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Penetralia

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Penetralia

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

Penetralia is a short fiction collection that occupies the fissures between the minds and bodies of its protagonists. Each story involves an uncanny disruption of identity that results in personal, social, and sexual convulsion and collapse. The convulsions are many: a man finds wisdom in silence when he is numbed and unable to speak during a tooth extraction, a woman uses cuddle parties to escape her anxiety and obsessive rituals, Marlene Dietrich converses casually with a marketer licensing her image posthumously, a confused revolution strikes its first blow after a fertility clinic refuses to inseminate across racial lines, a renowned writer plagiarizes from a schizophrenic homeless man, and a stand-up comedienne listens for echoes of herself from the other side of the spotlight. The mundane combines with the bizarre to disorient and unnerve bodies that have palsied in the grip of a modernity circling back to feed on itself.

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HA HA

She was losing them before she even started.

A swelling clamor, only in her ears, peaked and began to subside with the leveling cadence of her heart. She grinned through the spotlight to her audience, unseen and unheard.

Against the fall of her face, Selma pushed up her happiest frown, or her frowniest smile, a rictus of relentless, doomed positivity. She didn't really care which direction her mouth curved, so long as it did.

"Hello. How are you?"

It was a polite question, and an unthreatening opener to her set, delivered with a slight, courteous bow, but her small voice quavered terribly the way it had the first time she stood in front of people with a microphone, and the many times since. She had continued to warble and yowl on the first words of each performance over the subsequent years despite her efforts to warm up first and draw a steady timbre.

It all felt new to her, still. Even so, she had a responsibility to make her audience feel at ease knowing that she was firmly in control for the duration of the evening.

"...Everybody...?" came the dangling addendum to her initial question, far too late. This was not going well.

The spotlight listened impassively. Through it, she could hear the shifting of limbs and the clearing of a throat.

"As you know, since you're here, my name is Selma. Do you like my name? I think it's a good name."

No response.

“This girl named Judith told me one time in sixth grade that it was a beautiful name. At first I thought that was a really nice thing to say, but then I realized that I didn’t name myself, so it’s not really a compliment for me, is it? Oh well. I’ll pass the compliment along, be the bearer of good news.”

Selma smiled pleasantly before continuing.

“She also said my face looked like I caught typhoid and shit myself to death – I actually prettied up the language, in case you were skeptical that Judith would say such a thing, like my teacher was – so take the good with the bad. But, joke’s on her, my face isn’t my fault either. So, I guess I’m technically still neutral in her books. Jury’s still out with Judith. And, more importantly, I looked it up, and diarrhea is not a symptom of typhoid. Point Selma.”

Silence. Selma shifted the microphone from one hand to the other in a practiced motion that she had become particularly proud of over the years.

“But my name is in fact Selma, as I said a moment ago, and as you already knew when you got here. And yes, in case you were wondering, I *was* named after the famous civil rights march led by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., fighting for the right of every African-American to participate in the democratic processes of their nation, thereby affirming their essential human dignity, which is a lot to live up to for a kid with a permanent Kool-Aid mustache that eats her own hair. Pretty lofty expectations, Mom and Dad. *Yeesh*. I don’t even recycle.”

Selma showed her teeth as an offering of good will to her unseen audience. Silence greeted them in spite of their pleasing, peroxidic whiteness.

She would have to get serious and jump straight to the A-material.

“I was alone eating lunch at a breakfast diner because I’m so cool, and I made the mistake of ordering a glass of grapefruit juice to go with my scramble and hash. *Whoops*, my bad! Why was it a mistake, you may be asking? Well, it cost almost six dollars, for one, and the glass was small enough that if there was a country where juice was illegal, I could smuggle it through customs in my asshole without spilling a drop, and I don’t even do butt sex that much. It got me to thinking... got me thinking, why does G.F.J. – I call grapefruit juice G.F.J. – why does G.F.J. cost so much at diners? What’s with that? That’s a bunch of B.S., *am I right?* Come on!”

She was losing them – go to the voices.

“*Hi there, hon, what can I get ya?* Yeah, hi, stereotypical 50s diner waitress, you can get me a fork that doesn’t look like it’s been scraping gum off the floor until ten seconds before you set it on my fucking napkin, you stupid bitch.”

Selma heard her first laugh, a woman’s voice. It wasn’t a laugh, quite. More of a nervous titter. They liked it blue.

“She tried coming back at me with her period-appropriate patter, but I’m like, ‘bitch, fuck you, and let me speak to the waitress in the next section.’ She thought I wanted another server, but I actually had her come over to my table just so I could say ‘fuck you’ to that bitch too. Then I asked for the next waitress, and the next one, then the fry cook, then the dishwasher, and yeah, then the fucking manager, and I told all of them, one-by-one, ‘fuck you, cause I ain’t gonna take it anymore, bitch-asses.’ And then you know what they did? They apologized and gave me the meal for free. But I had to eat it with my hands. What a country.”

Silence. She came on too strong – more voices.

“Selma, please. Can’t we get through one meal in public without you making a spectacle of yourself? Mom, that’s what I do for a living. You’re not getting paid to eat breakfast, are you? Then can you please let us enjoy our meal without any more humiliation than we’ve already had to endure with you and your supposed career? Sure, Mom, no problem-o. I’ll finish my scramble and hash in peaceful, repressed silence, just the way you like it. Excuse me, waitress? You again? What is it this time, hon? Hi, yes, instead of sending my utensils back to the kitchen, could I send myself back so I could put my hand in a pot of boiling water and hold it there until my screams are louder than my mother’s voice? Thank you for accommodating me. I know it’s an unusual request.”

Selma lurched suddenly, as if her viscera had seized. Both hands went cold and gripped the mike in tandem.

“Okay, sorry, I think I screwed up. I said I was alone...uh...the diner...”

Selma looked beseechingly into the glare, her face palsied by fear and embarrassment as she waited for some agreeable murmur to reassure her that her mistake hadn’t shattered the meticulously calibrated verisimilitude she had established.

“Fuck...” she quivered involuntarily, barely audible, still staring forward. This elicited a short male laugh.

The response from her audience renewed her courage. Licking her upper lip once, she managed to let go of the mike with one hand and regain her casual posture.

“Actually, I said I was eating alone when I was eating with my mom because I might as well have been alone, because she’s completely empty and narcissistic and doesn’t hear anything I say. Hence, the story remains consistent, hence no error. Career saved!”

Selma half-heartedly imitated the ebullient cheerleader hops she recalled Judith and Tanya and Brenda doing in high school. She did her best to evoke the maneuver as it lived in her memory, her grinning head cocked and her arms extending invisible pompoms as her legs hooked back into an ungainly effigy of knock-kneed, coltish effervescence at her continued prospects as an intrepid comic.

Selma's feet returned to the plywood platform with an egregious clomp. The audience greeted her gruesome pantomime with a silence so complete that it began coalescing into a dense, vibrating substance slowly encasing her body.

She wondered what the audience was doing on the other side of the light. Untying and retying their shoes? Counting each other's fingers? Laughing silently into their hands? Masturbating?

She stage-muttered out of the side of her mouth for an easy, self-deprecating laugh, which she did not receive:

“Judith got a different response to that move on the cheerleading squad, obviously, because it's Judith, so why wouldn't she get everything she wants, *am I right or am I right?*”

Selma abruptly turned her back to the audience and looked at her shadow projected onto the rear wall of the compact room. She saw the shadow's arm raise and wave back at her, burned onto the blank, white, familiar surface by the unrelenting spotlight that she had so unrelentingly asked for across her short-long life.

When she turned back to face her audience, she was still for several moments, the shadow still waving in her eye.

Finally, she spoke in her mother's voice again – it was even better than her diner waitress.

“Darling, when you tell me you want to be on the debate team – sorry, I forgot to mention that I wanted to be on the debate team after my mom convinced me not to try out for the cheerleading squad, for reasons that are now apparent to you, am I right – when you tell me you want to be on the debate team, I don’t know whether to laugh or throw up. What makes you think you could excel at such a thing, for goodness sake? The only thing you’ll end up debating is whether to use black paint or tin foil over your bedroom windows. And that’s no fun to watch.”

Selma stopped, narrowing her eyes to see or hear something, anything, from the other side, mulling how she could get some kind of measurable reaction from them. She would have to try out some new material, throw some experimental shit their way.

“But listen, maybe you’ve heard enough from my mom by now. I know *I* have. You want to hear from my dad? Okay, here goes.”

Selma’s mouth opened as wide as her jaw’s hinge would allow, locking at its breaking point as her lips pulled back and her teeth shimmered and her eyes burned for refusing to close. From the cavern of her mouth came the deepest, low-rumblingest roar of a resonance and pitch that even she was surprised she could produce. Her voice seemed to throw to the other side of the room, seemed as if it was coming from another, distant source to be received by her mouth, from which a dull, dissipated echo wailed in the microphone gripped by hungry fingers.

The roar held her as long as it could before reeling her jaw shut with its declining force. Her mouth and the call came to a close simultaneously.

Silence.

She lifted the heavy corners of her mouth before speaking again.

“Pretty bad, huh? That’s how he said good morning. You should have heard him when I wet the bed.”

Selma tapped a couple of steps and held a showman's pose, unseen top hat in brittle hand.

A male voice announced itself through the glare by emitting a staccato torrent of guttural laughter. It slowly began rising in pitch as it maintained its repeating rhythm. Selma patiently waited as she looked to the sound and the affirmation it offered, a bat flying gratefully towards sonic stalagmites.

As the man's laughter approached its fortieth second without signalling its intension to stop or change tempo, even Selma began to feel greedy and overfed for its abundance.

"Shut up," she said matter-of-factly.

The laughter immediately halted. Selma nodded her appreciation for the man's compliance.

"If you go on for too long, the show gets all fucked up. How many times do I have to tell you?"

The laughter did not respond through the light. Recognizing the tension in the room after their brief exchange, she put on some quirk and shrugged to the rest of the audience, perhaps a bit too broadly, and sighed obligingly as she imagined a long-suffering comedienne should. She tried to make her eyes twinkle to emphasize a well-honed suburban agreeability. She had heard that it was important for stand-ups to appeal to as many demographics as possible, and the middle-aged middle-class were the ticket to a permanent tenure in a Vegas hotel-casino, which would be a big step up from her three-foot-high, unpainted plywood stage.

Selma gathered her thoughts and resisted the urge to retrieve the note pages from her pocket. This was her set, and she knew her set, because her set was her and she knew her.

She breathed deeply before beginning again.

“So anyways, my dad was bad, that is fair to say. But my bad dad wasn’t all bad, just some bad. He was some bad dad but he did do nice things for me, sometimes. He put together my swing set. He lifted me up to see a juggler once. He put up a colorful poster in my bedroom one time when I was seven that was called the Fear and Phobia Finder. There were bunches and bunches of phobias. I never knew there were so many things for a little girl to be afraid of! I was so fascinated, *and afraid!* Let’s see, there was the fear of cats, fear of snakes, fear of mirrors, fear of teeth, fear of empty rooms, fear of enclosed spaces, fear of men, fear of sleep, fear of words, fear of ideas. There was even a fear of everything – panophobia. That one’s rough. But seriously, pick a thing, am I right? Then there was pantophobia – fear of fears. Those people are just overthinking it, am I right? Or maybe just thinking about thinking. They only forgot to put one thing on the poster, so I filled it in with a sharpie: *collect ‘em all, kids!’*”

Feedback rang over her punchline as Selma chortled uproariously, holding herself as she shook. After counting off a few seconds, she decided to wrap it up and slowly wound the chortle down until finally it died in her chest. Her thin, brightly sticked lips gradually fell and sloped down from the middle on either side, back to their natural, belled curve.

She felt a steady vibration growing in the room, detectable beneath the silence, in the vertiginous heat of the spotlight.

“Dad gave me plenty to be afraid of even without that poster, though. He would have packed me a knuckle sandwich to eat every day at school, but he couldn’t figure out how to close my lunchbox around his fist.”

Selma glanced down at her feet, making sure they were positioned at the exact center of the modest stage, the plywood sagging with its age and hers. She had remained slender through

the decades, sometimes alarmingly so; the stage, though, was nearly as old as she. Only five years younger, in fact.

It groaned as her meager weight shifted from left foot to right, the sound somehow an improvement on the response her set was receiving. She saw the two tiny stairs, made from boards cut with something like love in the garage at the behest of her pleading, ringleted self. She could still hear the saws crying outside, could still feel her excitement when her audience awaited her first words on the stage a few days later, that Friday evening, as late as they would let her stay up.

“My parents weren’t too bad,” she said, giddy with anticipation over the convincing feint. “They were *just bad enough! Get it?! Is this thing ONNNNNNNNNN?!?!?*”

Selma carried the screamed question deep into the glare, bending at the knees and pressing her face forward, her neck extending like a crane into the persistent void. Her piercing voice and the microphone’s shrill feedback met the vibrating, endogenous thrum that thrummed only for her and adjusted until the frequencies matched, forming a concrete aural baseline for the unblinking muteness otherwise occupying the cramped space.

Selma felt her underfed body diffusing in the unwavering tone, her voice and the silence combining to consume the form she had no use for any longer, or ever. She thought she could hear the stage creak as it was relieved of her inconsequential weight, as she rose slowly in the air to a height the room couldn’t allow for.

A loud pinging pop interjected itself abruptly, the spotlight cutting out and bringing her crashing back to the stage at least as inelegantly as she had with her spectral pompoms. The room was dark enough for her to finally see – not only the vibrant, fluid shapes now dancing in her eyes, but the audience behind them, growing more distinct as the shapes faded.

“Technical... difficulties...” Selma said, raggedly. “Everyone please stay seated. This is a free show, but if it wasn’t, you would not be eligible for a refund this far along.”

Selma’s pupils opened and closed, chewing the dim light until there was enough to swallow.

Before the stage, in the stillness and the crushing familiarity, her audience sat in matching easy chairs.

Maria and Tom, her constant devotees, her avid and only listeners, always unresponsive and uncomprehending, now so for reasons beyond their volition, sat expectantly. Now their minds were as still and becalmed as Selma’s refused to be as it ran every second, ran out of her mouth as fast as it could, running from them and to them.

Tom looked away from the constant performer he had created on the tiny, wooden stage he had built. He searched the sudden darkness his demential mind would soon believe had been there forever for the violent clamor he was already forgetting had occurred. The lamp cooled in the air above his turning head.

Selma tried to continue her set: “So you can imagine how college was for little old Selma. You’ll have to imagine it, because it never happened. *Rim shot!*”

Selma tipped her head and smiled, unveiling empty space on the stage next to her with a sweeping arm. Her audience did not laugh.

“No, I got a degree in Waitressing, and minored in Getting Divorced a Bunch of Times,” said Selma, nodding with parodic solemnity. “The major and minor really should be the other way around, but it’s funnier to end on divorce. *It’s always funnier to end on divorce!*”

The audience did not seem to agree with her sentiment.

“And after all that, I learned how to wipe asses that belonged to people who forgot how to do it themselves. It just slipped their mind. It’s not like they had practised much or anything. They could put together a 3D puzzle in less than an hour so I had to keep buying new ones until I realized they couldn’t remember doing them each time and could just redo the same ones over and over, but somehow wiping shit off of their anuses just became a real stumper, a real brainteaser. I won’t ask you guys to imagine that part, because you don’t need to, because those asses belonged to *you! Boom!!*”

Maria had not looked away from the stage. Her stilled eyes were on the unmoving performer, waiting patiently for each cue to follow along with the nightly ritual of auto-consumption enacted before them.

Selma continued her set, carrying on with the carving and the abrading.

“Every morning I get dressed in front of the mirror in my bedroom,” sighed Selma, pacing and studying the air. “I take as much time as I can so that I don’t have to come out and face...*certain people* who, by chance, happen to be present in the audience today.”

Selma allowed her fingertips to graze her own cheekbone.

“And just before I leave my room, I put on a polished, shining mask of my own face,” she said, dragging the skin back to make sure her face was on straight. “Isn’t that hilarious?”

Maria’s mouth effortlessly pulled back into a smile, as if it had not refused to do so for nearly every day of its 81 years, as if the lines at its corners were not fresh and shallowly cut.

Her mother kept smiling at the forgotten joke. But Selma remembered everything, and for all her peering across the luminescent space of the room and the even brighter, stitched-together sum of her experience, seeing her mother now, sitting in the new dark, smiling, brought the weight of her concave, viciously reflective existence down upon her.

She decided to try some older material.

“So who wants to hear a joke about men versus women? Huh? *Mennnnnnnnnn...
Womennnnnnnnnn...*”

Onto her mother’s smiling mouth was projected the cycling tape of her perception through the pinhole lens of a well-honed act, repeated and rarely changed over uncounted hundreds of performances, over hundreds and hundreds and thousands of evenings in the same living room that the same two-person audience could not remember occupying with the performer before them.

“Dogs versus cats?” Selma asked, her enthusiasm waning.

That Maria would smile now after so many years felt like a punchline far crueler than any Selma had conjured in her bizarre nightly kabuki.

“Fucks versus shits?”

Maria’s smile reached across the chasm to Selma, the shock comic, the confessor, the performer that was hers in all ways, including the oldest and funniest gag in Selma’s act, her birth.

“How about some crowd work? Any volunteers? How about you, sir?”

Tom followed Maria’s unwavering gaze back to Selma and reacted for the first time again to the sight of the performer.

“Where are you from, sir?”

Tom didn’t answer, couldn’t. Neither could Maria, except for her silent, unmoving laugh.

“Where am *I* from?”

Selma could sense her body being eaten by its first earned smile. The still horror of it blanketed her in the dark, heavy and cold.

Her voice grew ever smaller.

“Is this thing on?”

She hovered in the darkness on a stage that had once felt so high to her.

“Can anybody hear me?”

Maria’s eyes never moved, and her smile never fell.

Selma’s lips finally drew back to reflect her mother’s.

“Ha.”

“Ha.”

“Ha.”

SOFT SERVE

Tara, sitting across from the doctor, was compelled to interrupt him:

“Hang on a minute, because I want to make sure I understand you. What you are telling me is that you will not give me sperm from a donor that doesn’t share my ethnicity? Do I have that right?”

“That’s correct.”

“—That I may only have sperm from white testicles?”

“That’s correct, yes.”

“Whatever white is...”

Dr. Kintner raised a hand to enumerate the descending subcategories of whiteness. “European, preferably Northern, preferably Western, or any expatriates in former colonial subsidiaries.”

Tara’s mouth was open for several seconds before it spoke: “That has to be racist, right?”

“Ms. Schwegler...” he responded wearily.

“That’s racist! I heard you right, right?”

“I haven’t even suggested that any ethnicity is superior to any other. Yours just happens to hail from—”

Kintner frowned, opening the folder in front of him.

Tara sighed impatiently: “Swiss-German and British, with a strain of Irish. And a little Dutch. Who gives a shit?”

“I see you struggling to keep your genetic record in order, and you want to hyphenate your child’s cultural identity even further?” asked Kintner, his long face longer with incredulity.

“If you were of African ancestry asking for European sperm I would tell you the same thing.”

“That’s why you’re doing this?” she demanded. “Streamlining my child’s ethnic history? *Why* are you doing this?”

“What you have to understand is that your child would be visibly mixed and would for this reason be subjected to far greater difficulties than has been your experience.” As he spoke, Kintner held up the chilled vial of congealed fluid that was the subject of their discussion, for illustrative effect. “This sample is a combination dose of Malian-Chadian-Ethiopian, and I can’t be—”

Dr. Kintner managed to evade Tara’s impulsive swipe for the vial, but only just, his momentum turning his chair nearly 90 degrees.

They stared silently across the desk at each other after the near miss, he shocked at her boldness, she mildly chastened in spite of her conviction. Tara sighed and rolled her eyes, facing the window behind Kintner as he pointedly opened a drawer and deposited the deposit securely inside. He resumed speaking as he busied himself straightening his chair.

“As I have said, it would be unfair for the child to grow up not fully recognizing its mother.”

“It will recognize me,” Tara over-enunciated, as if speaking to, rather than of, a small child. “It will see my face every day, from the moment it emerges from my vagina. I have no plans to wear a disguise in the delivery room.”

Kintner raised his hands, nodding along to Tara’s words as if to tamp them and soothe her into agreeability. Even the judicious padded segments between his finger joints seemed to

implore her to please comport with the values and practices that the Lifeblood Fertility Center prided itself on.

“I apologize. I should have spoken with more clarity,” said Kintner. “What I meant to say was that the child will not recognize *itself* in its mother. It will likely begin to feel conflicted and alienated when it reaches maturity and realizes that it does not fully resemble you or anyone in your extended family. It will compare its features to yours and, upon calculating the racial differences, available to the most untrained eye and unaccounted for in the relatives present in its upbringing, may feel strange or monstrous, and voluntarily exclude itself from the familial unit, falling into a spiral of self-abnegation and despair. I feel duty-bound to prevent this, Ms. Schwegler.”

“Why would I choose to spend all of this money and go through this procedure, not to mention having this conversation with you, only to neglect my child?” asked Tara. “The effort I’m expending now proves what I’m prepared to do to make a good life for us. Can’t you see that?”

Tara waited, imploring Kintner to understand, by the process of forming a reply, that his position was fatally stupid and morally indefensible.

When he answered almost instantly in his level cadence, she knew by his promptness, before she had heard a word, that no such awakening could have taken place.

“I’m afraid it’s not up to you or I, or even the child, how it will respond to this profound genetic and cultural mismatch. The child will not determine its circumstances, but they it. The systemic external forces acting on its confused sense of self will be merciless and unrelenting. I’m merely preventing that hardship.”

Tara looked wearily at her hands clasped in her lap.

“Please stop confusing race and culture,” she muttered. “And, by the way, you are one of those external forces. You’re fulfilling your own prophecy.”

He tipped his palm and shrugged a non-reply.

“Is that all you have to say?” she asked.

“It is the fate of our species, as primitive as we still are, to gather around the most familiar faces at the great fire we all share while the dark winds of chaos howl at our backs—”

“Okay...” interrupted Tara, hands over her head in surrender as she stood.

She had nearly reached the door of his office when she stopped and turned back to the doctor, whose brow was raised in private reproach as he closed her file.

