchange. Bring whatever he gives you home and hand it over to Eileen. She will take care of things from there. Do you think you can do this for us, Ian?”

It’s possible, in that instant, that you communicated – in the expression of your face or in the arch of your back – some degree of uncertainty, some countenance of indecision, because it was then that Eileen rose from her seat to make her case: “Ian, think of it like this,” she said. “We have no past, being as it is gone – may as well never have existed, nor is there any future, being as it is merely an extension of the present. In fact, we might go on as we are now, forever, and all you need to do is hand off a little package to some man on a subway platform, some man you will never even see again. Isn’t that simple? Could it be any easier?”

“She’s right, Ian,” Jay said. “And didn’t you just say yourself that you’ve enjoyed your time here. There’s no one who takes notes like you do. And haven’t you also enjoyed your time with Eileen? There’s no reason these things can’t continue.”

But it wasn’t so much that you couldn’t understand what was being asked of you, but that you were struggling to come to terms with a renewed perception of the emptiness in yourself and your surroundings, some preternatural immobility from which you were powerless to break free or in which you were somehow complicit, for even though you were in some office – Jay’s office – populated by three people, a desk, some dozens of paintings, and that thing in the corner – was that a bronze Degas? – you had no sense, in fact, of where you were; what, in fact, you were doing; or how you might get back to some place with meaning...

Riding the elevator to the ground floor, you clasp the pouch to your side. You look at Phillip. His left arm now rested in a sling across his chest. This made holding his crutches exceedingly difficult. Nevertheless, he managed to strike the number “1” on the control panel. (He did this with his knee – have you ever seen such adaptability in the face of hardship?) There are many questions you would like to ask Phillip. For instance: what is happening to you, Phillip? And why do you not speak out for yourself? You think it’s possible he might, had his vocabulary not been so cruelly diminished. (Upon boarding the elevator, you had said, “Floor 1, Phillip,” to which Phillip responded in his customary and singular way: “Phillip.”) You would like to know what he would do if he were in your shoes, and what, for that matter, would you do if you found yourself in his? As the doors slide open, you refrain from asking as you deboard the elevator, suspecting as you do that you already know the answers.

* * *

8:00 PM

Outside your bedroom, there is a hurricane brewing. Its name is Eileen. From your seat on your bed, you can hear the collision of so many kitchen and home appliances, the shattering of dishes on walls and floors. Having reached an impasse on your journey to understanding, your attention turns to the package on your bed. It distracts you, calls you to imagine all the things it might contain: a hard drive instilled with a map to national treasure á la Nicholas Cage; the remains of Anastasia Romanov preserved in a Fabergé egg. Your list of impossibilities is compounding when the sounds of police sirens impinge on the edge of your consciousness, and immediately your mind begins to reel: Eileen has called the police – you will be the scapegoat of a nefarious plot to dissolve world markets; you will be the patsy of a plan to launder large sums of money on behalf of foreign agents. Then, just as quickly, the sirens fade into the depths of your subconscious. Expecting relief, you are instead consumed by shame: will you ever amount to anything more than a flimsy paper kite caught in the wind?

* * *

9

The evening after your meeting with Jay, you parked your car adjacent to a small park near the subway. The clouds overhead had grown thicker and darker since the

afternoon, and as you crossed over the sidewalk of the park, you spotted several worms wriggling out of the ground, as if in anticipation of an approaching storm.

Passing beneath the cement overhang into the station's interior, you pay the toll before pushing through the turnstile. Making your way to the designated platform, you are surrounded by so many day workers on their way home, their shoulders slumped as if weary and returning from battle, their shirt fronts wrinkled and sweat stained. In many ways, it is indeed like they are returning from battle. They permeate the underground with a sense of exhaustion and dislocated want.