She waited until he met her eyes before speaking.

“It’s the fate of our species that the half of it that thinks like me has to spend its entire life with the half of it that thinks like you.”

He matched her resignation with a depleted smile.

“It is.”

∞

Tara’s heels tapped her rage across the Lifeblood lobby and away from the doctor, the startling purity of her indignation driving a metronomic tempo she couldn’t break out of. She wanted to tear herself out of the pantsuit she typically used for boardroom presentations, worn with the expectation of first eliciting and then celebrating the approval of her application. The full waiting room, the screaming phones, the stacks of pamphlets filled with lies of omission about the ugliness inside, repulsed her.

Nearly a dozen other clients waited their turn to face the most blatant xenophobia imaginable, though they would remain happily ignorant should their tastes in acquired sperm

cleave more to the mainstream, or if their desire to conceal from their peers the use of cups and syringes in the conception of their child was strong enough to warrant simulating a natural birth. Those who lacked the imagination to combine the greatness and beauty of all features available to humanity – to embrace the inclusiveness that Tara felt defined her – would choose to create a child as pale or dark as they and thus be spared the conversation she had just endured. For them, the shimmering curtain would never be pulled back to reveal the banal horror at the heart of Lifeblood.

Tara thought suddenly of Anthony, the only man of any color she had been with, their time together having laid waste to every other responsibility she had during her second year at Ryerson. She wondered how he would have responded to such an ethical affront, and wondered also what he had done with himself in the years since. Maybe she should look him up...

The slight, youngish woman behind the front desk wilted at the sight of Tara's pulled back blonde hair passing angrily through the space in front of her.

"I know why you can't look me in the eye," lobbed Tara at the receptionist as her hands hit the front door. "...Working for these people."

Tara had hardly exited the building when she realized a woman had ducked through just behind. Tara instinctively moved to catch the door for her, but they were both already outside.

"Sorry—"

"I see you had the conversation with Dr. Kintner."

The woman had light-brown skin and hard eyes that were exhausted and combustible at the same time. She looked familiar to Tara, must have been attending concurrent appointments.

Tara slowed briefly, unsure of how to field the question, but the woman's closeness and intensity pushed her to keep moving.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” she answered cautiously.

“There aren’t many reasons to be as mad as you are leaving a fertility clinic,” mused the woman. “If they miss, you’re disappointed, but you come back for another shot. You asked for something the doctor wouldn’t give you, and you got mad, right?”

As Tara struggled to respond, the woman clarified: “You didn’t want it to look like you.”

“That isn’t the reason,” said Tara, still walking. “It would look half like me.”

The woman held up her hands conciliatorily.

“You’re right, it would, and I shouldn’t make assumptions,” she conceded. “But whatever your reason is, and whatever my reason is, we want the same thing, and neither of us is going to get it the way we’re trying now.”

Tara stopped a few steps from her car, looking at her keys. She turned to the woman.

“I knew I wasn’t the first. You tried to get black sperm too? Or was it white sperm for you? I’m sorry, uh... What—?”

“My mother is black, mostly, my father was white, mostly.”

“Okay. So, for you...” Tara trailed off.

The woman nodded. “That’s right – nothing. He wouldn’t give me black or white, or anything else. Mixed means all of my options are cancelled out. ‘Nullified’ is the way he phrased it. I said if I was mixed anyway, wasn’t the harm already visited on me? No pure line left to protect. But the doctor said that mixed from mixed would just be compounding the problem. He said any torments and confusion I had lived with would be exponentially greater in my child. He said the world was an unforgiving place. I agreed with him on that count.”

Tara felt unable to respond to the recitation of Kintner’s bizarre pronouncements. The woman continued.

“My life hasn’t been perfect, but whose has? I love and accept my life, good and bad – mostly good, to tell you the truth, though it doesn’t feel like it lately. I won’t let what struggles and doubts I have had be made into something they weren’t,” said the woman. “Like they bled in from the skin.”

Tara finally found her voice: “I’ve seen you here before. Was all of this recent?”

“Three years ago.”

Tara was stunned. “He’s had this policy for that long?”

“Longer. You think I was the first?”

“And nobody ever said a word about it?”

“I did every day, for at least an hour or two. Sometimes all day, if I had it off work.

That’s why you’ve seen me every time you’ve come in. I used to pace the lobby and hold a placard and yell and scream. The reception staff was instructed not to call the police because the good doctor was worried that his policy would make the news if I was detained, but he thought it would be overlooked if I wasn’t. He was right, and I tried, believe me. I emailed and called, but the media didn’t write back like I thought they would. So these people just cordoned me off with planters and velvet rope in the far corner and went about their day while I chanted and yelled and marched in a three-foot-circle.”

The woman glanced up at Lifeblood, behind them in two large sections spoked with several walkways between them.

“It’s a big building, my voice didn’t carry as far as I would have liked. People would stare, but they had a reason to be here, and the day would carry on. Eventually they hired on Lise, that little girl you saw behind the front desk today. She started bringing me coffee and a pastry every time. It started to feel like a job, like I was coming into the office and saying good

morning or good afternoon and having a sip of coffee before I pulled out the placard and started hollering. After a while I gave my voice a rest, then my arm, then my legs when Lise let me sit in the main waiting area. Now I don't even bring the placard. I don't say a word. But I still come. I just sit. And watch."

Tara hadn't broken her gaze from the structure before her: irradiated in the oppressive heat of the afternoon, its parking lot and the roadways surrounding it muted, like the gravity of the enormous building was unthinkingly pulling all light and sound into its core.

"If we're not going to get what we want the way we're trying now, how are we going to get it?" Tara asked.

The woman also appraised the building, as if seeing it with new eyes after so many years.

"Maybe if we put our heads together, we could find a way in."

"Maybe we could." Tara turned to the woman, extending her hand. "Tara Schwegler."

"Cassandra Moore," the woman responded.

They shook curtly as fellow soldiers and released.

"I'll find you on Facebook," said Cassandra, abruptly turning to leave.

The conversation ended as precipitously as it began, Tara taking her cue from her new ally. Slamming the car door, she lowered the window and settled into the seat, already thinking ahead to the following hour, day, week, month, and wondering at the same time if all of this would amount to nothing.

As Tara started her car and got the A/C going, Cassandra called out from hers, window still descending.

"I go by Cassie, by the way. I forgot to say."

Tara nodded, and Cassie's car pulled out.

Tara took another sip of the red Melanie had given her after she first told her that she was planning on trying in vitro. Her friend brought the bottle over the same day and recounted how she had missed wine so much when she was pregnant that she put little Dillon on the bottle when he was born just so she could pop one of her own. The need for abstinence and her divorce had informed her decision to leave it at one child.

Melanie had finished retelling the story of her teetotal months as she helped her best friend use up her gift. Tara had waited patiently, knowing that Melanie would return to the topic for which she had sought her assistance: the Lifeblood conundrum. Kintner. Cassie.

“So this chick sounds intense,” said Melanie, her teeth conspicuously stained.

“Oh yeah, she’s for real. In a good way. She’s serious about what she wants. What she has a right to want,” said Tara, scrolling Cassie’s Facebook page on her phone. Long posts, very political. Quotes from blogs she had never heard of – something called Abortion Gang. Angry Black Lady, she had heard of that one – was that Cassie? Mentions of Judith Butler, who Tara initially mistook for Judy Blume, and bell hooks, a phrase that she only realized was the name of a person after she Googled it.

“A little crazy, maybe?” probed Melanie delicately.

“Maybe. A little, yeah.”

“Three fucking years, right?”

“Right, but she has a right to be crazy. You should have heard this guy. *He’s* fucking crazy. Check back with me in three years, I might be too.”

The most recent post, in Cassie’s words: *The system cuts one hand loose and waits to be thanked. When we reach to untie our other hand, the system warns the bound hand not to trust*

the free hand, because it has been free longer. Half-freedom and internal division is what we are left with, because with one free hand we can swing a hammer, but with two, we might be able to swing a bat.

Tara tipped her glass again, shaking her head. “So intense...”

“So what are you guys going to do? I could probably help, although I have Dillon until tomorrow evening, so probably not until after that. Tomorrow *is* Saturday, right? *I’m* not crazy now?” asked Melanie, reaching to check the date on her phone.

“Tomorrow’s Saturday,” Tara confirmed. “We’ll probably march or something tomorrow, if I can figure out what to write on a placard.”

Two whites make a wrong? That seemed to be missing the point.

Perhaps the old standby, *Hey, ho, we won’t go?* Or was that just something you shouted, not wrote? Was it just for labor strikes? Besides, she would have to go at some point, even if Cassie didn’t.

You need more than one color to paint a Picasso? Maybe...

“I suppose I could come tomorrow. Why don’t I just bring Dillon? He could sit in the car seat on the ground next to me, if we do a little protest circle,” said Melanie, frowning at the nearly empty bottle. “Or if you guys went on Sunday, that would definitely work.”

“The clinic’s closed Sunday, so probably not,” said Tara absently, searching for Cassie on Tumblr.

Melanie sat silently on the couch next to her, deep in thought. Tara scrolled through posts.

Melanie started and clapped once.

“I already booked a half-day on Monday next week to go see Dillon’s play! I can come after it’s over. They’re like ten minutes long in kindergarten. They feel longer, though.”

“Time After Time” started playing on Tara’s phone.

“I’ll let you know when we’re thinking of going,” she said as she checked the caller ID:
Lise Granger.

Lise. She answered, bewildered.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Schwegler?”

“Yes?” Had Cassie already asked her to make two cups tomorrow?

Lise’s voice, subdued and halting: “Hi, uh... I want you to know that I understand what you were saying to me. At Lifeblood. Sorry, I run the front desk at Lifeblood.”

“I know, I spoke to your friend, I guess. Cassie Moore.” Tara leaned forward intently.

“What do you mean, you understand what I was saying to you? I told you to fuck off, basically.”

“No, you were right. It’s been something I’ve been thinking about a lot ever since...”

Lise was fading.

“What have you been thinking about?”

“Listen, all I can say is that I’ve worked here for almost three years, and that this clinic is very diligent in maintaining a regular schedule. Everything is orderly and compartmentalized here.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what—”

“Please, just listen,” Lise insisted, clearly outrunning the limits of her resolve. “What I’m saying is that Lifeblood prides itself on running like clockwork. Every week, closed files are archived digitally. Every week, expired samples are discarded. Every week, the ventilation

systems are deep-cleaned so dust doesn't contaminate the samples when they're exposed. It's just like clockwork: every Tuesday evening, I leave the maintenance door on the east side of the building facing the loading dock unlocked so that the air ventilation cleaners can get in for night work, because Lifeblood is so orderly that they change the passwords on external key passes every two weeks, and sometimes the security company we contract with doesn't get the updated passes in time to open the outside doors for the cleaners. So I leave the door unlocked, like clockwork, at 8:00 pm when I leave the office to go home for the night, every Tuesday night, so the cleaners can come in at 8:30 to clean the vents above the refrigeration units on the second floor of the West building. That's how regular we are. I'm just telling you the standards that we hold ourselves to here at Lifeblood. If you can't live with that, then you know what to do. Goodbye."

∞

"What do you mean? She called you too?"

"Yeah, she called me too. An hour ago," answered Cassie.

Tara switched the phone to her other ear. "Then why didn't you call me? It's pretty clear what she was implying."

"I told her to call you. If you let the opportunity pass, or just couldn't see it in front of your face, then I'd know not to try and convince you to go along with me. If you called me, which you did, already halfway to a plan, which you are, then I knew we'd be on the same page."

"Good! We are. On the same page," said Tara as she silently shushed Melanie, mouthing illegibly next to her on the couch. "My car or yours?"

“Neither, at least not anywhere near the clinic. There’s cameras all over. We’ll park mine somewhere off the lot and approach on foot.”

“Right, okay. Do you know how many cameras there are? We might need masks.”

“I know how many tiles are on the ceiling,” said Cassie flatly. “I have a pretty good idea where the cameras are, but that won’t matter. I’ve got some accessories that will help us with the face problem.”

“We need gloves too, for fingerprints.”

Melanie shoved Tara almost off the couch.

“What?!” she cried.

“What’s going on?” asked Cassie’s voice from the floor.

“I’ve got a way to store the samples!” said Melanie.

∞

Tara and Cassie sat in Cassie’s car two blocks from the clinic, the falling sun a little higher than they had hoped for by five minutes after eight. Still, light was fairly low and the area was largely industrial, with a freeway on one side and unused lots behind the loading dock.

They would have been conspicuous if passersby had been present to see their almost matching Betty Boop masks, but it didn’t appear as if any were. The hard plastic mask still in factory white was on Cassie, while a second, spray-painted brown, dug uncomfortably into Tara’s face, the fastening string tight on the back of her head.

“The paint stings my nostrils,” complained Tara.

“It ain’t easy being brown,” replied Cassie dryly. “I thought there might be some poetry in switching them up – for Kintner when he watches the video, not that he’ll know it. Besides, we won’t be wearing them that long, if everything goes to plan.”

“It’s a nice touch. Any advice for my unborn, not-yet-conceived, half-brown child?” asked Tara, lifting the mask to stock up on clean air.

“Yeah: don’t do this,” said Cassie, opening the driver’s side door.

Tara hurriedly repositioned the face on her face, struggling to align her eyes with Betty’s so she could find the door handle.

They trotted in tandem across the weedy terrain of an empty lot, hoods covering their hair, the monolith of Lifeblood seeming to retreat from their relentless pursuit across arid, undeveloped land.

As the jog across the interstice between Cassie’s car and the austere geometry of the clinic dragged long, Cassie checked the time on her phone. They had planned to evacuate by 8:20, but that already seemed unlikely to Tara.

The large plastic coolers clutched by each of them bumped against hips and thighs as they finally approached the loading dock. Shimmers from the distant city center wavered in Tara’s burning eyes. She flinched as the twinkling backdrop abruptly disappeared in the glare of the floodlights above the loading bay doors, which she hoped had activated to counter the coming dark, and not in response to infiltrators as the two black-clad Boops instinctively feared.

Recovering, Cassie held the knob on the maintenance door and pointed her cartoon face with incongruously hard eyes at Tara.

“Watch this,” said Cassie as she turned the knob, the door swinging wide. “Legal...”

Cassie stepped across the threshold.

“...Not legal.”

“Do you feel different?” asked Tara.

“From what? Get in here.”

Tara discovered, huffing along empty hallways behind Cassie's hungry athleticism, that illegal air went in electric and left the head lighter when exhaled, and she was pretty sure it had nothing to do with the spray paint. The tessellated, only partially lit ceiling flickered by in vibratory, eye-holed bursts, Tara too delirious with adrenaline to look at signs or marked doorways, though Cassie was navigating like she had spent all of her time protesting on the off-limits second floor instead of watching sunlight move across lobby furniture for three years.

Tara nearly lost her feet as Cassie aborted her passage down one half-lit hallway and backtracked past her before hanging a right at the point of her initial deviation. By the time Tara cleared the entrance to the faulty corridor and caught sight of Cassie's retreating back again, it had nearly reached a set of automated glass doors behind which the ceiling lights were augmented by a vast floor-level fluorescence.

Tara did her best imitation of a 100-yard dash, which had never been notable and, encumbered by paint fumes and a bulky cooler and benumbed legs still acclimating to the transgressive altitude on the second floor of Lifeblood, would not impress any of the spectators who would likely be watching replays from all angles within an hour of their escape, should it occur. She nearly crashed through the sliding doors, they opening more laboriously and she braking less effectively than she anticipated. When the gap had wheezed just wide enough to accommodate the distance between the extremities of belly and ass, Tara was through sideways and briefly flattered as the cooler jammed and required another brief delay before it would fit, which in turn tamed her vanity with a nearly vomitous, panicky constriction vising her entire body as the seconds dropped like bombs.

Her mind had no time to fully contemplate reasoned queries like whether security might arrive sooner than the ventilation cleaners, or whether the cleaners themselves might alter their schedule for any reason. She could only fearfully watch for human shapes emerging from around corners or coalescing in doorways.

Only Cassie's still, white-masked face, angled upward and resplendent in the cold luminescence of the six-foot-tall refrigeration units, was able to decelerate Tara's heart until its palpitations were no longer outrunning the rest of her. Tara's brown Betty joined Cassie's white on the reflective glass, behind which dozens, hundreds of innocuous, red-capped vials waited for them, almost too many to fit on the shelves, each partially wrapped in incomprehensible labelling, each containing all of the shots they would need to blend the best the world had with the best they had.

"Negroid," Cassie read from the label atop the fridge in front of her.

"That's me," said Tara. "You too?"

"Yeah. My mom's still alive. Might as well make her grandbaby as familiar to look at as possible."

"Okay, that simplifies it. Let's just empty this one."

Cassie popped the lid on her cooler.

"Save as many as you can."

∞

The Nestlé Drumstick hummed at them in the otherwise dim basement of Melanie's townhouse. Its nutted chocolate exterior was partially bitten away to reveal a white interior in a chummily ingratiating visual pun of the motivation behind its off-off-brand cargo. Tara stood in silent observance of the freezer with her fellow radicals, new and seasoned.

A meter and a half wide and half as deep with dual, overlapping sliding display lids, the space inside comfortably held all of their rescued sperm without necessitating the removal of Melanie's copious pierogis and ice cream buckets, one of which, a Dreyer's Slow Churned Carmel Delight, was being passed between them. Tara had it for the moment, and Cassie and Melanie waited with licked spoons.

Melanie didn't conceal her amazement as she filled the silence of Tara's gluttony and Cassie's taciturn fulfilment:

"You guys are fucking amazing," she raved. "Seriously, I can't believe you did it! I knew you would, just to be clear, but wow. I'm just glad I could contribute, in a modest way."

"Tell me again why you have this. Not that I'm not appreciative," clarified Cassie, her eyes still glazed with the dopamine of their escape from the clinic, during which the cleaning vans had arrived within distant eyeshot as they were nearly finished their return trip across the empty lot.

"Dillon's preschool put it up for auction when their budget was cut almost in half. Another mom and I went at it for a while, but I wasn't leaving without this baby," answered Melanie proudly, as if showing off a restored muscle car. "Dillon loves it a little too much, though. He thinks he can take ice cream as he pleases from coolers in convenience stores now."

"I guess we'd be a bad example to him," remarked Cassie through a mordant smile.

Tara glanced at Cassie with the spoon still in her mouth, surprised and somewhat tickled. Melanie raised her hands, retreating from the faux pas.

"No, no – this is totally different. This is for a good cause. I'd be proud of him if he took a stand like this. I mean, maybe not the breaking and entering part, because I'm his mom and I'd be so worried, *blah blah*, but something like what I'm doing."

“Every revolution needs a freezer,” said Tara, mouth full.

“Melanie, kidding aside, it *is* important what you’re doing,” said Cassie carefully. “You realize that you’re receiving stolen goods, right? You’re in this all the way, just like us. Are you okay with that, or should we find a new home for them? We wouldn’t think any less of you. Tell her, Tara.”

“You’re awesome forever, Mel.”

“See?” said Cassie.

Melanie raised her hands again to stop them.

“Guys, I’m honestly touched by your concern for my wellbeing, but I’m in this. It means a lot to me too. Seeing the way Tara looked and sounded on the phone with you, Cassie – I haven’t seen her that way in a long time,” said Melanie, tearing. “It made me realize that we had lost some of our ability to challenge each other in our friendship over the years. It made me realize that I wasn’t challenging myself anymore. The way we used to when we were, I don’t know – younger.”

Tara nodded, her eyes glistening also.

“That’s why I’m doing this, and that’s why Dillon is getting a baby brother or sister out of this. I’m all the way with you guys. I’m all the way in.”

Cassie looked to Tara, who was already approaching, and she could barely finish her exhortation to “bring it in, bitches” before the three of them had intertwined their limbs and locked together in Melanie’s sparsely furnished basement, foreheads meeting and forming a gear that, though motionless now in its sororal fervor and determination, was positioned to begin an inexorable collective turn. Some part of the social machinery would shift, however localized or

small, and release the barest portion of change into the system, no matter how the system lurched or thrashed in protest.

“I think we need to turn down the dial on this thing.” Cassie’s voice was muffled against Melanie’s shoulder. “We don’t want the little guys to be frozen solid.”

“Oh shit, you’re right,” said Tara, glancing at the freezer. “Should we Google that?”

Tara and Cass separated and pulled out their phones.

“All my ice cream’s going to melt,” muttered Melanie to herself.

∞

Tara stood alone in her bathroom, in one hand a lubricated syringe with the needle removed – one of dozens she and Cassie had purchased and modified between receiving the surreptitious call from Lise and carrying out their incursion. She paced in front of the vanity countertop and the now-room-temperature vial it held. Google had told her all it could about making her baby and had left the rest in her hands, terrifyingly. She had hoped to drowse her way through this part after the break-and-enter, but it suddenly didn’t feel so easy, even if it benefited from the comparison.

The process seemed to her relatively simple, but there it was, nonetheless: she needed to put what was in the vial into her. This sort of thing had usually been done for her, and in more organic fashion, though not in pursuit of the outcome she now sought. She felt a surprising squeamishness about insertion that recalled her early teens in a way she hadn’t expected.

After vacuuming a good portion of the semen from the vial into the syringe, she stood stupidly in front of the mirror, realizing that she hadn’t looked up the optimal body position for conception. She thought about calling Cassie, who needed to wait more than a week for her window but would assuredly know the answer, as she always seemed to. Of course, she could

ask Melanie also, who was experienced with this sort of thing. But she decided that this needed to rest on her alone, if only to set a precedent for the childrearing to follow.

Glancing around her bathroom, she hit upon an inspiration.

Laying her body across the width of her bathtub, she folded herself in half, her neck and shoulders bunched against one side, her spine flowing across the valley floor and rushing up the opposite side, her hips and butt raised as high as she could get them and anchored against the porcelain, her splayed legs spilling over the edge in a spouting torrent to dangle in the air. Her chin doubled in its compression, and she audibly harrumphed with the effort of getting the syringe positioned above her skyward opening. She made herself laugh by imagining it as a stubbly volcano.

Girding herself, she inserted slowly and tentatively, in spite of the syringe's relative slenderness, and when she felt it was as close as she could get it to her cervix, she dropped the plunger, prudently at first, then more forcefully, wanting to cover the distance and make a point to her ovum to accept what she was giving it. When the body of the syringe was empty, she removed it and laid it on the floor of the tub and waited. She wondered how long she was supposed to wait. As long as her spine would allow, she decided.

She studied her thighs in front of her face: their smoothness at first, then their tiny pores and bumps and textural anomalies. She let her eyes roam the ceiling, the only surface in the bathroom besides her own that she could face comfortably, and thankfully one not exhausted by previous scrutiny, as her skin was. She found the same pores and anomalies there.

Her mind drifted to the possibility that, at that moment, or whenever it was supposed to happen, gametes were meeting and fusing, forming in their banality and wondrous power a dream that would slowly actualize inside her.

She hesitantly allowed herself to acknowledge that it might be happening at that moment, her feet wiggling stiffness away, her hands folded on her folded stomach, her eyes finding new corners to wander.

∞

Within three weeks, Tara and Cassie each knew that their first try didn't take.

Within four, Melanie had excitedly bleated her pregnancy to Tara over the phone, an hour earlier than she normally got up for work. The two of them screamed for a minute, but it felt expected and artificial to some part of Tara, appropriately so given the method of conception, but also due to the fact that they had done it once before in almost exactly the same way, along with billions of other people in the same circumstances.

Later, she brushed her teeth and grimaced at her embellishment and disingenuousness, even as she was salved by her genuine excitement for Melanie. She had contributed to the pregnancy in no small way, and had let Melanie know it on the phone when she referred to herself as the baby's stepfather.

Her next call was to Cassie coordinating a visit to Mel's to retrieve another vial, and to down a glass of wine or two. Even errands and social calls became meticulously planned operations between them. Tara wondered if it was an aftershock from the break-in, a variation on PTSD.

Maybe they wouldn't take off their invisible fatigues until their pregnancies took hold, which of course was the true end of their mission. Maybe they wouldn't really escape the clinic until the moment of conception. Maybe they were still running across that expanding, desolate lot, cleaning vans on their heels.

After work and a rushed supper at home, Tara drove over to Melanie's place. She saw Cassie's car already in the driveway next to a car she didn't recognize. Letting herself in, she heard voices – more than two – in the basement. Descending the stairs, she saw Cassie and Mel in the glow of the Nestlé freezer. Another woman stood between them. They all turned when they heard her approaching.

Lise stood between her co-conspirators, and Tara's surprise was immediately tempered by the fact that the pale, underfed girl certainly qualified as belonging. She didn't appreciate being the last to know, though.

"It was a surprise to Melanie too," said Cassie before Tara could say anything. "She called me last night. Maybe I should have run it by you guys, but I thought she earned it, so I didn't want to risk a vote."

Tara nodded, still not speaking. She looked to Lise.

Lise acknowledged Tara's expectant silence in her demure way, looking to Cassie for confidence before speaking:

"I was going to quit the day after the... The robbery? – sorry – but I thought that would draw suspicion to myself and then to all of you, so I stayed on. Then I was going to quit after two weeks, say I didn't feel safe working there, but I kept learning more from Dr. Kintner about what the police were telling him about evidence they had collected, what they had seen in surveillance videos, stuff like that. So I decided to stay on at the clinic longer, like a mole, which I already sort of was."

"And now?" asked Tara.

“And now I want to leave the clinic in another way. I want to keep my job there just long enough to go on maternity leave, and then return with a mixed baby and a resignation notice.

Then he’ll know that he can’t hold back progress any longer, even from his own staff.”

“A baby won’t take your guilty conscience out with it.”

“But maybe it will prove that I have one.”

Tara shook her head over and over and didn’t see Cassie coming until she was right in front of her, taking her shoulders gently, pleadingly. She spoke quietly, just above a whisper, so that not even Melanie and Lise could hear.

“I know what you’re thinking, but we can’t take this away from her like he did from us. We can’t be gatekeepers like that. That’s not why we did this, is it? Her reasons might be a little fucked up, but mine might be too, Mel’s might be too. I still don’t quite know why you’re doing this, but that doesn’t mean I’ll stand in your way. Are you prepared to stand in hers?”

Tara looked past Cassie’s shoulder to Lise.

“I really hope this makes you feel better, but if it doesn’t, don’t take the kid down with you,” she said.

Cassie let go of her shoulders, lowering her face with relief.

Tara saw Lise smile for the first time.

∞

Tara made breakfast, her stomach settled and happy, unperturbed, eager for eggs and toast.

0 for 2.

∞

When her meeting with radio executives mulling how to space their ad blocks ended earlier than expected, Tara decided to swing by Melanie's for her third dose a few days earlier than she needed it. It was on the way home from their station, and she was primed to once again take aim at her ovum. Her frustration over the puzzling, stationary elusiveness of the previous two drove her forward. She forgot to call ahead.

When she reached her friend's townhouse, two unfamiliar cars occupied the driveway. She had no right to expect Melanie to be ready for her, but was nevertheless irritated that strangers were present. She would either have to keep driving and come back when the coast was clear, or contrive a non-felonious reason for being there and join the party.

As she pulled a U-turn to parallel park on the street, a sick anxiety built on years of love and fury for Melanie and her weaknesses grew in Tara's stomach, causing her to doubt that any cover story would be necessary by this point. She felt repelled by the door even as she approached it, even as she decided to enter without knocking – as she often did, to be fair, but would do this time to give her suspicions the most honest assessment possible.

By the time she brushed the front door aside and faced Melanie and her nominal friends and preschool parenting colleagues, introduced to her at a dinner party earlier that year as Sam and Tereza, sitting around tea cups in the upstairs living room, she knew her next task would be deciding how long it would take her to forgive Melanie.

Two of their red-capped vials sat on the table next to the tea cups.

"Tar..." started Melanie, as if caught by her lover in bed with another, but she stopped immediately upon seeing Tara's appalled face.

Standing before the three suburbanites, Tara felt all of the pulsing dominance afforded to her by her new revolutionary character. Her two new co-conspirators, who couldn't be sure that

Tara wasn't prepared to murder them to protect the secret Melanie had offered up with apparent ease, sat in anxious, slightly abashed silence.

Sam took the first plunge: "Tara, we just wanted to put it out there that this is totally on us. We got it out of Melanie about who the daddy was, so to speak, under threat of torture. Not quite, but we were relentless..."

Tereza saw an opening: "And I just wanted to add that we deeply admire what you guys did. So many of us talk about the rights of women and sparking change, but you guys really *did* something. My grandparents are Czech and lived under the Communists for years before they got out, so you being, like, this badass rebel is really inspiring to me..."

Tereza hadn't even finished before Tara was halfway to her. The gym-preserved mom flinched visibly as Tara swiped her vial off the table. She took the one in front of Sam and went back for the still-open door.

"You didn't earn these," she said, holding up the vials as she stormed off.

Tara heard Melanie again, offering a bookending appeal: "Tar..."

The vials rattled in her pocket as she marched away from Mel's, soporific traffic exhaling into surrounding cul-de-sacs. Tara let her contempt for middle-class seclusion and deference fuel her, partly for the reason that she had, since attempting to get pregnant, been mentally experimenting with placing herself and her future child in front of just such a backdrop.

She wondered how the propulsion and raw belief of her radicalism, still in the cradle itself, could lead to such a pacified conclusion. There were other ways to raise a family, but the hardest roads did seem to lead to cul-de-sacs. World wars ended in cul-de-sacs.

Maybe that was what victory looked like: blinking through blood and the punishing blows of the gauntlet only to emerge in a shaded, bulbous terminus in which long rest and a comfortable death waited, the living core of society humming and buzzing faintly, far away.

Melanie caught up to Tara on the front lawn halfway to her car.

“Please let me defend myself,” begged Melanie.

“It was a mistake to let you in on this,” stated Tara. “Cassie made me nervous, and I ran to you to give me the strength to make a stand, and it ballooned into this whole thing while you were sitting next to me. Otherwise—”

“I know, okay? I know you’ve always looked at me like I’m a fuckup, and maybe I am...” Melanie seemed to find herself unable to go beyond agreeing with Tara.

“Why?” asked Tara. “Why couldn’t you just be loyal? Why couldn’t you just be fucking quiet and do your part?”

“Because maybe I didn’t want to be quiet and just dispense cum whenever you guys drop by,” said Melanie. “I sat at home while you guys became heroes. I got pregnant without even trying because that’s what I’m good at, I guess.”

“These are all your choices, Mel!”

“I know,” Melanie affirmed. “But I had a chance to be something more in their eyes. I got to be fucking cool, for once.”

“You already were cool,” said Tara, turning to leave. “Not anymore, not after this. We didn’t do this to start a trend or impress soccer moms. We didn’t do it for them.”

“Who did we do it for, then?” demanded Melanie, raising her arms. “Just ourselves? Just you? They believe in your cause, they want to participate. They want their own revolution babies.”

Tara didn't answer as she got in the car and turned the ignition. She lurched to a stop almost immediately, the window falling.

"Did you give them any?" she shouted to Melanie as she marched towards Sam and Tereza, the two of them hovering in the doorway.

Melanie answered without looking back: "They were here for their second try."

Tara pulled out, causing a hatchback to brake hard, the other driver too stultified and cowardly to give her the honk she deserved. She drove towards Cassie's to give her one of the vials in her pocket.

∞

Cassie's voice:

"Lise hit the bullseye. She just called me. I know how you feel about it, but it's another one for the revolution. You? I'm sorry to hear that, I am. Round four for me too. We'll make it."

∞

Cassie had implored her to let it go with Melanie so that they could go together for their fourth vials, and to reaffirm the collective. She had stood between Tara and Melanie, looking from one to the other before gesturing to Mel to ensure that she extended her arms first.

Melanie did, leaving them hovering uncertainly in front of her as Tara considered them.

It was left to Tara to interlock with her friend, her comrade. The moment would have come of her volition soon enough, but it had been fast-tracked by the need for unit cohesion. She understood, and missed Mel anyway. She heard Mel crying quietly on her shoulder; she let her decide when to break.

After hugging it out, they went to the basement and popped the suction seal on the freezer, lifting the Drumstick away from the dwindling seed of their insurgency.

Tara and Cassie reached inside.

∞

The friendship was given its final resuscitative jolt when Tara got pregnant on her fourth try. She and Melanie dutifully squealed as before, the act even hollower the third time. Though her feelings on her auto-impregnation were real and complex enough to warrant some kind of bellow or yawp, she would have preferred to do so in a context outside the socially ordained one they had chosen to pay homage to, again.

Just more than a week later, Cassie would confirm the failure of her fourth attempt. She conveyed this news in a level voice to Tara, who listened in the doorway of her bathroom, the confinement of which she felt compelled to seek upon hearing the thrice compounded crush of disappointment in her friend and ally's voice.

Maybe she had marched in a circle for too long, wondered Cassie. Or maybe she had been born not to give birth, and she had needed until now to face the discovery of her physical incapacity for this particular biological function. Or maybe Kintner had been right, and nature was conforming to his opinion that the admixture of human elements should not become more diverse and unsettled than it already was in her.

Tara told her no, that the opposite was true, that nature was slowly rejecting the moderated inbreeding of intra-racial insemination through a slow degradation of the most translucent and featureless of the species, and biracial people like her were always more beautiful because their genes were healthier and their minds more diverse. This only made Cassie sadder, she said without saying. She offered reassurances to Tara before hanging up.

Two weeks of trying to convince Cassie to come over to Melanie's went by. It went without saying that they couldn't share wine with her, but she could go home with another bullet. Any target worth four shots was surely worth five. Tara received only noncommittal replies.

∞

After hanging up with Cassie with no firm plans to visit the freezer, Tara was nearly ready to leave for work when someone knocked on her door.

She was unable to reconcile the dull terror of seeing the police on her front step with reality until long after their conversation was over.

They stood patiently in her kitchen, almost apologetically, as she sat by accident.

She would have to accompany them to the station for booking.

She would be allowed to contact her family and a lawyer.

She would not have to accomplish this in a single call, as television had led her to believe.

They would not be handcuffing her, and she could drive behind them to the station.

She would likely be released on recognizance.

She would not be going to work today.

∞

When Tara was back in her bed – nearly a full 24 hours after she had walked stiffly out of her apartment while an officer politely waited for her to lock the door so he could follow her down the stairs of her building; nearly 22 hours after her parents and sister had arrived at the station; nearly 16 hours after the lawyer they had secured for her was able to meet with them; and nearly 4 hours after she had driven away from her mother's house with robotic precision –

she had only time to seal the lids of her eyes, against their will in spite of the day, before her phone rang. She still recognized the number.

“Hello,” she said without intending to.

“You see where this has brought us?”

The silence between them lasted almost a full minute.

“I have been asking myself over and over if I have been wrong all of these years,”

Kintner finally continued. “Have you had the decency to ask yourself the same question?”

“There’s no avoiding the future,” she replied, rolling onto her back, too exhausted to react in any way to the shock of his voice.

“There’s also no avoiding yourself,” he responded, his voice quavering oddly. “Your tribe.”

“What does that mean?” she asked sleepily.

“You took the wrong vials,” he said. “One of the Caucasoid refrigerators was under repair, so we doubled up in one of the Negroid units. White samples mingling with black.”

Tara’s skin tingled.

“Blacks to the back, whites in front,” he continued. “Last in, first out. You didn’t leave with the samples you came for. I thought it was only fair to tell you.”

She watched from the pool of her hair as the ceiling passed over her. She listened to Kintner listening to her breathing.

“Anyone who belonged in those fridges could have read the individual labels,” he said, almost apologetically, she thought. “But you couldn’t, and it all circled back on itself, as it always does.”

Tara could only speak in the meter of an automaton: “It changes nothing about what we did, or where this will lead you.”

“No, I suppose not.” His voice was wan and aimless. “My doors are crashing in. I’m closing up shop, you’ll be happy to know. My position will be misunderstood, of course. And maybe I am the villain. I never would have expected that.”

Tara heard him set a glass down.

“I’ve gone too far in a single direction,” he said. “I don’t have enough energy to turn around.”

“Good night, doctor,” she whispered.

“I destroyed all of it,” he said before she could end the call. “Black and white and brown. I unplugged everything and let it all putrefy. I don’t owe you that knowledge, but I’m offering it. Better that than...”

“...Than what?” she asked.

After a long pause: “I don’t want you to think that I take pleasure in any of—”

Tara hung up, her eyes never breaking from the colors dancing and suffusing over the faint white of the ceiling above her.

∞

Tara, Cassie and Melanie took to conferencing in Mel’s living room while Dillon played on the floor or watched television, trading notes on the advice their lawyers were giving them. They were all equally pessimistic about their chances of beating the charge of receiving stolen property, although Tara and Cassie still had hope that they could avoid a break-and-enter conviction.

Tara also had them firmly onboard for a lawsuit against Kintner, though her lawyer had expressed far greater skepticism when she ran the idea by him in his office early in their pretrial prep.

“There is no lawsuit yet, and I think we should keep it that way until after the trial,” her lawyer, whose doughy face belied a fast pragmatism, had said. “We have a tremendous amount to focus on as it is: coordinating with multiple co-defendants, Tereza Morávek’s testimony against us, the possibility that Samantha Kagan might join her...”

“The trial and the lawsuit are the same thing, though. Flipsides of the same coin,” Tara had said emphatically.

“The standards of evidence are not the same between criminal and civil trials.”

“Right, so let’s try to win one of them at least! They probably have us on the stolen goods complaint, let’s face it. We had the jizz, we weren’t supposed to have the jizz. The law doesn’t care that Kintner was a piece of shit. But a civil jury might side with me on two issues: first, racial discrimination, for denying me the sample I selected on the basis of race and for destroying all of his samples to prevent miscegenation; and second, fraud, for mislabeling the ethnicity of his samples.”

“You want to sue Kintner because you stole the wrong sperm!” He actually laughed. “You do keep me on the edge of my seat, Tara. He didn’t administer his sperm to you incorrectly, or at all, so I don’t see how you could collect on that claim.”

“This isn’t about collecting a claim. I’ll sue for a dollar. It’s the principle. And please don’t refer to it as *his* sperm. You’re ruining it for me.”

“Legally it is his. But suing because you had a white baby when you didn’t want to isn’t going to play well with some jurors.”

Dillon laughed at an animated dog on the television. Cassie drank liberally from a wineglass, appearing blankly fascinated by the cartoon as Tara and Mel mooned over her emptying glass.

“I’m still so angry they took the freezer away with the sperm. Like, I paid a lot for that thing,” said Melanie, her empty hands fidgeting. “And Dillon misses it.”

“You’ll get it back if we’re acquitted,” replied Tara.

“My lawyer said if Lise doesn’t testify and they don’t find the Betty masks, we have a chance of dodging the heavier charges,” Cassie said, seemingly unmoved by her freedom or its revocation.

“You said you burned the masks, right?” asked Tara.

“Burned them side-by-side. It was kind of poetic.”

“Good. Okay, I’m going to keep pressing my lawyer on whether pre-conceptual ethnic genocide is a thing you can sue for. Destroying sperm seems like a crime when it’s done for racist reasons, right? In civil court, at least?”

“Maybe it could fall under the pain and suffering thing?” asked Melanie, frowning.

“That is sort of a catchall,” agreed Tara. “Although sperm don’t have nerve endings, so pain and suffering might be a technicality we’d lose on.”

When Cassie’s car had driven out of view, Melanie sighed. “There were all of these conversations that I planned to have with Dillon, explaining about skin and people who have skin with a different color than his and what skin means to different people and why his brother or sister would have different skin than him and I, and now that I don’t need to say any of it, it’s kind of sad. Things that will never be said...”

“Maybe he’ll still hear the message somehow,” said Tara. “Like voices in another room.”

“You’re starting to talk like Cassie,” said Melanie with an inflection Tara couldn’t place, but that disturbed her in some indefinite way. “Maybe it’ll be easier for Dillon not to have those conversations, who knows?”

For the briefest moment, Tara felt more distant from Melanie than she had in a long time, though they stood elbow against elbow.

“It always is,” Tara said.

∞

“Lise miscarried. She just called me. The stress was too much. And she couldn’t make herself eat a thing, so it was going to happen.”

∞

“Dr. Perry Kintner, the owner and chief executive of the fertility clinic at the center of this controversial story, offered his reasons for declining to offer treatment across racial lines when we visited him at his office, which has since closed for business.”

Kintner’s angularity cut across the screen.

“These women have been terribly irresponsible, and are contributing to the increasingly diffuse and decentered values in this part of the world, an identity crisis that has gone from cultural accoutrements like music and clothing down to our individual cells. They have used their vaginas as bullhorns to blare a pernicious political message to the detriment of our nation. We are becoming indistinguishable, indefinite, abstracted, blurred, and will soon cease to exist altogether. We are doomed.”

∞

Brown Betty spoke into the webcam in her signature baby talk: “Ooh, don’t you keep humanity divided, you big bully!”

White Betty followed a jarring jump cut: “Yeah, miscegenation sure is swell, isn’t that right, Brown Betty?”

Cut back to Brown Betty: “You said it, White Betty! *Boop-oop-a-doop!*”

They started warbling lines from “Baby Be Good” together in split screen.

Tara closed the anonymous video link Cassie had sent her and immediately tried calling her. She sat down with relief when Cassie picked up the phone.

∞

“I thought you said you burned them?” whispered Tara, looking over her shoulder at the ceaseless perambulation of the courthouse lobby for any tilted ears. “Are you trying to sink us after we’ve gone this far? We actually have a chance with this thing.”

The afternoon after viewing the video, Tara and Cassie were finally able to commune outside the courtroom after they had adjourned for the day. Tara’s belly was pushing towards peak protrusion.

“I did burn them. I made the video just before. Those faces meant too much to our efforts to just hide them away or destroy them without keeping a record,” said Cassie. “If they find it online and trace it back to me, I’ll take the rap. I would never hurt you with something I did.”

“Why even do that? I’m so mad at you for taking a chance with your freedom.”

“I’ll always be free. So will you. You’ve got the baby on the way, your own child of the rebellion. Not that I’m asking, but you never have said why you wanted it and why you went in with me to get it. Just because you don’t need a reason to want a brown baby doesn’t mean that you don’t have a reason. Even if *this* brown baby is going to be white when it’s all said and done. But whatever our reasons are, you have the baby and I don’t. And I’m at peace with that, I can

live with that. But that also means I find my children where I can, and my children are changed minds.”

Tara peered out the front door of the courthouse at the teeming mass of protesters shrilly advocating for every conceivable side of their case, thrashing among and over and against each other and the reporters scattered among them.

Cassie looked at everything and nothing together. “Every one of them is precious to me.”

Tara put her arm around Cassie’s shoulders. They stood together and watched the people reach out to them with their voices through impervious granite archways.

Cassie’s lawyer, a soft-featured woman with a hard voice, approached them and spoke: “Are you ladies ready? We’ll lead the way and take the hit for you. As always, let us speak to reporters.”

Tara’s lawyer smiled his affirmation that this was the best exit strategy. They had become accustomed to the hubbub, but the commute from the front door to their waiting car was becoming exponentially more fraught as coverage of their trial intensified.

Tara girded herself. Her lawyer nodded the signal to Cassie’s, and the four of them pressed out into the open air. Tara tried to stay close to Cassie’s back as they followed their attorneys in single file.

They immediately saw Lise, pale and drawn, being led by her attorney through the crowd a few paces ahead of them, which might as well have been a few city blocks, considering the pulsing density of the throng.

“Cassie!” cried Lise, extending her slender hand out to her. “Tara!”

“Lise! Stay strong, sister!” shouted Cassie, raising her fist towards Lise’s fragile fingertips. “The fight is ours! The day is ours!”

Placards surrounded them:

Dont shove brown down our throats, or up our u know what!!

All colors are BEAUTIFUL

We're all white when we're sperm

Where did I leave my keys?

Tara tried to avoid a pants-less woman with a painted rainbow bleeding from between her legs, which were set wide and bowed to approximate the arc of such a meteorological display, each radiant, stratified side descending sloppily to its corresponding sockless foot.