Several times you think you spot Jay among them, only this Jay looked inexplicably peculiar, which is not to say you would ascribe to him a certain *je ne sais quoi*: his limbs sagged as if his joints had come loose in their sockets; his jaw looked misaligned and mangled. You suspect there was no French that could help him. Then, before you can get a better look, he disappears down the corridor into the dark and the crowd. You look around you. There is no French that can help any of these people, you think, watching them shuffle into train cars that pull away with a thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk. You are considering pursuing this Jay-figure, this other-Jay, when someone grabs you, hard, by the elbow, and you turn to face a monument of gray fabric: a man in an oversized trench coat that nearly swept the floor. His face looked ageless, with a long forehead just below which his eyes twitched wildly left and right. He gave you the impression of having been pulled straight out of a poorly made *le Carre* adaptation. He said, "Did you bring it?"

The package Jay gave you is tucked beneath your left arm. It is too big for him not to see it.

Taking it, he looks inside and smiles. "One hundred percent worth it," he says. "One hundred percent." From somewhere in the depths of his trench coat, he produces his own package – a square box wrapped in brown paper that he shoves into your chest.

You feel something slide from one end of the box to the other and fumble with its shifting weight.

Recovering, you look up to find that he has begun to pace a tight circuit in front of you. "Do you know what I think I'll do?" he says. " Everything. Everything I've ever wanted. And you know when I think I'll do it? Whenever I damn well feel like it." As he speaks, his smile grows wider and wider, but instead of joyful he looks only increasingly grotesque, the sort of figure children would want to run away from; the sort of figure you want to run away from. But for some reason you are rooted where you stand, like you are watching some horrible movie scene so appalling – in its casting, in its acting, in its setting, in its framing; you could go on – that you cannot turn away less you miss its agonizing conclusion. But suddenly, without a word to you, the man turns and strides away, in his wake knocking from her walker an old woman, who proceeds to crawl through the closing doors of a subway car that scoots off into the darkness, leaving at the scene only you, a sad and discarded walker, and the resurgence of that sick feeling in your stomach.

Clasping the package in both hands, you rush to the exit of the station to find it pouring outside, the worms now out in droves dancing their worm-rain dance. They make squishing sounds beneath your feet as you run for your car, in which you drive for hours through the night, the wipers of your windshield flicking madly back and forth.

* * *

12:00 AM

So there you are, though perhaps you should say, So here you are. At last, you have come full circle, and now it is that time of night, that unforgiving hour that you have replayed in your mind again and again. You stand at the window, in the darkness of which you see a reflection of yourself peering through a nearly closed door, trapped in a constant state of horrible discovery, a vision interrupted at times only by the light of passing taxis bearing couples to heaven and what light shines through the blinds of nearby apartments, behind which a city of people laugh and make love.

From the corner of your room, you are haunted by the ghost of your mother, for whom you have agonizing questions. She is wearing that ridiculous orange and red dress. When you ask her what you might do with all of the pain inside of you, she smiles and says, *"I'm sorry to inform you that your mother is dead."* Spinning wildly in search of comfort, your eyes settle on the brown package sitting neglected on your bed. It speaks to you. It says, *What do you want from me? I'm a fucking box.* If you had beliefs, now would be the time to blow something up. Sadly, you do not have beliefs. Instead you have a brown paper box. You have an Eileen, who has returned to her position outside the bedroom door, where she makes appeals to your sense of despair: "Ian," she says, "where else do you have to go? What else do you have to do?" These, too, are good questions.

You imagine other worlds where other versions of yourself have escaped with James to grow old in seaside cottages; where you are the twin caretakers of a Danish

windmill plopped idyllically amid a field of wild pansies; or any number of realities where you are to one another bottomless reservoirs of generosity, or sacrificial lambs. You are wondering why things didn't work out like that when you are interrupted by a new sound coming from the other side of the door. It is the sound of Eileen, sobbing, and without warning you feel as though a rapid transformation begins to take place inside of you, making you think things like, *Excuse me? Are you crying?* You are certain Eileen has nothing to cry about, not when you have lost as much as you have. *What a twat*, you think. *What a cunt*. Suddenly, you are filled with fury: terrible things have happened to you, and someone must be held accountable. Now is not the time for self-pity or resolutions, you think. It is the time for action and great revenge. Read *The Count of Monte Cristo*. See *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye*. You steel yourself for Eileen's next attack, to which you will lob this counter volley: "Shut-up, Eileen," and your voice will be without an ounce of remorse, carrying in it instead your intention towards movement.