“If the colors aren’t separate, you can’t make a rainbow,” explained the woman, speaking at Tara’s ear as it passed.

A petite female reporter ducked under a security officer’s arm.

“Ms. Schwegler, do you have any comment on the attack on Dr. Perry Kintner?” she shouted.

“What attack?” Tara yelled back.

The reporter fought to keep up with them, weaving between two more officers.

“Acid. About an hour ago, outside his home. Paramedics on the scene say he may not survive the burns in his esophagus. Do you have any comment?”

“Who would do that?”

The reporter dropped to all fours and crawled between the legs of another officer. She stood up again, chasing Tara.

“Suspects detained by witnesses claimed that his fertility treatments and the Holocaustic destruction of the clinic’s sperm stockpile both constituted willful disregard for God’s plan. Thoughts?”

“I have none,” said Tara. “I have none left.”

The crowd shifted and the reporter was knocked down abruptly.

In front of them, a woman tore a placard out of the hands of an elderly man with a shaved head and smashed it into the ground.

The lawyers and Cassie ducked as unidentified liquid sprayed over them.

Two middle-aged men, both wearing sandals, were locked in a flabby, unskilled combat of attrition prolonged indefinitely by red-faced inertia. The buttocks of one man were exposed as he attempted to escape a headlock.

Somebody banged an arrhythmic drumbeat.

Cassie reached her hand back without looking and locked it onto Tara’s, who grasped hers in turn. The thrum of the crowd slowly faded and dropped. Tara stared wide-eyed as Cassie pulled her onward.

A hush enveloped their caravan as it migrated through skin and cartilage, battered by the implied bellows of silent, opened mouths and blows of still, raised fists.

One horn sounded.

Silence.

Then:

“Mom?”

The only voice she could hear, though she couldn’t place its source.

“Mom? I’m right here.”

Tara looked down at her hand, which was now held by a smaller but stronger hand, a child’s hand with pale skin.

“Let’s go for a walk.”

Looking ahead, she saw Cassie and the lawyers and Lise disappearing in the distance. Peering back over her shoulder, she watched as Melanie, late to leave and hiding her face with a handbag, rushed between uniformed backs and overtook Tara without seeing her.

Melanie dragged Dillon behind her, his short legs barely able to keep up. He smiled at Tara as they passed, chocolate ice cream smeared on his face.

Tara looked to her own child in front of her, a child whose face she could not discern and whose sex she could not determine, because neither existed to her yet, but whose pale skin she could see, because she knew it to be developing inside her own pale-skinned body.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi, Mom,” said the child. “Mom, do you love me?”

“Of course I love you.” Tara knew she said it, but didn’t hear herself say it, heard only her own breath in her ears. “I’ll always love you.”

“Do you still love me even though I’m different than you wanted me to be?”

“I could never imagine you being any different than you are. I love every bit of you.”

“My hair?”

“Yes. I love your soft, precious hair, sweetie.”

“My hand?”

“Yes, sweetie, you have the cutest little hand in the whole world.”

“The things I say?”

“Yes, sweetie, and I’m so happy to hear you say them.”

“My skin?”

Tara studied the blue-veined hand holding hers.

Her own was gripped purple, ruddy in the heat of packed flesh, cracking with age and dehydration in the airless air of ancient stone corridors in which voices argued about privately owned subhuman life and the arbitrary shades and protrusions and bulbs and flaps and lines and coils it would produce on and in bodies when mixed with the magic, vitalizing broth at the center of hers, and how such tiny physical variations could determine identity and worth and possibility in a pattern-seeking, value-creating, terribly confused mind, as they all were.

“Mom? Do you love my skin even though it isn’t what you wanted?”

She had wanted to make her pregnancy an act of love, not of purity, even if no love and only struggle went into its conception. She had wanted to pull people of many skins to her body, integrate them into the child inside, shelter them, heal them. But now she would have to wait to discover if her child would find its colour in her struggle, if not in her body. She had to decide what kind of act her pregnancy would be.

Tara turned her free palm to her face, saw it sweat in the sun. She saw sweat on the tiny hand clasping the captive fingers on her other hand.

It could only be an act of love, she decided. But what kind of love would it be now?

“Mom?”

How much would they resemble each other? Too much?

“Do you still love me?”

How much of her would just happen all over again?

“Mom...?”

She finally answered in the only way she could.

“Yes.”

WISDOM

Craig's body stretched over a tango pink chair – the color identified by a label on the back of the headrest, which he had tried and failed to adjust – that he believed was intended to be ergonomic. His feet were higher than his head, which had settled into a padded depression that arched his neck and offered his mouth sacrificially upward.

Mandible was held as far from maxilla as possible by muscles and tendons that were tiring already, causing his mouth to set in an unseemly, protracted yawn. His lips were pulled back and held in place by a plastic guard, the exposed teeth complemented by a translucent tube that snaked into his mouth, sucking saliva and blood from under his tongue and running in the background as white noise.

Present to judge his ungainly appearance was a man (the dentist), possibly in his late thirties, and a woman (the hygienist), possibly in her early thirties. The man was attempting to wrench a tooth from Craig's lower jaw with the aid of thick forceps.

The dentist spoke with a slight accent that Craig couldn't place in spite of his education. Pale, cherubic features offered little in the way of clues; Russian, Israeli, and Afrikaans all seemed equally plausible, somehow. Craig listened to the man's consonants and idly speculated.

The hygienist leaned in to observe the violence. She had no accent – or, rather, she had Craig's – and spoke in a level tone that seemed meant to be reassuring. However, Craig had swallowed enough of his own blood, in spite of the tube's gurgling efforts, to realize that she would be largely unaffected by his accumulation of injuries. His creeping suspicion that she might never be moved by his flesh or its disruption annulled her attempts to comfort him.

Was that her breast?

It had rested lightly against Craig's pate just for a moment when she applied a cotton swab to what was undoubtedly some geyser of blood or unintentionally sheared side of gum tissue.

There it was again! He wondered if this had been intentional, or if female dentists and hygienists simply settled into a comfortable unawareness in careers spent with chests hovering over and abreast of the heads of the supine and temporarily immobilized.

If it was intentional, a conceit that privately tantalized and commensurately shamed him, then he had to consider whether her body had responded to his touch as his did hers. It was more likely that he was indulging a narcissistic yearning for a secret, nonverbal communication from a woman to him, in circumstances he knew to be in no way befitting flirtation. His mouth would by now resemble the final, gory conclusion of reproductive sex more than the clean, presentable, likely fictitious beginnings of the coupling that he had somehow conjured, to his mild guilt and embarrassment. He couldn't conceive how his thin-lipped, Munchian scream could be attractive to her. Perhaps from her elevated angle...

Before he could land on an assumption about her motives plausible enough to resuscitate his momentary titillation, Craig was distracted by the taste of his own blood again.

"And close," the woman instructed, tempering the curtness of her command with the extraneous "and."

"[*Okay,*]" he attempted to say, but could only manage a glottal non-word.

Before following the hygienist's instructions, Craig first had to wait until the dentist was able to shake himself from the task at hand and impatiently remove the forceps. He stared into the middle distance while his hygienist did her work.

Craig's lips met and formed a seal around the translucent tube. The gurgling became a high, muffled hiss, turning the inside of his mouth into a bloodless vacuum. He waited for his skull to collapse in on itself.

"And open," the hygienist said just in time.

Against his own inclination and that of the vacuum, he forced his mouth open, the air rushing to fill the space before his head imploded.

"[*Okay,*]" he attempted to say again, this time with even less purpose.

The hygienist removed her breast from its resting place next to his nascent bald spot, of which he had only recently become aware, and the dentist snapped back into action, putting the forceps back into Craig's mouth to attack his face with renewed vigor.

Some thirty minutes earlier, Craig had been attempting to read a *Golf Digest* that would have been a three-month-old issue of *Vanity Fair* had the cover of the latter not been splashed with a sexually provocative image that Craig believed would have given the probable septuagenarian across from him in the waiting room the wrong idea. He thought of the golf magazine now, trying to use it to distract from the blood and the wrenching motion, which was reaching a force and pitch that threatened to break off his mandible like a thin branch in a stiff breeze. However, he could only get to what he remembered as Number 4 on the "75 Best Golf Resorts" list before the boredom became less bearable than the painless destruction of his skull.

If only he had braved the elderly woman's withering glare, he could have at least stocked up on pretentious implied nudity, always in the form of a celebrity tableau vivant (could it be defined as such when photographed? – a photograph of a "living picture" seemed like a redundancy and a paradox simultaneously) employing effects like bizarre makeup and blank, disaffected stares to justify the base stimulation provided by partially unclothed bodies to an

upper-middlebrow readership, or so Craig maintained to himself as he numbly tongued the shredded gristle clinging to the molar roots that were still determinedly fused to his jawbone.

“Very stubborn,” the dentist grunted.

They were twenty minutes into the appointment and still on the first of four third molars targeted for extraction. Craig could already tell that the early stages of frustration were long past setting in for the dentist. Perhaps he hadn’t expected such resistance, or wasn’t used to it. The air of precision and delicacy that the dentist had begun the procedure with had steadily fallen away as the first tooth refused to concede a fraction of its rooting, or even placate him with a wiggle.

Craig had noticed that as time passed with no progress on removing the tooth, the percentage of the dentist’s body actively involved in wrenching it loose increased in a gradual wave: hand and wrist were joined by forearm, with biceps and shoulder jumping in, followed by chest and abdominals, until finally the whole band was back together, the dentist on his feet, knees cracked, two-handing the forceps and rocking his full weight against the unassuming icon of intransigence in Craig’s face.

Craig felt oddly embarrassed that his tooth wasn’t cooperating, and was consumed by a need to apologize for it as one would for a drunken, belligerent spouse at a dinner party. This sensation was only imagined, of course, because he, of course, had no spouse, not since his five-and-a-half month cohabitation with Gwenn had ended, more acridly than acrimoniously. But then, he couldn’t hold on to much of anything, as he soon would no longer have his teeth either, or at least those targeted four: the so-called “wisdom” teeth.

The term must have been invented by generations old and earthy enough to equate pain with wisdom. From his perspective, pain made people stupid, closed their minds and skewed their humors. But then, what had Craig’s painless existence, including this very, bloody moment,

given him but sterile anonymity and a fine, anesthetic haze? Nothing hurt on him, or in him, so nothing was really lost, or could be. How could it if he didn't notice its absence, if the hole it left behind didn't hurt?

Observing the dentist's unblinking effort and the hygienist's impassivity, Craig wondered how he could dissociate himself from his own teeth and their irksome refusal to do so from him. He wanted to endear himself to the dentist and the hygienist again, the way it had been some thirty minutes earlier. He already missed the cordiality of their initial greeting. He tried to smile apologetically up at the dentist, but on his mouth, it came across as more of an agonized wince.

"Are you feeling any discomfort?" asked the hygienist.

"Very stubborn," the dentist mumbled to himself.

"No [*I'm fine,*]" said Craig. "I can't [*feel anything at*] all."

"Okay. You just let me know if you experience any pain, okay?" she said absently, looking at the computer screen displaying his dental chart.

"Hand piece and elevator," said the dentist to the hygienist, ignoring their exchange.

"[*Okay,*]" Craig replied to the hygienist, but she had already swiveled around in her chair, opening a drawer on the desk behind her.

"Number eight round bur," muttered the dentist, peering into Craig's mouth. "This one's surgical."

Surgical? Craig thought, a chill running down his spine and into his bowels. *Number eight? Out of what?*

When the hygienist was facing Craig again, a drill and a small tool resembling a flat-headed screwdriver rested in her hands.

On the television screen mounted in the ceiling above him, a daytime talk show host was celebrating the uplifting story of a young girl horribly scarred after dumping a hot pot of coffee on her face who was now overcoming her injuries to become the face – the phrasing was used quite pointedly – of a new app that would digitally remove scarring, discoloration and other physical traumas in photos to show how the user’s genetics would have developed had they gone unimpeded. This would allow individuals to upload images of themselves to all social media platforms for the rest of their lives totally free of the visible effects of their wounds, but still marked by natural aging and additions like makeup and tattoos.

Users would of course still look the way they really looked in person, but the twentysomething programmer who developed the app was quick to point out that in statistical terms, the face-to-face exposure of the average user with anyone classified as an acquaintance or better at any given time is a fraction of the exposure available on social media. They illustrated the concept using accounts they had set up for the little girl on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, LinkedIn and Tinder. By covering more ground with a healthy appearance, as nature intended before nurture’s cruel hand had intervened, users would be able to leave a greater volume of impressions of health and wellbeing among acquaintances, so much so that the injury almost didn’t happen anymore. Users will, however, still remember what it felt like when their flesh was changed irreversibly.

Gwenn would have hated the girl being used as a pitchman.

“Look at that smile. Good for her,” said the hygienist, taking a moment to look up at the screen.

Craig’s gaping face nodded happily, a guttural noise of agreement escaping.

“What do you think her cut on the app was?” asked the dentist half-jokingly as he tried to find some purchase with the elevator, a wedge-like device he was apparently using to pry the tooth, as with a crowbar, out of Craig.

“You would ask that, wouldn’t you?” replied the hygienist, mock-appalled.

“Fair question,” said the dentist, still playing the bad guy.

Craig was annoyed at the idea that these two might be fucking each other.

The hygienist playfully chastised the dentist:

“The point of the story is appreciating what you have – or something. Don’t ruin it.”

Craig applied her well-meaning platitude to himself. For a short while longer, he would still have these four teeth, all at the back of the line, two of them still partially ensconced in gum tissue, forgotten, left out, even when he was brushing. They steadily accrued cavities, and Craig accrued warnings – they’re beyond saving and need to be removed, sooner than later. Two of them are already dead inside, the nerve gone dark, the pulp soon to be eaten away by ravenous bacteria. Get them removed.

Craig decided he would take the hygienist’s advice to appreciate these teeth in their final moments with him, cancerous remnants of a messy evolutionary history though they were. He pondered if they should really be referred to as “wisdom” teeth. In a way they were the opposite, something a hirsute ancestor of his would have used to grind down a stupid leaf to more comfortably swallow and survive and – do what? Maybe they were wisdom teeth because they reminded modern humans that they were in fact animals, in spite of certain advances – say, in the understanding of the mechanics of the human skull and how it can be dismantled – a humble beginning that they as humans could never learn their way out of. *After all*, he countered with his own platitude, *isn’t wisdom acknowledging how foolish you really are?*

At that moment, there was a highly educated human drilling into the face of another human while a third watched, and before long, one hoped, those monkey bits would be gone, sitting in a dish waiting to be disposed of with the other biohazards that once lived in people, leaving only Craig's appendix as a burden of his bestial past, though he assumed there were many others and would have to look that up.

On the television, the young girl, whose right eye sparkled with burgeoning intelligence and whose left was clouded over, happily swung her bright, floral-patterned shoes as she recounted giving the young app programmer suggestions.

"Did you give him some ideas? I bet you came up with the whole thing, didn't you?" cooed the female host, tongue-in-cheek.

"Yeah, get your cut, sweetie!" shouted the hygienist without looking up from Craig's mouth.

The programmer started to raise his hand to object, glancing off-camera, probably at his lawyer, but the girl made him feel at ease with a heartbreaking but age-appropriately worthless contribution: "I told him I wanted to look pretty."

The audience groaned as if they had been punched in the thyroid. The host leaned in close to the little girl.

"You know what? You are the prettiest little girl I've ever met."

The girl smiled as the audience cheered, shy but obviously animated and suffused with the positive attention, not yet aware how scarce it may in fact become in her lifetime among a superficial and self-interested species. Craig found himself overcome by a fervor, a sincere wish that ten or so years from that day a boy or girl would look past the physical trauma and the

guarded personality that might grow protectively around it and embrace her teenaged self in spite of it all, because of it all.

His mind tentatively began interrogating itself about whether, had their ages matched, he, teenaged Craig, would be the boy to look past it all and stop on what mattered, whether he would be the boy to wrap his arms around her. When he felt the pangs of doubt and guilt for a heart he would never break but never save either, his mind writhed out of its own grip and slithered on.

She'll be fine, he thought. It's condescending to assume anything about how or if she'll suffer. She'll probably have a great life.

"I feel terrible for her. Other kids must be so tough on her," lamented the hygienist.

"Oh, [*I know,*]" Craig replied. He tried to shake his head ruefully, but the dentist physically held it in position.

"Don't move, okay, buddy?" the dentist said, the tenor of his voice more haggard and impatient than his little-league-coach vernacular would suggest.

"[*Okay,*]" replied Craig.

"Don't try to talk either, okay?" said the dentist as he aimed the drill, noticeably larger than any Craig had seen used in previous procedures.

"[*Okay,*]" said Craig again, shame instantly washing over him.

As the drill began screaming in his mouth, Craig sank as comfortably as he could into the pink chair and fell into watching the television screen through the blood mist and enamel dust that hovered in the air before settling on his face and protective glasses. He let himself escape into the familiar rhythms of a story of everyday tragedy and the deafening, overwhelming solicitude thrown at its victim by a studio audience and in the multitudinous anonymity of the Internet, all in an effort to sweep that tragedy out into a roiling sea and drown it in temporary

love from strangers who would dissipate the next hour. It was as noble an undertaking as television and social media were likely to attempt, but Craig couldn't help but question how the little girl would fare when the love tides rolled slowly back from her tiny, landed feet.

Craig wondered idly if the app would give him his wisdom teeth back in photos, assuming the dentist could ever get them out. He decided he would try it out at home.

The pain shot through Craig's face without warning, decimating in an instant the image of the girl and the gnawing emotions and the hopes for her future and the idle curiosity. The pain, emanating from the frayed nerves interwoven among the severely rent and savaged gums on his right maxilla, could not quite be compared to a lightning bolt, though the speed and ferocity with which it travelled from its source and landed on surrounding corporal topography would seem to invite the comparison. Ultimately, the clumsy jigs and wandering jags of a lightning bolt were entirely insufficient to describe the path of geometric efficiency and exquisite purity the pain cut through him. A distress call sourced from the deepest core of his nervous system, it instantly overwhelmed the brain that produced it, and Craig's grasping, agonized mind could only interpret the torturous sensation as a sound – a tone, unwavering and impossibly pitched, infinite in its depth and reach, toning in his ears, in his eyes.

“Herrraaaaaarrrrrrr!” Craig moaned, leaping to rigid attention. *“[Stop! Stop!]”*

The distressed tenor of his voice was such that the dentist was forced to respect it. Or perhaps it was his body, which had previously slackened as it shaded itself under an anesthetic umbrella, now shooting into a kind of heel-digging rigor mortis, too pained to even writhe. Thankfully, modesty and the constraint dictated by social convention prevented his body from screaming or defecating in protest against the torture it was enduring.

Something in Craig's posture compelled the dentist to disengage the drill from the tooth immediately and without complaint, like a father who has dismissively refused to acknowledge his son's stubbed toe only to realize that it has been badly dislocated and is pointing accusatorily up at him from an angle he dare not calculate. Craig couldn't help but moan briefly, with relief as much as anything – the pain was gone when the drill was.

"It hurts? It shouldn't hurt," said the dentist.

"[*It hurts,*]" said Craig, his voice shaking.

"You're telling me it hurts?" the dentist asked again.

"You're experiencing pain?" asked the hygienist.

"[*Hurts,*]" said Craig, struggling to make himself understood. "[*Hurts.*] Hurts!"

"Okay," said the dentist, reluctantly accepting Craig's claim. "The anesthetic must have worn off. Prepare another dose, please."

Craig nodded his gratitude, his mouth smiling dumbly as the hygienist commenced filling a second needle.

"I was planning to be home at six. It's fine, Mike has the girls today, but I really can't be later than eight," said the hygienist as she filled the needle with clear fluid.

"We'll be out of here before then. Just 13, 14, 15, and 16 left," replied the dentist, his voice flat and insouciant with so much expended effort.

"Oh yeah, should be fine. Just letting you know."

Craig's eyes moved back and forth between them for several moments, somewhat relieved by the pleasant and accommodating exchange. Still, somewhere deep in his brain, a persistent knocking echoed faintly, growing steadily louder and more urgent.

Can't be later than eight... 13, 14, 15, and 16...

Something in those numbers was shouting at him. The list of four numbers, he assumed, signified remaining teeth. And they were still on the first tooth, as far as he knew. So that would make sense. The left mandibular third molar, he recalled it being.

Had he lost track of something? Eight, she had said. Did she mean o'clock? How long had he been here?

The appointment had started at 11:30. He looked past his feet, through the overwhelming glare of the overhead light and out the window: the sun had almost finished falling into dusk. The voices echoing through the office, the sense that other mouths were waiting in the waiting room, had vanished. They were alone. It was growing dark.

Craig tried turning his head away from the dentist, who was preparing to go to work with the elevator again. The dentist was having none of it:

“Buddy, I’m going to need you to stay still, okay? We still have a lot to get through, and everybody is tired, including you, I’m sure.”

Craig nodded and offered a placating smile, grunting his apologies as best he could as he continued to turn, past the television, where the little girl with the scars in real life was long gone, possibly forever, and past the hygienist, who was blowing air impatiently through her surgical mask, to the tray first wheeled over at the beginning of the session and situated next to his head, to the tin bowl on the tray. Moving deliberately and vacantly, as if not entirely of his own volition, he raised his hand and took hold of the bowl. As it tipped slightly and he heard the rattling and sliding of a large, shifting pile, like a gift tin filled with gourmet jellybeans, Craig knew.

“What are you doing, pal?” asked the dentist pleadingly, putting the elevator down and letting his blood-soaked gloves fall wearily to his thighs with a slap.

Craig stared down at the discarded pile, the mass grave, the polite massacre of 28 teeth haphazardly tossed aside, forgotten the way obstacles since traversed are wont to be. All but four gone, instead of all but four remaining. Only the rest of him was left.

He couldn't speak for the longest time, and when he finally managed to, he still couldn't.

“*[What the fuck is this?]*” he asked blankly, in a voice not his own.

“That's where we put the teeth after we've extracted them. Did you want to keep one as a souvenir?” asked the hygienist, responding as condescendingly as one does to one who mumbles incoherently.

“*[Whose are these? What the fuck is this shit?]*” demanded Craig, his voice sharply rising, looking back and forth between the dentist and the hygienist half a dozen times. “*[You were contracted to remove four teeth! Four! Four third molars: upper right, upper left, lower right, lower left! So, what the fuck is this?! This contingency wasn't covered in the waiver I signed!]*”

“This is ridiculous,” sighed the dentist to the hygienist. “It's after seven. Carol's probably gone home already. I'll have to process his revised invoice...”

“I can do that tomorrow,” said the hygienist.

“Yeah? You know the new software?”

“Yeah, yeah. Carol showed me. I can totally do it first thing.”

“Hey!” shouted Craig, clear on one word, at least. “*[I want answers!]*”

Before Craig knew what had happened, the hygienist's hands wordlessly encompassed his head in their soothing, talcumed clutch and gently lowered it back to its resting place on the chair's headpiece. He docilely allowed her to adjust him like she did the light on the extension arm hanging over him.

“I know you want to go home. We’ll be done very soon, okay? You’ll be home soon, I promise,” she said, looking directly into his eyes, for the first time over the course of the entire, apparently eight-hour appointment, and projecting into them the kind of profound empathy he wasn’t sure he had ever experienced in his life, even though she probably hadn’t understood a word he had said.

Craig silently nodded. He was surprised to find himself smiling up at her, a trickle of blood running down the side of his face.

“[*Okay,*]” he said softly.

“Okay,” she said back, as though she knew that’s what he had said, smiling devotedly down at him before abruptly breaking eye contact to pick up the needle again.

The dentist mouthed the words “thank you” to the hygienist as he took the needle from her and leaned towards Craig, penetrating the roof of his mouth at a 45-degree angle and pressing hard enough to tip his head back as he injected the liquid into him.

When the needle was out, Craig spoke to both of them:

“*[I never want to get married or have children. I look forward to dying alone.]*”

“Remember, no talking, okay, buddy? We’re almost done,” said the dentist.

Craig nodded, briefly and only once, feeling suddenly safe and content in the knowledge that he could say anything in this moment and the words would never arrive intact, but merely hang in the room’s chilled air, never understood, significant simply for having been uttered. He felt empowered, like the Invisible Man, but it was the knowledge, not the act, that comforted him, and he remained silent after that.

The final four teeth went by comparatively briskly, which wasn’t surprising considering the extensive ground they had covered up to that point, without his knowing. By the time the

dentist was working the final incisor from its rooting, which was relatively unsure next to the molars, it was completely dark outside, and a show about children screaming at each other was on the television.

Craig was continuously and obsessively running his anesthetized tongue all through his mouth, over the apparently empty spaces where his two rows of teeth had been, searching for some sign that they were gone, or somehow still there. He felt nothing, not tooth or gum or absence, his nerve endings fathoms deep. He couldn't even be sure that his tongue was actually moving.

"Try to keep your tongue out of there," chided the dentist as he good-naturedly clacked the forceps together in front of Craig's face, his good humor returning now that the work was nearly done. "If I took it out too, you wouldn't notice for a few hours, so look out."

The hygienist laughed, perhaps a bit too loudly, but she evinced a tired relief at this late hour. Craig laughed along with her, accidentally breathing in what the tube missed and coughing blood all over his face and eyewear, which made the three of them laugh even harder.

"I think he's ready to get out of this chair. What do you think?" asked the dentist.

"I think he's ready to go," the hygienist agreed happily.

After three backs and two forths, the last tooth popped free like an unusually cooperative champagne cork, the act completed by a final, brief spurt from the socket. The dentist shouted triumphantly, patting Craig on the shoulder and leaving a red handprint. He held up the tiny, pointed tooth like a caught fish. The hygienist clapped. The tooth clattered onto the pile in the tin bowl.

The stitching of the gum tissue went by in a blur, Craig's body reeling somewhat from the orderly trauma it had undergone in the clean, white room. He had only asked for four, this

was true. What did it mean, that four had become 32? How could anything in this space of precision and patience be a mistake? Perhaps he was the one that was mistaken. He would have to check his form again.

Craig saw the dentist put down his tools for the last time that evening.

“*[It doesn't] hurt [at all]. No hurt. No hurt. [Is that normal?]*” he asked.

“Good, good. It won't hurt for another hour or so. Then it will hurt very much. Very much,” said the dentist, nodding to communicate that he appreciated the gravity of his message.

“It *[will?]*”

“Yes. But then it won't again.”

“It *[won't?]*”

Craig stared at the dentist, wanting to believe him, wanting it to be true that it wouldn't hurt after a time, for himself, for the girl with the burned face and flowered shoes, for Gwenn, for the thin boy he could still remember being introduced to his fourth-grade class who had moved again by the time Craig had returned for the fifth grade, seemingly without a word spoken.

Yet a part of Craig, smaller but deeper, protested, demanding that the dentist be wrong, that it wouldn't be true that the mark of all wounds would remain unnoticed, that the ugly, stupid, painful pasts of everyone wouldn't dissolve into a space defined by what used to occupy them, a space that heals quickly and never hurts.

Craig was suddenly overcome with joy knowing that he would soon hurt, ferociously, so that minutes would pass like days. He wanted time to slow as its revolutions churned through a viscous, cosmic agony. He wanted to have to lie down to endure the suffering. He realized he hadn't voluntarily prostrated himself as an adult in years, because there wasn't any reason,

really, for an adult to ever lie on a floor. And yet what beauty there was in looking up from the bottom of a room, or so it seemed to him as he gazed up at the ceiling lights from his pink chair.

He recalled early mornings, indistinguishable from others except that he had been fumbling at crunches or attempts at meditation in rare sedentary excursions towards self-improvement, during which he had felt so helpless and yet pathetically transgressive lying on the floor, where children and dogs belonged. As an adult man, which he still didn't think he was, his waking form only stood and sat, usually in the same few places, and he never put his body in anything resembling a compromised or unexpected position.

But his wisdom sockets, all of those new holes in his face, would take that decision away from him. They would do him the kindness of hurting him irrevocably before growing over, leaving behind a new memory of deep physical distress of a kind unseen by him since he first realized that life wasn't fair, probably while he was playing on a floor somewhere. Through that process of pain, his wounds would adjudicate the question of his worth and identity with a trial by suffering that would leave a permanent physical imprint not unlike the one suffered and survived by the girl on TV.

Though the comparison felt shameful and disgusting to him, he insisted to himself that, in his own meager way, he had suffered and survived, as she had. No audience would cheer him, or should, and many little hurts would follow, as they would for her. But now, for him, finally, those hurts would have a face and a reason, a definition that he could hold onto and lament and love.

The dentist seemed to misinterpret the emotion welling in his broken face as fear and stumbled over himself trying to make Craig once again feel horribly at ease.

“After a while, it won’t hurt. I promise you, buddy. Just for a short time. Everything stops hurting after a while. If you wait long enough, it all goes away. Everything needs time. Everything just needs time.”

Craig stared back at him, unmoving. He finally nodded, accepting that it was true, relieved and crushed by mourning.

He whispered almost to himself:

“[*Okay.*]”

Craig’s tongue was still searching blindly for his teeth as the hygienist led him by his shoulders to the large mirror next to the door to the outer office. Craig imagined his tongue to be the mother of 32 lost children, their tiny bodies never found, she grieved by knowing they had all been taken, but tortured also by her inability to confirm their absence by touch.

However Craig conceived of them, though, his teeth had undoubtedly been the tongue’s protective garrison and greatest threat simultaneously, the kind of complex relationship that seemed to forge the longest-lasting bonds.

“Are you ready to see your new mouth?” asked the hygienist over his shoulder.

“Yes,” he managed to get out with some clarity.

“Now you get to see what you look like.”

She turned him towards the mirror.

He felt like he was seeing himself for the first time: blood smeared on pale skin, eyes wide and electric, mouth closed but dribbling.

He still could feel nothing; he made the decision to be glad of this.

His eyes met the hygienist’s in the mirror. The corner of his mouth started to move.

“That’s right,” she breathed, physically turning his head to face itself.

His lips lightly quivered.

“Smile.”

REAR PROJECTION

Miranda tracked Geoff's sneakers through the ball chairs and beanbags and defiantly asymmetrical, cubby-style shelving littering the modern concrete floor space of the Personality Cult offices. The two of them traversed the long curve of the green communal couch that Miranda hadn't seen used since it was delivered, with the exception of Geoff's mandated midweek mixers. It was during these that the executive, creative and admin teams spent time away from more pressing duties commiserating with each other over their respective shoulders on either side of the narrow, two-sided sofa. The teams and the people comprising them would empathize and cohere, backs facing backs, as the exercise intended, until they formed a thick, green caterpillar that wound its way through the baubles and sculptures and toys.

The couch ended against a wall on which hung a satirical take on Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, the famous triptych restyled to resemble an assuredly unlicensed *Where's Waldo* illustration, complete with Waldo in the bottom right corner, on all fours, vomiting into a river of demon shit.

It was under this image that Geoff and, an instant later, Miranda came to an abrupt halt, he looking at the floor and struggling to speak. His open hands wavered in a repeating globular cycle in front of his chest, massaging the pocket of air until the accumulated static could jumpstart his synapses and produce a word.

"Trevor!" Geoff finally shouted. "Trevor!"

"Geoff!" returned Trevor from behind the yellow plastic wall of his workstation, situated on the other side of the open-concept space, next to the brainstorming station (word magnets).

“Trev-!” started Geoff again, recovering as he got a bead on him. “When are we sitting down with those guys? Did they give you a time yet?”

“Ocho’s,” shouted Trevor back.

“I know the place, I need the time! Keep up!”

“Ocho’s at nine!”

Geoff faced Miranda again with his long, slightly doughy frame. He finally pressed his hands together, popping the thought pocket.

“Miranda, this is really huge. You know Trevor and I would be right here with you, hunkering down and ordering samosas and getting the Marlene project done as a team, but the Hello deal moved way quicker than we thought, and it’s ready to close now, tonight. This is big. Like, knock the wall down and absorb Dr. Teagarden’s office, that kind of big. That’s why I brought you to this wall.”

Miranda reflexively glanced at the wall before returning to Geoff.

“Geoffrey, I’m good, seriously,” she reassured him as casually as possible. “I can roll with what I have. I’m not actually familiar with the Hello project. I’ve just been on Marlene so far.”

“Stew didn’t tell you about the Hello thing? He wasn’t supposed to, so good for him, but that really surprises me,” remarked Geoff. “He’s over at Core Capital’s office now doing the legal stuff. Okay: you know when someone just isn’t getting it, like you’re trying to tell them what’s going on, and they’re really confused, and you’re trying to snap them out of it – something like that?”

“Okay?”

“And then you say to them, ‘Helloooo?’ Like, anybody there?”

“Oh, sure, of course.”

“We own that now.”

“Shut up.”

“Or, to be more precise, we own the best version of that now. Our competitor that shall not be named, the one with the big coffers and small imagination polluting the Internet with the worst Marilyn t-shirts and Chaplin mugs...”

“Say no more,” said Miranda, arching her left eyebrow. She had learned quickly that belittlement of the Likeness Branding Group around her new office was often the only recourse to the existential threat that it posed. Their roster of deceased celebrities and licensed phrases and design properties was breathtaking.

“They own Hello?? Just the word ‘hello’ with two question marks. *Blech.*”

“So bland.”

“We, as of 90 minutes from now, own *Helloooo?!?*”

As he carried the note just long enough to ingratiate without grating (his personal motto), Geoff’s eyes, seemingly never fatigued to begin with and not so now at nearly eight o’clock in the evening, positively gleamed. He didn’t react when Trevor shouted the refrain back from behind his workstation wall.

Miranda silently mouthed the word “whoa” as Geoff continued.

“Italics, four o’s, question mark, exclamation mark, question mark – the far superior product, and it’s ours! The smiley face ain’t got shit on what we can do with this. I know it’s been hush-hush and I apologize for that, but I’ve been working on this for just shy of five months, and now we have it, finally. Here, follow me. Sorry, gotta keep running tonight.”

“That’s okay, I need the cardio. I’ll be sitting for the next four or five hours anyway.”

“Sorry about that, too.”

“Please, I live for this. Congrats, by the way.”

“Thank you. Team effort.”

Geoff’s sneakers moved rapidly across a painted simulacrum of a Twister game sheet that had thought generation strategies written inside each colored circle in erasable marker. Miranda stepped on one that said “Innovation is your mind putting itself back together.” She accidentally scuffed part of it off.

As she followed, Miranda’s mind was reeling: what did it mean that she wasn’t let in on this? Sure, by the sounds of it the deal had started at least a few weeks before she first arrived, but she had always been a star at Ear Rational, and to find that she had now been left out of Personality Cult’s newest big contract so soon after they had lured her away from her old home was more than a little frustrating. Her mind was already running with the *Helloooo?!?* concept, almost against its will, torturing itself with the possibilities that only it could realize. *Trevor could do better? Please...*

Instead, she was stuck choking on the dust from the Marlene Dietrich account. She had been an icon in her time, certainly, but she had died in 1992, just after Miranda’s seventh birthday. Her estate was prickly about how her image could be used, which made her wish there was a family or spouse that she could meet in person for once instead of contending with holding companies and legal intermediaries.

The merchandising possibilities seemed too niche to really break out, limiting opportunities for ad contracts. Dietrich of course projected Golden Age Hollywood class and had a great deal of visibility and impact in her day, but her sharp-angled, Germanic persona and androgynous look were as forbidding as they were alluring. Audiences had to actively seek out

connection with her, and were always made to scale a few steeped iron gates and stone parapets before getting anywhere near her center. She would never consider working for anyone's attention or approval on her own behalf, and certainly not for the purpose of hawking a black leather clutch or, more likely, an eyeliner collection. Marlene dismissed Miranda's supplications for accessibility with a glance; Miranda could say nothing in rejoinder. Still, Miranda kept trying, finding Marlene the hardest to let go of, not only because she had been occupied with the account fairly continuously since beginning her tenure at Personality Cult. And it appeared that, for this evening, at least, it would be just the two of them: Marlene and Miranda.

Miranda and Geoff arrived at Trevor's desk, which was made with transparent plastic so that people could see his stylishly rustic shoes, or so Miranda thought. Geoff, as a Vice-President, needed to apologize for his title with consciously messy hair and sneakers, though they were designer. Trevor, younger and fitter than Geoff, needed to compensate for his artfully moderated goofball persona with his classic leather. Miranda apologized to no one with her basic flats, their simplicity usually counterbalanced by something on her head or around her neck and shoulders. Refusing to put in too much thought below the knees kept her level. Her eyes and brain were her living, anyways.

"Trev-Trev, time to go. Tell Miranda the news first."

"*Ooh*, I have news?" asked Miranda.

Trevor smiled, almost handsome: "Since I'm going to be saying *Helloooo?!?* every time I walk through the door from now until 2019—"

"Longer," said Geoff.

"*Oh no...*" moaned Miranda, tongue-in-cheek. *Gloating prick...*

“—that means I’ll have my hands full. By the way – sorry, Miranda...” Trevor pivoted to Geoff. “Geoff, I already had a first run of tablet stickers printed. I knew you’d slap me if I told you before we closed the deal.”

“You mean *if* we closed. It was so up in the air, like, three days ago.”

“I knew it was a matter of time with you on the case. I’m here for you, brother.”

“I still might slap you,” warned Geoff. “Quit chasing my approval and tell Miranda.”

Trevor exhaled wistfully. “You’re taking Marvin away from me,” he said. “Or, as Geoff worded it: ‘Got to give it up.’”

They all laughed.

Miranda turned to Geoff: “You’re giving me Marvin Gaye?”

“Couldn’t be in safer hands,” said Geoff. “Listen, are you sure you’re okay going it alone with Marlene for a few hours? I really do feel terrible leaving you on your own to do this.”

“Geoff, I’m great. And thank you so much for giving Marlene and I company,” she said, touching his arm.

“I couldn’t wait to give it to you,” he replied, checking his watch. “We’ll be back early, or maybe even later tonight, but don’t stay too late okay? And come in late tomorrow. We’ll have a few hours in the morning to finalize everything you can’t finish.”

“Deal,” said Miranda.

Geoff raised his palm for a high-five. Miranda raised hers to meet Geoff’s as Trevor’s computer finished shutting down. Trevor looked away from her.

Before the strike of their fives could finish sounding, Miranda found herself alone with Waldo in the infernal beanbag garden.

∞

Miranda carried up pizza from the stand just down the block that served clientele exiting downtown drinking establishments decidedly less reputable than Ocho's.

The strains of "Got to Give it Up" echoed through the office, the shape and details of which Miranda found her brain already filing under Home now that she had the place to herself, as her brain did when acclimating to a hotel room or someone else's bed. Its intimacy with objects and their containers was a subtle and temporary effect, but real nonetheless. The office had become her apartment in a way, the combination of space and solitude, and the falling evening light outside, lending permissibility to her to treat it all as her own. The door was hers to lock.

Still, the relative enormity of it inversely diluted the sense of familiarity her aloneness tried to gird up around her. The vast expanse gradually pushed her to seek comfort in containment by packing herself into the farthest corner in the back of the converted loft, in a chair at the end of the long row of tables and laptops where the company held group sessions. Over her shoulder was an open window.

Marvin Gaye was hers now. Though the news couldn't fully balm the wound of her exclusion from *Helloooo!?!?*, his soothing ballads were beginning to calm the most exigent pains of bewilderment and professional outrage that were roiling her in its wake. The opening chords of "Let's Get it On" wound their way out of her laptop and wrapped her up tight – okay, she was over it. *For now...*

Miranda had anticipated that her night would be spent with Geoff and Trevor in what had been planned as an after-hours emergency assembly spent collating their various active and developing strategies for licensing Marlene over the subsequent 12 months. All of this had come about after she and Trevor arrived in Geoff's office even before going to their desks three

mornings earlier, as his email the previous night had instructed, to find his face ashen and palsied. He had received from Marlene's estate an urgent memorandum, express-delivered, detailing their diminishing confidence in the ability of Personality Cult to commercially exploit Marlene's image to their satisfaction. The message called for a concrete plan for reversing the company's apparently troubling misuse of such a potent property. Unspoken but unmistakable was the possibility that the estate could turn to the Likeness Branding Group in the event that they did not renew their contract with Personality the following annum.

But a great deal, quite literally, had transpired since the delivery of that memo and, just as precipitously, the concern over Marlene was seemingly vanquished, or at least ameliorated by the sudden capture of the prized *Helloooo?!?* license. As a result, their Marlene powwow had been whittled down to an intimate conversation between Miranda and one of the most intimidating dead ladies she had ever not met.

A woman screamed outside, a party exultation that managed to carry from down on the street all the way up over the music playing on the table. It came across as flat and forced, trying way too hard. Miranda rolled her eyes to no one and took another bite of terrible pizza.

On her laptop, she had the Marlene file open – it suddenly looked so meager. Comingling in her mind were two voices, one cooing to her that she had only been with the company for four months, the other shouting frantically that, *fuck*, she had already been with the company for four months, what the fuck had she been doing!?

There were a few posters that college-aged girls might buy – strike that, should buy. They were actually pretty good. Miranda had one of the mock-ups that she and the design team had put together in her apartment, against policy, as it wasn't copyrighted yet. She would have to remember to take it down the first time she had company people over. But, generally, her plan so

far was décor for the homes and devices of younger women and the segment of the LGBT community that could appreciate a certain arch, kitschy, imperious vibe in a performer; perfume and cosmetic endorsements for older women; and remastered digital film transfers for the movie buffs. It all seemed very thin, suddenly.

A workable strategy for Marlene's peculiar gifts might be the Forrest Gump, Diet Coke strategy of vintage clips combined with new footage in ads. It was a technique heavily tried and a bit hokey, certainly, but it often worked, alternately delighting or outraging consumers, depending on the good taste or lack thereof present in the ads. Product visibility improved either way.

The industry also had at its disposal new technology that would allow for the digital creation of moving, lifelike ersatz celebrities, composed using databases of archived facial tics, bone structures and skin textures that would allow for entirely new, synthetic performances to be built from scratch. No longer would the modern availability of reactive movements, spoken dialogue and the signature cumulative arrangements of the features of the face, whether still or in motion, be dependent entirely on the efforts of prior generations of filmmakers, photojournalists and marketing firms. They could make their own Marlene now.

Miranda wasn't certain how she felt about this reconstruction, and didn't have time to be. The luxuries of the stopped clock that dead celebrities usually enjoyed – a long present in which physical features were no longer remolded and ravaged by the pounding waves of daily habit, their faces no longer aging away from themselves as visual signifiers, like letters bleeding across a page – were in a sense denied to the licensed dead celebrity. People like Miranda made them dance and pose and sing songs they had never sung while their handlers benefited. They were always on the clock.

Deals were made with the same frantic urgency as any involving the talent of a living person. Moments mattered – the *zeitgeist*, whatever it was. Moods had to be seized. Money wasn't eternal and interchangeable like she used to think. There were dollars that could only be captured on a particular day and in a particular way before they morphed into new dollars that were suddenly much farther from reach. The Marlene Dollars, if there were any, needed to be seized now, according to their clients, anyways. Miranda couldn't be sure why.

Still, none of this had anything to do with Marlene, really. Her contemporary fans were dead or old – no sense placating them. Miranda was alive and youngish, and her job depended on how Marlene could strike a 24-year-old at a glance, and the ideas that such a visual collision could excavate or produce within that 24-year-old's mind. She had to ask herself, ask Marlene, what that face, which no longer existed physically and never would again, carried with it as its image travelled the wavelengths of cognition and association? That beautiful face...

Miranda exhaled long and slow, staring into the table. She gradually realized, with the clarity of the exhalation, that an oppressive silence had draped over the office. Her music had stopped – she conceded to herself that her Marvin playlist didn't exactly dig into the deep cuts. But then, deep cuts didn't sell headphones – “Sexual Healing” did. Or wool hats. Wool hats by Marvin might sell. That was a pretty iconic look for him. She needed to get that written down.

Miranda felt marginally guilty as she left the Marlene folder for a moment to start a Marvin folder, a folder assuredly easier to fill, if the success of Bob Marley licenses in recent years was any indication. As she started formatting a list of Marvin products, she realized that she could no longer hear the music from the bar street a block away either. She glanced over her shoulder to confirm that the window was still open.

Smoke rose lazily from the head of the table, to Miranda's immediate right. The thin cigarette clasped between delicate fingers was burned halfway down. Heavy-lidded eyes looked at the tip, considering it the way a hawk considers a field mouse.

Miranda was very still in her chair, somehow instantly enmeshed in the midpoint of a conversation in which she had naturally fallen to the position of deferent listener, waiting for the more august speaker, who to this point had not spoken. The severely arching eyebrows rose as the ashes were flicked from the end of the cigarette.

"You look tired. I hope you'll forgive me for saying so."

Miranda opened her mouth several seconds before speaking. "I am tired," she said, though what might have seemed admirable terseness was merely her inability to say more.

"I was more often tired when I was young, like you. Then I learned to speak more softly in the down times, when there wasn't work to be done. I saw no reason to speak or do more than was necessary. Not until the work had started again, anyway."

Marlene brought the cigarette to her lips. She waited until she had exhaled the smoke completely before continuing. "I loved to work. I always loved to work."

Miranda felt sweat forming on her back.

"I wish I felt the same way," she said.

Marlene raised her eyebrows higher with something like solicitude.

"Oh, are you a lazy girl?" she asked.

"No," replied Miranda hurriedly. "No, I work very hard. Long hours. But it always feels like work."

"Naturally," answered Marlene. "Is this a riddle?"

"No, I..." Miranda started. "I just wish work could feel like more than work sometimes."

“When I used to perform ‘Lili Marleen’ on the frontlines all through the war, it felt as if I was doing it without effort, even though I was exhausted every night.” Marlene took another drag. “The boys loved me.”

“Sure they did,” said Miranda.

“They loved me from both sides, exactly the same. The German boys knew I was there for the OSS, knew I was singing a love song to them in their language to hurt them, to mock them, to steal their comfort. They knew which shore I was singing from.” Marlene looked to someplace distant. “But they loved it still. I never understood that.”

Miranda waited for Marlene to return to her, bewildered, but wanting more from her.

“After the war, I thought more of the Germans, how they loved it when I sang, because I could not understand,” Marlene said finally. “Something like that is harder to let go of.”

Miranda slid her right hand off of the table and down to her lap so that it could clasp the tension out of her left. “Everyone loved you, even when you didn’t love them,” she proffered.

“They loved the idea of me,” answered Marlene. “I suppose that turned out to be enough.”

Marlene’s wide-set eyes flashed onto Miranda’s, holding them for several moments before sleepily returning to the cigarette. Miranda was proud she hadn’t reflexively glanced down until after the look had left her. She put her clasped hands on the table for something to study in silence.

She finally spoke again: “Were you ever afraid that you would be shot down?”

“Of course. But I was more afraid that they would capture us. They would have shaved my head, and I don’t know what they would have done to me. I was always more afraid of

capture than the bullets or the bombs. The Army made all of the entertainers captains to ensure good treatment if we were ever captured. I found that charming.”

Miranda swallowed, unsure of how to proceed.

Marlene kept her eyes low. “You’re alone here. Do you like being alone, or are you afraid of it?”

Miranda somehow felt that she needed to treat the question carefully.

“I love being alone in the moment,” she said. “I only hate being alone when I imagine it. Or dream it.”

“You can’t live by yourself in your own mind?”

“Sure, sometimes. Sometimes not,” said Miranda, escaping Marlene by looking out the window. “Maybe that will change, I don’t know.”

Marlene gave a slight wave of her hand.

“I only asked for right now. You don’t need to know the whole thing, not for me. We’re sometimes asked to know too much.” She looked around the office. “This place is very silly, yes?”

Miranda laughed, mirroring Marlene’s expansive appraisal of their surroundings.

“It really is.”

“Yes.” Marlene stood, walking slowly across Miranda’s suddenly much more embarrassing temporary home, cutting a sharp but elegant line as she passed through space.

“What do you do in this silly place? Is it a place for children?”

Miranda stood slowly, debating Marlene’s words, and whether she should follow.

“In a way, yes, it is for children, now that you mention it. Myself included.”

“You consider yourself a child?”

“In some ways,” Miranda replied. “In other ways I feel so old already.”

Marlene stopped walking and looked back to Miranda.

“If you’ll forgive me a second time, perhaps you are wrong twice?”

Miranda smiled at her flats: “Perhaps.”

Marlene’s lips formed a tight, downward kind of smirk that, with her violent eyebrows, pencilled impossibly high on her forehead, came across as more good-humoured and campily refined than condescending. The makeup, heavy but falling just short of tacky excess, and the peculiar and extraordinary set of her facial structure, all suggested to Miranda the true extent to which Marlene’s actual image and presence were a construct, much like the one her own professional efforts were involved in building now, even if those cheekbones *were* real.

“So I ask again,” said Marlene, carrying on with her measured pacing of the floor. “What is it that you do here?”

Miranda stepped out from behind the table and began to follow the shimmering hem of Marlene’s gown through and among the ball chairs and beanbags.

“Sometimes I’m not really sure.”

“Sure you are.”

Miranda looked up and saw Marlene looking back at her as she walked, her eyes twinkling.

Miranda mustered the best answer that she could.

“I make people feel that they should buy things. I tell them it would be good for them, or that it would make them live a certain way that they want to.”

“*You* tell them?” asked Marlene.

“No, not me. I use other people,” said Miranda. “People that aren’t here anymore.”

“Where did they go?”

“They died,” Miranda said, afraid that she had somehow offended the uncanny.

“Is death a place?” asked Marlene.

“I don’t know,” Miranda answered. “I’m not dead.”

“No, I don’t think you are.” Marlene approached the Bosch doodle. “I think you are very much alive.”

She leaned in and stared impassively. “I thought I recognized this, but now I am not so sure.”

“Oh, that’s supposed to be funny,” Miranda said dismissively. “It doesn’t really mean anything.”

“Then why have it?” asked Marlene. “Not that I mind a joke.”

Miranda stopped several paces from Marlene, literally distancing herself from the desperately uncouth trifle that had withered to an abomination under Marlene’s glare.

“It’s part of this industry, part of this company,” Miranda finally said. “I guess it’s about looking at established things differently. Getting a fresh perspective. Not being too reverent. I don’t know...” Miranda shrugged, defeated.

“Wal-do?” Marlene said, pronouncing both syllables with subtly accented distaste, as if declining an unappetizing dessert. “And you are supposed to look for him?”

“Yeah,” said Miranda.

“And what happens when you find him?”

“Nothing,” said Miranda, flatly.

Marlene was silent for several moments.

“Seems fun,” she said, standing. “Don’t ever do something like this with me.”

“No!” insisted Miranda, horrified.

“I don’t want to hide, I want to be seen! I admit it,” said Marlene.

“You will be, I promise.”

“This piece, the painting, wasn’t very good to begin with. I found it too scolding. Let Waldo have it,” said Marlene, turning away from the object of her disfavour. “Why shouldn’t life be lived with gusto, as long as you can avoid hurting your fellow man? After all, when you’re dead, you’re dead. That’s it.”

Miranda began to protest: “But you…”

“You think I am alive?” asked Marlene. “Or that I am a ghost, which is the same thing? The same wish.”

Miranda struggled to clarify her thoughts: “I don’t know. I mean, I know – I know *of* somebody named Marlene Dietrich, and you look and sound just like her, even though I never really saw her face or really heard her voice – only images and recordings. Is that the same thing?”

Marlene tilted her head and pondered a giant teddy bear wearing sunglasses. “Maybe I am some kind of echo, then? Or light projected from a sun that is no longer there, if you’ll pardon my attempt at poetry? After all, any person you see, standing in front of you, is only light reflected to your eye. Is that any different, really?” Marlene blew smoke at Miranda. “Unless you still think I’m a ghost?”

“No, I don’t think you’re a ghost,” she admitted.

“Good.” Marlene nodded, turning and walking idly towards the large framed print of one of her most famous publicity photos hanging on the wall near Geoff’s office.

Miranda watched Marlene stare up at her own photo: her body fitted with a tuxedo, top hat askance on her wavy tresses; a cigarette retrieved from the stylish case held in her left hand brought casually to the corner of her mouth with her right; one eyebrow noting the insolence and provocation of her masculine pantomime by arching beyond its already considerable resting height; her famous bedroom eyes buttressed by powerful cheekbones that extended so low that they gathered the mouth into a thin, drawn pout.

Marlene spoke without looking away from herself.

“I never liked this one,” Marlene remarked, still gazing at it.

“Why? It’s so iconic,” said Miranda, stunned. “For good reason. You’re beautiful in it, but in a way I can’t define. It’s completely yours. Completely you.”

“I never saw myself in this one. It just didn’t turn out.” Marlene finally turned away. “I can’t answer why not, just like you and the public can’t answer why.”

“I’ll be expected to answer that, to some extent,” said Miranda. “I mean, it’s my job. I have to know why people love you. What seeing you means to them.”

“You will use me in the way that you do?” asked Marlene as she approached Miranda.

Miranda continued absorbing the Marlene print that already lived permanently in her memory, even as she avoided looking at the Marlene in front of her.

Miranda directed her answer to the still image: “Yes. I’m going to use you.”

Marlene looked back and smiled up at herself. “This makes you sad,” she said, not asking.

“Yes, it does. I suddenly have this feeling...” Miranda started without finishing.

“You have many feelings,” said Marlene. “Which one do you want to share?”

“I feel like I’m disrespecting you.”

“Goodness, how?” asked Marlene.

“Maybe the way the studios used to.”

“Do you think they made me do anything that I did?” Marlene seemed genuinely curious.

“Being a woman, in the 30’s and 40’s and 50’s in Hollywood, the way it was then...

Even now...” Miranda let the question answer itself.

Marlene waited for Miranda to meet her eyes.

“Do you think they made me do anything that I did?” Marlene repeated, somehow not really asking the second time.

Miranda struggled to answer. “I don’t know.”

Marlene shrugged. “Neither do I. It’s true my father gave me my love of work. It’s true that I was the one who answered the idea of what von Sternberg saw when he looked at *The Blue Angel* behind his eyes, and it’s true he told me how to be that idea, as directors do everybody, but it’s also true that he and I made each other what we were. I stood and sang what I wanted to sing for as long as I needed the money, until I couldn’t stand to sing any longer. I loved who I wanted to love without care for categories or expectations. I made myself what I wanted to be. If it wasn’t really me that wanted these things all along, then so be it. They were still mine.” She faced the print again. “This is still mine.”

“Except that it’s mine, now. It’s Personality Cult’s. And I don’t know what to do with that.” Miranda stared intently at the back of Marlene’s head, beseeching her.

Marlene answered without hesitation: “You live with it. I died with it, so I have nothing I can lose. I wouldn’t give you an eyelash if I were here, but I can’t stop you now. I won’t ask you to safeguard it, because I know you won’t. You will be asked to do unspeakable things with the parts of me you can see, and you will do them. Take comfort in the fact that I will never know

that you did, and that if I did know, I would suspect that you didn't mean the harm that you caused."

"I could fight my bosses if they tried to make me do something awful."

Marlene waved off the suggestion. "Don't do that to yourself."

"Why not? I thought you took yourself back from them, made yourself what you were," protested Miranda.

"Whatever I turned out to be, I can't really know. But I never fight, no. I never fight with anyone." Marlene's eyelids threatened to close as she took a long, slow drag.

Miranda nodded anxiously to herself, stymied in her attempt to grasp what Marlene meant. "What if something I design embarrasses you or demeans you?"

Marlene shrugged again, stepping forward. "I did shit movies all on my own. My dignity is not always above reproach, even if my work ethic is."

Before Miranda could realize what was happening, Marlene stood immediately in front of her.

"This struggle you have now—" Marlene began softly. "—please always remember that you had it."

Her hand softly touched Miranda's face. Miranda felt the warmth of her skin against hers.

The first sunlight was seeping between them. Miranda couldn't speak in their proximity.

"I wish I had been here," Marlene whispered, Miranda feeling her breath on her face.

Marlene removed her hand and walked towards the window and the rising sun.

Miranda was overcome with a grasping urgency. "Wait, you're going? I have so much more to ask you!"

"That's because I have been asking all the questions."

“I wanted to say earlier that *The Blue Angel* is one of the greatest things I’ve ever seen,” said Miranda, hoping to flatter her into staying for a while longer. “I watched it for research, but it’s one of my favorites now.”

“Thank you. My favorite was always *The Devil is a Woman*. But then, Mr. von Sternberg was a brilliant man.”

“Yes. And you were brilliant.”

“I did what I could,” Marlene replied. “Tell me; are there any boyfriends or girlfriends in the mix?”

Miranda was taken aback by the question. “Uh – none of either right now. I don’t have time for all that.”

“Mm, neither do I,” agreed Marlene.

By the time Miranda got the joke, it was too late to laugh. After a pause, she opened her mouth without expecting to. “It’s really fucking weird that I’m doing this without you ever knowing that I will, or have, or am. Or knowing me.”

“Yes,” smiled Marlene. “It is.”

Marlene gazed around, taking final note of the space, signalling no more approval of the office than when she had first arrived.

“Do what you must with me,” she said. “It’s a hard world, and one must earn a living. That’s the only benediction I offer.”

Miranda felt a giddy compulsion to say more, to make some final proclamation that she would safeguard her in death – anything to make her remember her, even though that was impossible.

As had become their custom, Marlene spoke for her, gazing on her from a distance.

“I wish I had been here,” she said softly. “I wish I had known you.”

Miranda met her eyes, far away, but somehow close, luminous.

“I’m glad I know you,” Miranda managed to respond. “If I do. If I can.”

“Maybe you do,” replied Marlene.

Miranda broke into a smile which faded before it finished as Marlene turned away.

“Oh, and go out and sleep with someone, will you?” implored Marlene as she began stepping towards the sunlight again.

“Okay, I will,” affirmed Miranda, wondering if she was meant to follow.

“You need a break, for heaven’s sake.” Marlene smoothed out her dress. “Probably not anyone from this office.”

“No!” Miranda nearly shouted.

Marlene registered silent amusement.

“Will I see you again?” Miranda stood in the center of the office, hands at her sides.

Marlene gave her one of her nearly imperceptible smirks over her shoulder, a one-of-a-kind *Marlene* smirk, given to Miranda to use as she would, and said, in her huskiest voice:

“Every day.”

Almost before the words had left her mouth, she had flicked out like a flame.

She was gone. Nothing moved or sounded.

Miranda, empty but in some way gratified, or grateful, stood in the space and silence of her returning world, the silence ultimately broken by the first waves of rush hour traffic.

She looked around at the baubles and things that were hers for the remaining moments of the morning, until the others returned to share them with her, take them from her.

She looked at the face that was hers, up on the wall, looking back through the hanging blue haze.

MID

Without interrupting Christie, Karen discreetly opened a drawer and produced from it a heavy binder which she set down noiselessly on the desk between them. She set her soft but strong forearms, ringed by innumerable bands and handmade bracelets, on its cover. Sandalwood and coconut oil hung in the air.

Christie continued speaking:

“I keep thinking of those blue ribbons you tied around the sunflower stems for Theo, the way his little hand touched one of them at the exact moment, and I honestly think that was what brought me back to you when we all agreed on using a midwife again. I don’t think anyone else would have thought to use them like that. You would expect someone to tie bunches of sunflowers together that way, but not to tie one around each flower individually. At least I wouldn’t. It’s something that seemed – it was intuitively right for Theo—”

“I thought it was too,” interjected Karen.

Christie smiled without pausing, their words overlapping: “—and I think that sort of insight that you seem to have could be right for Robert too. I thought it could connect them somehow.”

Christie stopped sharply. Her mouth grew small and held firm. Her glistening eyes refused to move.

The binder cracked the silence as Karen opened it to a third of the way through the laminated pages. She peeled up a few more with her short, roughhewn nails, folding them over until she found what she was looking for. Turning the binder around for Christie, she drew her finger across the laminate and stopped on the blue ribbon Christie saw when she saw the sky, and

the sky in it. It was so simple as to be at once meaningless and refulgent with associations, notwithstanding the minor extravagance of its embossed edges.

“Sometimes I hesitate to use them for anyone else, like maybe they belong to your Theo now.”

Christie shook her head lightly, thankfully. “No, it’s not the object that matters. It’s the way it was used, in the moment, in our home. You know...”

Karen nodded her understanding.

Both home services – Theo and Robert. Theo’s 17 months ago had been a pacific and unexpectedly sensuous experience in a way that Christie hadn’t expected, ushering Theo through in a warm, flame-lit haze of essential oils and clasped hands and waves crashing from speakers brought in by Karen. She thought of Theo’s eyes in his tiny face in low light, looking about in wonder, everything so new, so briefly infinite.

She could certainly envision Robert’s service being just as successful. Karen was such a professional; Christie would never have considered another midwife for a home journey.

She hadn’t expected the need for another so soon, had believed that Karen would only guide them through it once, walking ahead of them on sturdy legs in bare feet, stopping at the edge of a clearing as they continued forward on their own. But some things couldn’t be planned, and here Karen was again, emerging from the treeline to retake Christie’s hand, the passage feeling so unaccustomed on the return trip. Theo had been the hesitant first step, the peering forward, while Robert had the misfortune of being carried back by travelers too tired and benumbed by the trail’s familiar strangeness to muster the same awe.

“Can I discuss with you what I envision for Robert? I do think that a few things should be the same between Robert and Theo—”

“The ribbons...”

Karen nodded along to the words and smiled before continuing: “—but many of the elements will be unique to Robert, as I think he is from Theo, if I’ve been listening.”

Christie affirmed Karen’s observation with a slight lift of her chin and a straightening in her chair.

Karen smiled again. “Okay. I want to reflect something of Robert that he can see and feel the way your Theo did – colors and textures that his mind can play with and find pleasure in as it rides them through this transition that we all eventually experience. We can interpret and find meaning in these things, but Robert will be aware of them on a very basic sensory level at this point, as you can imagine. These objects and scents might seem like set dressing, but they form the essence of a very profound experience for Robert, and for us by extension. And, as I did with Theo, I need your input for this, because you know Robert in a way that I can’t.”

Christie started flipping through Karen’s catalogue with some urgency at the latest mention of “your Theo,” her brittle hands grasping and pulling her through the pages, away from Karen’s words and towards the serenity they promised:

Fragile candleholders made out of twigs and twine.

Semiprecious gemstones of various colors – too gaudy for Robert, and certainly would have been so for Theo’s temperament.

A cheap fountain that endlessly circulated water over a blank ceramic face – a boy’s face.

Theo had been one, and now Robert was simply another. As much as this was true, they didn’t feel as though they were weighted to Christie with equal gravities; something in her demanded they should be. She was driven by a conviction that they should match, or meet, to

instill some clarity or completion in her and them, some rounding of a bend. That was why she had returned to Karen's office. That, and the blue ribbons.

Karen continued, her eyes on Christie even as Christie's refused to leave the catalogue.

"I imagine Robert's ceremony as plastic," said Karen. "I see consumer objects in the room, knickknacks, old license plates, Coke bottles, records, souvenirs and collectibles, objects of personal importance. I want it to feel like an accumulation, like objects washing up on shore from across a thousand oceans and ending up together, which is what a life is, when you think about it: accumulation against the odds. Compare this to Theo's and his natural elements, his branches and leaves and flowers and grains, given that he was, I suppose, not so far removed from them."

Shrouds, gauzy and embroidered.

Oils – jasmine and orange and distilled roses.

"I envision us playing music for Robert. That can ease discomfort and confusion for people suffering from dementia. Who do you remember him liking? The old crooners like Sinatra or Crosby? Maybe someone jazzier like Louis Armstrong?"

Endless flowers.

Ribbons of colors not blue.

"Perhaps you could consult with your aunts and uncles on Robert's side regarding the music question – his siblings who have agreed to be present. Can your sister remember what he listened to? You said she was a couple of years older than you?"

"Six years older," answered Christie. "Will we wash the body the way we did for Theo?"

Her pallid face rose from the catalogue. It had fallen blank, waiting to be animated by a prompt from Karen, sympathetic or prescriptive.

Karen pushed a strand of her naturally curly blonde hair back from her face. “I believe the washing is essential for your healing, and for proper care of the body. The ritualized method that you remember us using with Theo is important as well.”

“The circle,” said Christie.

Karen nodded. “The circle. Structure is what you need, because it’s what you lack in these circumstances.”

“Structure?” asked Christie in a whisper.

“Yes,” replied Karen gently. “It’s what we lack in our time of grieving.”

Christie imagined herself asking, “So if we all hold hands in a circle, Robert won’t rot and fall apart the way Theo did?”

She imagined Karen looking like she had been slapped as she tried to explain and equivocate.

She imagined herself closing the catalogue, thanking Karen for her efforts, and exiting the office as a vapor of tranquility and acceptance.

Christie imagined but did not say or do any of it. She turned another page in the catalogue.

“Mom will never be there for the washing, I’m sure of that,” she said, studying an inflatable washing basin with a raised headrest. “She probably won’t come at all.”

They had used the bathtub for Theo’s washing, Christie sitting in the water in her clothes, although he would have fit in the sink.

“These services can heal the wounds of estrangement just as well as the wounds of mourning,” prodded Karen. “So many of our experiences and memories can seem disconnected

and fragmented, especially the painful ones. But they can surprise us by interlocking and shaping into a story if we look at them the right way.”

Christie didn't say anything. She wondered what baby Theo's story had been. A blink. A lightbulb popping.

She wondered how many pages it would take to tell the whole thing. She turned another page in the catalogue.

“Isn't there a story of Robert that you want to tell in your last moments with him?” asked Karen. “I'm sure everyone has their own contributions to make.”

Christie thought of the void, the absence that was her father. When flipping through some albums at her aunt's townhouse in preparation for the consultation, she had seen countless photos of him for the first time in her life, whole haircuts that were new to her. She found in the photos the haircut he had worn when he stood carrying a duffel bag and wearing his winter coat even though it was still late summer, because he would need it by winter and so couldn't leave it there with her and her sister, who wouldn't leave her room, and her mom, who wouldn't be angry or sad for him as he stood dumbly surprised that she wouldn't.

Christie had cried for him, only because something in the clumsiness of his bulky coat in a late-August sunset made her feel intensely, overflowingly sorry for him, like he was confused and needed help, and she would sometimes cry at the image even into her twenties, even now. Then he had left and never really come back to her, even when they had sat down for lunch from time to time, or when he had awkwardly stood for her wedding, in which her mother had walked her down the aisle.

Maybe the coat was still in storage somewhere. Maybe they could put it on him at the service so that she could cry for him one last time.

According to Karen, photos of distant love and missed time could be strung together on cardboard surrounded by sticky aphorisms and lemniscates drawn in marker by nieces and nephews and second cousins, multiple infinities drowning in cheap sentiment.

Every wave touching shore must one day return to sea. ∞ Our day doesn't end in the darkness of night, but in the beauty of sunset. ∞ Only eyes that have been open can be closed. ∞

They had made a story with photos of Theo, he looking the same in all of them, never having the time to change or grow, always swaddled and bald. His eyes had barely opened. She was supposed to believe a story could be carved from his 72 days of life, but she had refused to risk crushing him with a sculptor's grip along his separable fault lines and fontanelles, and so found peace in his unformed life and its immortal breadth of possibility.

Christie opened her mouth to answer: "I'm the only one here. How much do you think they have to contribute?"

There was a silence.

Karen haltingly opened her mouth to speak again: "Related to that, do we want to refer to him as Robert? You seem to prefer that to Dad, and I get the impression that your sister agrees."

"Robert is fine," said Christie, turning another page in the catalogue.

Christie wondered what this reclamation project could accomplish for her or any of them. Robert had never met Theo, but she had never particularly minded that. She still didn't.

She had returned to the death midwife's office – the plaque on the door of her home office now referred to Karen as a death doula – looking for what she understood to be closure. And it was here that she found herself in a closed system in which she was the switch between two negative spaces, opening and closing the circuit she had built for herself and conducting

grief between two absent points. Perhaps that was what closure meant. Karen's professionally solicitous eyes suggested it might be.

She had little Theo, her Theo, who was gone but still had by her, and she had Robert, more present now in the impending death she was manufacturing for him than he was in his life, or hers. Whether it was Theo's natural service or Robert's plastic one, the elements all came from the same place, and broke down in their time.

Christie knew the breakdown intimately. But the orderly washing, the artifice of the enclosing circle, the rudiments of a structure that would hold indefinitely, the dream of an extra-organic perpetuation of life and prolonging of the sensory and the tactile and the real stemming from skin and petals and ribbons – only Karen understood this. Only Karen could design it. Christie could cut her own ribbons; only Karen could give them meaning.

Christie stayed in her chair. She turned another page in the catalogue.

She imagined the people who had known Theo and the people who hadn't, together, clasping young and old hands, encircling his small stillness.

She imagined her hand slipping from her sister's and her ex-husband's and all of them watching Theo disintegrate together.

She imagined Theo's body reintegrating and aging into Robert's.

She imagined Theo's hand coalescing with hers.

Even if her hand closed empty, Christie had to reach, for both of them.

She turned another page.

“Tell me what I should do.”

IDILECT

Ambrose paced the park in his usual way, blowing smoke to his feet as he listened to tumbles of spoken words fading in and out of earshot:

“...Um-hm...um-hm...um-hm...”

“...when did they say they were...”

“...I tried planting these last year, but they wouldn't...”

Together, he and the objects of his surveillance edged around petals and bulbs dangling along footways, each stepping their measured meters. He was always terribly aware that the ums and uhs of his fellow strollers rarely offered much in the way of content, but as a writer and something of a journalist, he found value in the rhythms of their maundering. Relieved of any demand for coherence and originality, and so often decontextualized as one half of a cellphone call, the blending cadences were to his always aging and now officially aged mind instructional in a reiterative sort of way at their best, and cozy with sentiment at their worst, which wasn't so bad.

He liked listening, preferably alfresco, which was reason enough for him to believe that his frequent walks weren't the waste of time they likely appeared to be to the half-interested observer, or to the slightly more invested Ben Fulton. Though he hadn't charged him with it outright, his editor at *Panoply* had shown himself susceptible to the temptation to blame Ambrose's long rambles in the park, and his longstanding predilection for gin once home, for his habit of threatening to blow deadlines at the burgeoning magazine.

Fulton was 64 to his 61 and resentful, Ambrose thought, of each of those years and their inability to gain him ground professionally against his own steady meander to intellectual and

literary fame. But, like more than a few who traveled in the sorts of circles that cared about such things, Fulton probably believed that Ambrose had lately lost his inspiration to the sometime breeze and sometime gale that swept in off the sound, wound up and delivered to their rocky shore from somewhere over the Atlantic, assuming the gin wasn't to blame. Ambrose would have agreed had it been explicitly stated by Fulton or anyone that his political and cultural writing of late had fallen into a stylistic, if not perceptive, torpor. This was at minimum a misalignment of priorities with regard to his late-career, retirement-inducing, two-thousand-word weekly meditation, which required less of his former rigor as a globetrotting journalist than it did of his panache at recapitulating world events gleaned first- and second-hand by real, active journo's, of which Ambrose was not one any longer.

Unvarnished reportage had never been his forte anyway, and to adopt a stripped-down style this late in the game felt more like atrophy than late-period revitalization. If he was being honest with himself, he had hoped to fulfill his weekly commitment with amusing reminiscences and dry-runs for his percolating memoirs, with possibly a catty reappraisal or two of sacred contemporaries for whom his affections had sufficiently waned and, on rare occasions, a cultural insight. He had certainly seen enough martini glasses rattle from not-quite-distant artillery fire in hotel bars run by jittery skeleton crews to keep himself and the mid-to-highbrow readership of *Panoply* diverted.

“...I tried calling twice yesterday, once today...”

“...oh my god, it's almost three...”

Ambrose stopped to lean against his favored railing in linen pants and rolled sleeves, facing the water, still a handsome enough figure when he tried. He listened to the voices riding what was thankfully a breeze, thankfully mild on a late spring afternoon. He sometimes craved

the frigid blast, perhaps to vicariously punish distant violence or exploitation or depredation or mendacity with a cutting sea spray on his own benumbed flesh, or to punish himself for letting such a wrong tax him beyond the average share of the moral bill, or to lambast himself for such a self-pitying acknowledgment of his own moral pangs. But today he let himself indulge in a warm and sunlit bath. It was almost as if no one was hurting or getting fucked over anywhere; so convincing was the lie of a sunny day.

“...like I know she *forgives* me, but does she *really* forgive me...?”

Ambrose had to stifle a snigger when he saw a man probably in his seventies drop his ice cream from its cone at the feet of his wife not ten paces from the small cart selling them. He guiltily concealed his mirth by cupping his cigarette hand to his face in an affected way that he never would have deployed otherwise while the woman fussed at a vanilla smear on her husband’s tan pants.

Each article of his, bearing examples as they did of “devastating eloquence,” in the breathless opinion of more than one early reviewer, was a brick surplus to the monument that he had spent his life building and which had seemed to him complete for far longer than he cared to admit. But he still felt that handing in his weekly column allowed him the minor satisfaction of augmenting the surplus. The monument stood redoubtable and mute, the words of its construction already spoken in the writing, piled high and shifted by slides as each addition perversely tantalized him with the possibility of collapse.

Besides the legacy business – which in fairness to himself he spent even less time considering than he did rereading the past work on which his reputation rested – it was no small pleasure that each new column, good or bad, effectively delivered a cuff across Fulton’s thin,

patrician mouth each Monday evening. Pining for his star contributor to succeed and fail at the same time must have exhausted him, which energized Ambrose as the sun did.

A thin, late-middle-aged woman looked up from the flower beds to follow a light gust and, Ambrose thought, to subtly acknowledge their proximity to one another near the sea-viewing edge of the park. She brushed her neck-length hair behind her ear, her eyes radiating curiosity and a kind of well-earned humor that appealed to Ambrose. He sent an understated glow in her direction, smiling without smiling in what he hoped was perceptible as the return of service that he meant it to be.

He was always somehow surprised by his contemporaneity with women of her (his) age, and always felt warmed by their generational kinship even as he found himself mystified as to how to speak to them in any way except politely. They always seemed to have lived different years than he had, but maybe that was because he had so often been with someone younger.

As his and their years had passed, his self-proclaimed intention to date his own age had increased even as said practice had never been more prevalent than his younger, more cavalier nights and weekends, when the difference of a year or three in his favor was enough to make a relationship of any length intelligible to him. Now that his hands were firmer on the wheel, to pull over and give someone his own size a turn felt like an alarming abdication of a hard-won command. But he enjoyed the scenario hinted at by an attractive, confident woman of their shared vintage near him and noticing, and he hoped she appreciated it too.

By Ambrose's calculus, his shared advance through the years with Fulton, on the other hand, could have affected their relationship in one of two ways: by calcifying their animosity and licensing any expression thereof in spite of professional and social inhibitions, or slackening it with the absurdity of their post-middle-aged bodies and decline in mental and physical elasticity.

As it turned out, the second possibility had come to pass, and as Ambrose felt himself being gradually ushered out of the teeming, thrashing pool of eligible straight males and onto a sparsely populated green on which the air was still and the sound strangely muted – not entirely unlike his park on such a day as that – he felt the piercing sexual resonance inherent in professional jealousy wane.

Writers, editors, and intellectuals at large sharing Ambrose's carnal suasion had always inspired a far grander need in him to humiliate by comparative achievement than his gay and female rivals, no matter how great an edge he may have already possessed in the bedroom or on the page. But as the august celibacy of a retiring playboy loomed, every opponent became as if gay or female, and so escaped the greater part of his enmity. What had once been a near manic urgency towards one-upmanship had faded to a more curative, contemplative pruning of a mostly finished hedge, he stopping not infrequently to glance with faint benevolence towards those on other lawns.

His and Fulton's fires had cooled in their hearths, leaving them just enlightened enough to disdain without hating. Ben wasn't so odious to him, really; they were nearly friends. They had the same alma mater, after all, Ambrose having arrived at Columbia a boyish import out of Harrow and the British New Left just in time for their studies to overlap for their respective first and final years, though they hadn't met so early in their careers – and they were careers, even then.

Ambrose watched a middle-aged man of slight build in a desperately unstylish denim cap, tightened all the way around the nubby volume of his head so that the tail of the leather fastener dangled ridiculously as he peered about at nothing. Ambrose was suddenly waterlogged with the cold fear that he appeared as this man did, weakly strangling his afternoons in an urban

park long enough after the end of the traditional lunchbreak to give himself away as a retiree or something very like one. But the rest of the man's outfit – nondescript windbreaker, t-shirt emblazoned with an American football logo that Ambrose recognized as older than fresh and newer than ironic, and jeans of unfashionable fit and colour whose elevated hems exposed battered sneakers and raised socks – mollified him with its declaration that its wearer was an unpolished nondescript. Ambrose wasn't that exactly, but it was something to avoid as the demands on his appearance were increasingly made by him exclusively. He stubbed out what was left of his cigarette.

Lately, he wasn't sure how cool his embers really were. He didn't need to see his editor in person very often as a weekly contributor, and might not more than a few times a year were it not for Andrea Telig. Initially rank with the suggestion of being an obligatory youth hire, she managed first to write with brio about culinary discoveries her contemporaries couldn't afford and alternative film festivals and obscure gallery showings far enough from the mainstream circuit that her contemporaries might consent to attend, and, secondly, unwittingly, and just by being, to draw him in to his previously ignored *Panoply* office, not so distant from his park, far more often than he would have appeared in her absence.

He was vaguely embarrassed at the Rothian cliché of his wanting to sleep with her at their respective ages, but what he did, and a cliché he was. She was erudite and witty, and rewarded visual inspection, certainly, but he had to admit, if only to himself, that a few dropped mentions of her appreciation for his early work had been the real spark for him. His desire for her had constructed in him the usual complex of intertwining simplicities that being in such a position entailed. The twinkling regard and crusty aggravation with which he observed and supported her flourishing literary and critical accomplishments lay uncomfortably alongside the

vulgar lust he felt for her, which could be diagramed on a sliding scale spanning from a simple appreciation for her liveness, on through the shape of her eyes and the peculiarity of the motions of her buttocks, limbs, lips, breasts, and hair, and the physical sum they produced, past the charmingly unadorned inflections of her speech, to the way she refused to deflect his praise for her own work, which he never proffered disingenuously and which she never took for granted. She was remarkable, and he felt the urgent need to erase his own drawn face and stocky torso from his reflective consciousness each time before he spoke with her over coffee, or lunch, one time, or just a desk, usually.

He could have predicted this thirty years earlier for himself as he was now, and here his predictable self was, in the flesh, or in this case not, sadly. Rather than revisiting the stymied libido of adolescence, he might have even preferred the outcome, just as likely, that their interactions would have devolved into a petty but platonic generational rivalry, with Andrea facing him only two years removed from a blog, albeit a hugely popular one, and an unpaid internship under Fulton. But the fact was that Ambrose had refused to acknowledge anything like competition as soon as he realized that the blade of her wit, still singing on the grinding wheel, would have publicly eviscerated his aging trunk and spilled its tired guts at this late date. Better to want to sleep with her.

“...thought he might like that for his birthday...”

Still, it all kept him engaged and keenly motivated, the way the column unfortunately hadn't of late. This week it was Syria, as it had been quite often in the past eighteen months since he had established “The Weekly Cull,” his title for a tightly spaced two or three pages – printed, oddly – set aside just for him, and nearly as often for Mr. Assad and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi these days. Such a social collapse and civil unrest in Western Asia would normally have been just the

collision of postcolonial blowback and upstart fascistic overreach to tantalize his lower portion, but this week's attempt at a flirtation with impassioned yet level analysis was turning out limp, and it was Friday already.

His park would be prohibitively hectic for the two weekend days, which he normally set aside anyway for confinement and intensive clacking on keys to justify his meditative walks. If he was going to hit upon something coherent about the topic – which was not necessarily *at hand* there in his park on the eastern edge of the North American continent, though it was certainly at a few throats on the other side of the Atlantic – he would have to do it soon. It was almost three. After three!

“...yes, but, I mean, I told her, remember, last week...”

Reports of so-called moderate rebels armed by America's spies shooting self-styled moderate rebels armed by America's soldiers, and their gracious return in kind, certainly interested him. But then he didn't want to be too hard on his adopted homeland when they had so unexpectedly gone against type and refused to strategically endorse the epicene dictator with an inherited army he wasn't afraid to aim at the least armed hands in Aleppo.

Russia had slipped easily between those sheets, though, and this interested him too; but again, he wondered how biting his take could be when the strategy had benefited the perception of Putin as a military patron so awfully and predictably well. He marveled at the choice left to him between two fading empires, all the more dangerous in their declines, and the guard dogs administering rented lands, rabid and nearly unleashed by this stage, gnawing wantonly at each other and the bloodied heels of their former and current sponsors.

“...in a whirlpool, everything meets at the center...”

Then there was the Neapolitan connection, with the Italian Camorra mafia network furnishing jihadist militants in Western Europe with military-grade weaponry, suggesting that an overriding young, male, antisocial, outlaw principle that superseded religious or regional interests was at play in every—

Ambrose stopped and half-turned, arrested suddenly by shouts from his shortest-term memory.

What was that he had heard? Whirlpools, what?

He scanned for the source of the clipped phrase, so defiant in its refusal to be banal alongside the quotidian mewls generally heard along his gently sloping footpaths.

Then a ragged bark, issued in the same voice, startled him with its sheer plunge from the finely wrought metaphysical heights of its predecessor. Brief but intense, it was a call with no intended receiver. Ambrose was compelled to see the creature that could bridge the chasm between these two sounds with a single body.

He allowed himself another clumsy twirl, barely concerned for how deranged he might appear, and was instantly consoled by the comparative advantage of decorum he possessed over the source of the stellar phrasing and ensuing belch.

On a bench named for its benefactor, a Margaret R. Pratchley (1919-1997; he hadn't known women of her era to commonly employ the middle initial, which in her case he had privately decided was Rosemary after reading the commemorative engraving one afternoon when caught absent his forgotten copy of *The Paris Review*) sat a tall man, heavily bearded, gaunt of face but great of body in a large, bulky trench coat buttoned completely, a tattered woolen cap pulled low. Cap and head were in equal disarray, if Ambrose could judge by looking. Age was impossible to guess considering the man's soiled and battered condition.

The man stared forward intently at nothing in particular – at no one, Ambrose could verify, and at no object out of its ordinary place or shape. He hadn't noticed Ambrose in spite of how obvious his sudden fixation was. As he stared, the man seemed to chew his own teeth, his jaw continually mulching its next utterance, which apparently had an equal possibility of being refined prose or an obscene non-phrase. He stopped chewing and opened his mouth, pausing on a silently articulated “o” that refused to utter for several unmoving seconds.

Finally:

“Oh! Ha ha! Categorical denial implies... Implies... Implies categorical deniability...
Ha!”

The odd monologist returned to chewing, looking over his shoulder and rubbing the back of his head for the next several minutes, unaware that he had become a one-man show with a one-man audience.

Ambrose was transfixed. As the axiom on the undeniable denial, or something, forced its way painfully from the man's mouth, Ambrose had waited breathlessly for its conclusion even as he anticipated the start of the next in what was beginning to seem a series of intriguing fragments and fruitful non sequiturs. He had stumbled upon some sort of grumbling, ursine genius, spontaneously emitting abstractions as if his skin was a crust over a pressurized, molten core.

Ambrose then realized that he had seen this upright bear not infrequently in his park, though had not until that moment granted him such – or any – attention. He hardly could have known the fecund mind under that cap, or the intermittent burps of ingenuity it released. Had he known, he would have stationed himself nearby and, disguised by a cigarette or his otherwise neglected phone, given the man on the bench the small but discerning audience he so clearly deserved.

Lighting a cigarette he hadn't planned on putting to the flame until he reached his apartment's balcony distantly overlooking the park he occupied, Ambrose contrived an awkward, backward sidle to a tree situated within the limited range of his hearing. Leaning against it and feeling like a first-time drama student unexpectedly conscripted into an exercise demonstrating, as broadly as possible, the concept of "acting naturally," he smoked straight ahead and laid in wait for more pearls to issue forth from the hirsute clam.

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Patience had been tested but rewarded, and more pearls had issued: something about a small canvas set against a larger canvas of the same color having no true borders, and the brief but oddly pungent locution, "paganism is refreshing." Ambrose nearly skipped on his way back to his building, invigorated by the hilarity and incomprehensibility of his find. He even laughed along with a passing skateboarder who pulled off a difficult maneuver closer than he normally would have countenanced.

He had finally left after his new friend trundled off along a trail that led into a deep, coastal wood contiguous to the park that Ambrose only ventured down on particularly palsied writing days. His whirlpool bit in particular was a fascinating angle that could be supported by some of the facts in the desert, if he kneaded the lumps.

Everyone assumed that Syria was flying apart and separating irrevocably like substances in a centrifuge, soldier from rebel, Sunni from Shia, Kurd from everyone else, but perhaps they were all flying to the center, like his source in the park had claimed. Voluntary recruitment for both Daesh and al-Nusra Front was down, and reports from the region suggested that support among the non-affiliated populace was falling as well. Maybe they would all be somehow blasted into moderation, a kind of stunned resolution that anyone waving the flag of

eschatological zeal or ideological purity would be run out of town in favor of nuts-and-bolts centrism, or whatever passed for centrism under what would assuredly still be theocratically oriented governance of one form or another.

In a column as artfully slapdash as his, he could run with it. He looked at the sky over the ocean as he tripped happily home.

Back in his capacious apartment, martini within reach, the oriel windows in his office opened wide so that cooling air moved slowly across bare feet pressed on hardwood faintly reflecting the dusk, he felt the dam break. The reservoir Ambrose had always known to be still full within him, though no longer rippled by his seismic impulse to truth, burst through.

By the time the sun was an hour from rising, his customary time to close up shop, he had nearly the entire piece written with few edits calling for his attention. Ben would find as many as his ego demanded, but it was closer than it had any right to be so soon after its inception. And nearly all of the words belonged to Ambrose.

He put the empty glass in the sink and paused in the afterglow. He hadn't felt quite such a sense of satisfaction in as long as he'd written for *Panoply*, and likely longer, if he really thought about it. His perspective felt flush and redolent, like some previously undiscovered topography in his brain had been touched and was sparking and alive.

The presence of another person – another man – in a moment of private revelation for Ambrose, however unwitting and partial the man's contribution had been, was somewhat unsettling, but also welcome to the part of Ambrose still open to the experience of finding oneself in unexpected company. It was as if the man from the park was there waiting with him on hardwood for the sun to rise. He was repulsed in a way, but also driven inexorably to hear more dispatches from the underneath.

He knew, now that he had a chance to recall, that he had seen the man before, more than a few times. He was already reconstructing an assemblage of glimpsed men in trench coats and wool hats from countless spent afternoons of all weathers, always gazing at something beyond sight, always vocal without recipient. He had heard the man speak many times before but hadn't listened, it shamed him to admit privately.

How much hearty nutrition he must have missed in favor of the middle-class twaddle he lined his stomach with instead. More than the sting of unclaimed profits, though, was an upending of the way he viewed himself as a citizen and a chronicler. He had once thought himself the sort of man who gave ear to those who were left unpaid by the average attention, a speaker of and for the people who disregarded the imposed restrictions of class, culture, and decorum and took a knee and lent his time to even the least presentable speaker. That this self-image had failed on closer inspection was of some considerable disappointment to him now.

But the man had more to offer, and would keep on having more, if Ambrose could trust the assurances of incomplete memory. His next surveillance would be dedicated to confirming his hopeful suspicion that the bounty was not exhausted, or somehow a singular event. If it turned out to be true that the man had more borrowable brilliance to speak, Ambrose could cull his harvest each day, as was the imperative implied by the title of his column, after all.

He thought of it as a new kind of found art, left to drift over the Atlantic unheard unless netted and preserved by him, because only he was listening and only he knew what to listen for. His byline would not be diminished for his failing to have uttered such unmoored conceptual rumblings. Rather, the value of his contribution would be identified and measured in the obscurity of their source, and his ability to spot and record them, and incorporate such distant echoes of a misplaced consciousness into stories that were vital now, occurring now.

It was reportage, in its way. Ambrose felt like a journalist again, the flab of his final residency as a languid cultural observer melting away. He had discovered a source – of what, he couldn't be sure. But it was a source that spoke freely, that had insight to offer, not to a story, but to The Story, the archetype of incidence draped over perceptual framework that years of burrowing had revealed to Ambrose in its consistent state in all languages and geographies at countless dawn deadlines.

Somehow, this earthbound, roughhewn man had found a conceptual substratum with unskilled hands, out in the open of the park's empty hours, or among noontime people too ignorant of his discovery to distract him from it. The stilled vagabond had chosen to live and sleep nestled in its bedrock, sounding calls from its depths and reaching, by coincidence and without intention, a listener who had himself glimpsed on occasion this core substance.

This writing would be a kind of collage in Ambrose's hands, a series of glimpses of the essential what. He liked that particular phrasing, in fact, and wondered briefly if he should change the title of his column.

After very brief consideration, he decided against the conspicuity of such a move, given the unusual circumstances that would be attending and also announced by the change. Besides, it was a little precious, on second thought, and would probably come across as an effort on his part to be niftier than could possibly be agreeable to the self-consciously sensitive palates his prose usually encountered on the way down. Perhaps it was his new friend's utter lack of such or any self-consciousness that was so stimulating; Ambrose couldn't be sure.

But all future plots and guesses at the potential mine under his feet would have to wait; he needed his sleep, and a deadline approached. He made for the bathroom, and for the first time in a long time was spared noticing the silence of his apartment.

“You made the cover, sort of,” said Fulton, holding up a copy of that week’s issue, which was entirely devoted to the Syrian crisis, as notably evidenced by the embossed mention of Ambrose’s piece in the bottom right corner.

“I feel suddenly bashful,” said Ambrose, sitting down at Fulton’s desk and reaching for the issue with one hand and a cigarette with the other.

“Please – it’s policy.” Fulton gestured with his chin.

“Of course, I forgot,” grumbled Ambrose as he put the pack back in his pocket. “Pardon begged.”

“You’d remember if you came in more often.”

“I have too much affection for you in your declining years to put you through it.”

Ambrose sighed the riposte, hackneyed by routine and not worth saying with much vigor.

“Well done this week. You had some pep in your step,” said Fulton.

“Careful, that’s a compliment by the slimmest majority,” cautioned Ambrose.

“Your work here is stellar, that goes without saying—”

“Almost always.”

“So, what do you think?” asked Fulton of that week’s cover.

Ambrose gave it his full consideration: a photo of a Syrian mother, face dusted white with plaster and cradling what must have been the body of her child freshly pulled from the rubble of an airstrike, though Ambrose couldn’t be sure because in her arms now was a fat bomb, simulated-cut and fake-pasted in a punkish, overtly seamed collage work signifying – what?

“Your restraint is unimpeachable, as always,” said Ambrose, languorously releasing the magazine from a height sufficient for an audible smack on Fulton’s desktop.

“I love it, personally. You don’t think we’re making a bold statement?” asked Fulton, leaning into Ambrose’s indifference, as usual.

“A bold attempt to prove how desperately *brazen* we all are, maybe,” said Ambrose as he looked for anything new on his editor’s walls, already bored with a man he hadn’t seen in six weeks. He noted a photo he hadn’t seen previously of Fulton shaking hands with Robert Gates, formerly of the Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. Department of Defense. They looked like they were attending a 40-year Skull and Bones reunion. “I’m burning out on Syria. I might go in another direction next week.”

“What are you thinking?” asked Fulton, pulling the maligned issue protectively to his edge of the desk. “Something on Trump?”

“I get a case of the greys musing on civil war and mass murder, and that’s your solution?”

Ambrose wondered what the man in the park was doing at that moment. Solving pi and eating flowers? How much more fecund that conversation would be than the one he was already turning his ankle to wrench himself free of.

Fulton held up his hands like Ambrose had cocked his contempt like a pistol. “Okay, I had to try for something on Trump at this point in the primaries. You wouldn’t believe how many people have asked me if you’re going to do one. Especially upstairs...”

“Tell them it wouldn’t be fit to print,” said Ambrose. “I’m surprised you don’t have a picture of him on your fucking wall. I hear a constant echo of back-patting in here.”

“If you’re going to get grumpy, we can always do this over email.”

“Let’s...” Ambrose went for his cigarettes again as he stood to leave.

“Please, not until you’re outside, Brose.”

“For Pete’s sake, Ben, nobody calls me that anymore, and almost no one did when they did. And if you can tell me what that cover means, I’ll tell you the frames on your eyeglasses make you look sophisticated.”

Fulton picked up his frozen yogurt and stirred delicately.

“I rest my case,” said Ambrose, turning to leave.

“Always a delight,” said Fulton after him.

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Ambrose sauntered back down the cortege of offices he’d passed on the way to Fulton’s, including his own, still locked up since the last time he’d visited and immaculate for the exclusive reason that it was opened too infrequently to collect dust. He approached Andrea’s much more modest quarters near the entrance to the back stairway.

Her door was closed and the lights were off, as they had been when he’d entered. He laughed inwardly at the hollow of disappointment opening up in his belly. He had plummeted straight back to A-levels.

He avoided the main hub of editorial and layout work done by hoi polloi not gifted offices and was mid-reach for the button arrowing down at the bank of elevators when Andrea emerged and nearly collided with him.

She was alone in witnessing his excitable start at seeing her, the blushing immodesty of which he clothed as best he could in a parodic hail of fellowship and greeting of the mid-century sort.

Andrea also leapt, but was already smiling as she settled her coffee before it could leave its cup. “Ambrose! What the—”

Ambrose continued his faux aristocratic recovery: “Apologies, madam, but seeing you within the confines of this office is so unexpected as to be nearly supernatural.”

“You’re one to talk, my hermetic friend. I’ve been here a bunch this week. Honestly,” she insisted.

“You’re right, you’ve been cooped up all day. Care to join me for a walk?” he about-faced, ushering the bothersome elevator door back into its slot.

Andrea rolled her head to the side and blew air at him in feigned exasperation. He shrugged.

She leaned towards him to whisper: “In all seriousness, I think they’re going to fire me if I set one more foot outside today.”

“How about two?”

“Ambrose...”

“They won’t fire you if I have anything to say about it, and I will. Your foot or feet can go where they please,” said Ambrose, the door pathetically sounding a beep in protest and peeking an inch into the entranceway before it was elbowed back. “Fulton is afraid of me. You don’t have to worry about him.”

“I do,” protested Andrea. “I think I still count as new here.”

“Hardly. Besides, he’s a coward, you’ll be fine,” said Ambrose as the buzzer started, shockingly loud and shrill.

“Okay, okay, let’s go,” said Andrea over the noise, imploring him in. “If they didn’t see me come back, then I didn’t really leave again.”

“Both in *and* out of the office. Sort of a variation on Schrödinger’s cat?” asked Ambrose.

Andrea laughed. “Schrödinger’s hack? Sorry, that was kind of punny.”

“You did say you were a hack,” replied Ambrose, smiling sympathetically.

“You’re lucky you’re clever occasionally, or I’d never put up with you.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to otherwise,” he said, finally taking out a cigarette.

“Oh, no, Ambrose, not in here,” she said, wincing from the slender, white stick.

“You too? Jesus,” he grumbled, not bothering to put it away as the elevator doors opened and only the span of the lobby stood between him and his blue wafts of calm.

“You really should stop,” she said, looking slightly up at him with something he hoped might be more-than-casual concern as they crossed the bustling floor.

“*You* really should stop,” he said back.

She snorted and rolled her eyes, saying nothing.

“I’m serious,” he continued as they went through the revolving door together. “You really are too much.”

She laughed.

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By the time they were halfway to the park, a green tea in his hand to match her coffee, he had talked her into going all the way to the edge of the sea with him. He thanked the day for being gorgeous, as so many had been of late.

He had by now fully acknowledged to himself the ulterior, or maybe even primary, motive of possibly encountering his new friend again. His conversation with Andrea could only be improved by picking up a byline or two, the kind of editorial guidance he had never particularly needed and certainly wouldn’t expect to find from Fulton if he had. As they crossed the street and found the footpath, he surreptitiously kept one eye and ear scanning the background for bluster and strange wisdom.

As he and Andrea fell into the kind of delicate, observant step so encouraged by parks, and his park especially, they found the need to speak less urgent. This development initially made Ambrose nervous, as it deprived him of his main selling feature and left only his barely managed age- and alcohol-related distension for her to appreciate. He quickly amended his self-assessment of the way he was minus speech to include several clear positives, including his ability to dress himself and the facility his chestnut hair had in responding to the wind in just the proper way to convey “dashing.”

Andrea’s auburn tresses parried the wind’s thrust exceptionally well too, and may well have had his beaten. She didn’t seem to need to adjust them, at least in his eye, and so only did when requiring punctuation on silence or a compelling something she said, or a flatteringly attentive consideration of a something he said. But nothing she did read to him as practiced, as her writing also thankfully didn’t – a rarity these days, it seemed to him.

“You met Chuck Colson in this park to interview him for *Intents and Purposes*, right?” she asked with a nonchalance that disguised the question’s fannish specificity, gazing about as if on the Golden Age Universal lot while aliens and centurions ambled by.

“In 1981,” Ambrose affirmed. “I met Chomsky here too. We discussed East Timor.”

“You really grilled Colson on his evangelism.”

“Obviously. You wouldn’t expect piety from me, would you?” he asked, aiming for a suggestive undertone.

“I’m surprised he didn’t get up and walk out on you,” she said, holding Ambrose in a sidelong appraisal.

“The view was too lovely to leave,” he responded, cringing inwardly at his second attempt at suggestion.

Her only reply was to look about her as if to verify that this was true more than thirty years later.

“I can see why you still come here so often,” she remarked.

“Have you been surveilling me?” he asked.

She looked at him, surprised: “The first time we had coffee you mentioned that you come here almost every day.”

“Oh, did I?” If he had ever needed another reason to feel old, an amnesiac misplacement of what must have been a thuddingly boring monologue to a much younger woman about his park-going would certainly suffice. Abashed, he sipped his tea. “I suppose I don’t bring as much to a conversation as I used to, or as much of it with me when I leave.”

“You mentioned it off-hand. I asked what your social schedule was like that you could never slog your way into that big office we’re all so envious of.” Andrea seemed to be hurriedly dragging his self-effacement down until it balanced properly with its counterpart, a swaggering, self-satirizing performance of himself for her benefit.

Ambrose took her invitation to pull himself back onto the proscenium lip and regain the grand, wobbly charisma that seemed to endear him to her. “Certainly, there is a social responsibility on my part to attend to this humble esplanade and its regulars and irregulars. I’m not sure how they’d get along without me, frankly.”

“I’m not so sure, either,” Andrea, relieved, said to his shoulder, growing nearer to hers as their path circled a fountain and opened on water mottled with light.

Andrea stopped at the railing and looked over the rises and falls, he a step behind.

“So, how much of me *have* you read, if I may ask?” Ambrose asked with the most casual forward lean he could muster. “I’ve risked sounding vain just there.”

“I know you would be so mortified to come across as vain,” she replied. “Why do you ask?”

“I have to confess that I feel at a disadvantage in some way. You’ve known me for so much longer than I’ve known you.” Ambrose looked to her. “It’s true I’ve hung on every word of yours since you’ve arrived at *Panoply*, but that’s made me feel a different sort of disparity these days.”

Andrea rolled her eyes self-disparagingly. “You’re a little generous, I would say.”

“You know that isn’t true,” he replied, smiling away her deflection, itself rare. He thought she must have been in a vulnerable mood.

Andrea didn’t take her eyes off of the vast undulation in front of them. “It feels silly to say, but it’s your fault, so I will: I have been in awe of you in one way or another for a very long time. Since I was in high school, actually.”

“So, six months ago?” he asked, elated by her disclosure, and not totally sure that a quip was the right response.

She punched his arm. “And thank you,” she added.

“I’m flattered, but you’re confirming all of my worst suspicions,” he continued hesitantly.

Andrea allowed a light acknowledgment before carrying on.

“Hang on, because it’s actually a bit complicated,” she said, “Young me was dazzled by your style on the page, and in those dustjacket photos. You were still in your forties in some of them.”

“Can we go back to the part about the awe?” he asked.

“I’m giving you a hard time, but seriously, the open collars and the aviators, and that hair, my god,” she gushed, egged on by Ambrose’s guffaw. “But *By All Means* just totally obsessed me, I have to say. I had never had that perspective on Madeleine Albright of all people, and it somehow seemed so true and so much deeper than anything even she could have said for herself.”

“Thank you. I mean it,” he replied.

“Hang on,” she cautioned again, still looking at the water more than at him. “The admiration I felt became resentment by the time I got to Brown. Deep resentment, for a while. No, it was hate, actually, now that I think of it. I was in awe of how much I hated you and what you represented.”

Though not the first time he had heard this, he felt it land more surely than usual. “And what did I represent, may I ask?”

“I’m not totally sure yet. The unmovable center, I guess. Something certain, something male... The center of knowledge and all the rest – wisdom, power, potency, everything. Like Albright, she became yours suddenly, just by writing her the way you did. That didn’t seem fair to me, and I was embarrassed at how much I bought into it when I was younger.”

“I never made any claims on—”

“I just hated that you did everything right and put every word where it needed to be, but not for the sake of the subject. It was more for yourself, or so I started to believe. I’m not as sure now,” she said, looking at him finally. “But it seemed that way to me then, and I hated that I recognized that in your work so young. I wished you could have hidden it from me a while longer. *For my innocence.*”

“I was far too late for that, I’m sure,” he chanced joking.

“And now I hate you for a different reason,” she said, ignoring him.

It was his turn to laugh: “Bloody hell. What did I do this time?”

Andrea took the time that she needed to answer: “You gave me the idea that it could be my turn,” she said, her eyes back on the water. “At the center. And that’s not why I’m doing this. I got into this business because I thought the time had come when a sort of democratic dispersement – word?”

“No.”

“—Dissemination of power and voice and word had arrived. And every week I seem to get closer to being the same, I don’t know, gatekeeper of opinion and style that it seemed like you were. It feels like a betrayal of my younger self and people younger than me. Women younger than me, honestly.”

When he was sure her addendum was no longer dangling, Ambrose chose his words with a care to match hers: “On the count of your self-belief and my role in it, I can hardly be blamed for my enthrallment with your potential, I’ll never mind saying. And this mantel of literary power you speak of, it was certainly never my intention to bestow—”

“I’m not blaming you, Ambrose. I take responsibility for my position.”

“But I also must take responsibility for and admit to consciously pursuing the position you want to run from now—”

“Of course, it’s the game you were born into, but my generation can make a new one.”

“Yes, but don’t hate yourself for having the ability to speak in a way that others can’t.”

“I don’t hate it, I feel an imperative to reject it.”

Ambrose laid his hand over hers on the railing, the first conscious move on his part to in any way place her physicality under his auspices. Maybe he had taken her somewhat limited

generational and gendered expectations for him as license for it; or maybe she had wanted him to traverse the line separating them physically; or maybe he was the patriarchal dolt she thought him to be after all, but he made the counterintuitive move and she didn't flinch from it or draw into it, leaving him uncertainly adrift in the wake of his action.

He spoke as a way of raising a sail and blindly directing them: "I could buy you an ice cream if you want."

"Look, the truth is, you make me feel fucking stupid when we have conversations, and I am not fucking stupid, Ambrose," said Andrea abruptly, startling him.

He regained himself. "It would be fucking stupid to suggest such a thing. That's the only stupid thing you've ever said, actually."

"Ambrose, I've said plenty of stupid things in your company."

"I must have missed them, then, because I've always been happy to point out stupidity in you, myself or anyone," he replied, drawing his arm back to encompass the rest of the park.

"And you're not so smart that you should make me feel stupid," she continued adamantly.

"Not so smart as all that, no."

"Seriously, Ambrose, just stop," she pleaded, thumbing the frustration from her forehead while Ambrose waited, sufficiently chastened. Andrea lowered her hand and sighed: "Why do you talk the way you write? I am a damn good writer, but I just talk like me – just meandering and pointless and common, just shit and duh and more shit, and when I try to talk like you, it's a fucking nightmare, as you well know. Writing is a different story..."

"You're very well-spoken."

"Ambrose!"

“That wasn’t sarcasm! There is value in your vocal rhythms that you haven’t quite captured in your writing, if I may say, which, while natural and commanding, might could do with a little more, I suppose, sturdy self-deprecation of the kind you embody to quite excellent effect in person,” he found himself lecturing without planning to.

“So you get to write with stone-cold confidence for forty years, but I have to doubt and simper and wring my hands?” she demanded.

“Not in the least, but allow the wobble in your legs to go unbraced until they gain their strength, instead of trying to start at a run. If you had read my first book, you’d see that I didn’t begin my career in any such fashion.”

“I did read it,” said Andrea sourly. “It was brilliant.”

“Read it again,” he responded brusquely. “And, by the way, my confidence is my greatest weakness.”

“Oh my god!” shouted Andrea, drawing the eye of several people away from a stunning view of the water. “Your ego is incredible!”

Ambrose resisted the urge to respond with “thank you” and persisted onward: “Expressing ideas that could never be stated as confidently as I typically do while still honouring their fullness and complexity is a flaw that I have not overcome. It points to a quality of straightforwardness that I despise in myself at times. At many times...”

“If you get to have that weakness, then so do I,” said Andrea. “I’ll take it.”

“Fair enough. I only presumed to suggest that there may be found in what you think of as personal weakness a slight correction to your professional course, unless you would prefer to keep your spoken and written selves entirely divided, in which case you’re doing splendidly,” he said with some exasperation.

“So that’s why you talk exactly like you write? Some kind of internal cohesion?” she asked.

“*Excuse me*, but I don’t talk the way I write, I write the way I talk, and I talk like this because I think like this, and because I love the English language and when I discovered that I knew how to use it, I stopped speaking within any social constraints narrower than the inescapable English accent—”

“Yours is extremely thick, by the way,” she interjected meanly.

“Excuse *me*, it is robust and non-regional, not *thick*, and I use it to share ideas in polite conversation not normally associated with said in a way that might feel like a façade to you but which is entirely natural to my way of thinking and expressing, two activities which all of my years have been dedicated to making indistinguishable,” said Ambrose, making his point with some force even while propped on his elbow on the railing. “If you feel in some way inferior to me in our conversations, I can only say that I am genuinely distressed by this, not only because it puts me at risk of being deprived of your company, but also because it isn’t true.”

Suddenly left with only the ambient voices and woodnotes of the park, Ambrose looked uncertainly, almost anxiously after his words as they alighted on her.

Andrea looked away from him again to the ocean, and she suddenly appeared ten years younger, somehow smaller and more childish, and her hair was out of place for the first time, stringed and cobwebbed and matted to her face by the wind. As soon as Ambrose saw her shocking vulnerability, he was terrified that he had shattered her young confidence, still surrounded as it was by scaffolds and chisellers. He wanted desperately to undo everything he had just said, his ridiculous suggestion to undermine herself in her writing, but he feared making the damage worse with his cloddish hands.

She turned to him finally, his heart jumping with relief and the anticipation of reprisal, which did not come.

“Maybe I’ll let the two of me talk,” she said, brushing her hair back to perfect. “Me-Writing and Me-Talking. When they’re ready. No guarantees, but we could try negotiating something between us.”

He nodded to her gesture of humility. “If it could eventually be said that I mediated such a peace, it would be my profoundest pleasure, Ms. Telig.”

She nodded back, matching his solemn formality.

They replaced a tense, breathless silence with one of reprieve. She let him speak their way out of it.

“You still haven’t answered about the ice cream.”

Andrea bent slightly and seemed to laugh silently into her folded hands. She returned upright, turning to Ambrose.

“We have to finish it before we get back to the office. Or before I do, anyway,” Andrea said just as an immense trench coat in a wool cap stepped behind her to the railing nearly at her back, she unaware and facing Ambrose, who squelched his own surprise.

Looking over Andrea’s head, Ambrose saw the man mostly in profile and much nearer than he had allowed himself to get the other day. There was a hollowed quality in the bearded face he hadn’t noticed before, as if the man was gradually speaking his head empty, and Ambrose saw in his eyes a jaundice and fatigue that was alarming up close. The fellow had seen better days, or so Ambrose hoped.

The man scratched his wool cap and pulled at the air with his nose.

Seeing him looming behind her, Ambrose briefly wondered if he could prolong the accident of their encounter just long enough for the man to speak over Andrea's concluding pause, but he thought better of it and lightly took her shoulder to guide her away from the railing.

Before puzzlement could congeal into offense at his wordless commandeering of her, she caught the huge man over her shoulder and looked back to Ambrose with alarm.

"Was he there the whole time?" she stage-whispered, horrified.

"Just now," he muttered, glancing back at the man, who hadn't seemed to notice them at all, and certainly not enough to be insulted into silence, as Ambrose feared. When they were a few steps distant from him, he removed his hand from Andrea's shoulder.

"Thanks for the save," she said, softening.

"Of course," he replied casually. "He's harmless though. I see him here. He even chats with me from time to time."

"Really?" asked Andrea, suddenly impressed. "That's very sweet. He doesn't recognize you?"

"I'm a new face every time we talk, as far as I can tell," mused Ambrose, unsure if he was lying to Andrea for the first time.

"I guess I was kind of an asshole to him," she said regretfully.

"You're excused by the size differential," said Ambrose, waving off her concern. "And the hygiene differential..."

"I guess so." She allowed her arm to press to his as they walked away from the hulking object of their discussion and towards the confectioner and his line three deep. "So, as I mentioned before our friend arrived, I don't have much time for ice cream. But I still would like some."

“I’ll finish what you can’t,” he said, leaning into her lean as, in the instant of their mutuality, the new-old voice reached him and he knew without having to look that it was *him*, barking faintly at his back.

What was he saying now? The listing what?

“I hope you like strawberry, because you might have to finish it,” threatened Andrea.

Ambrose couldn’t be certain of what he thought were flirtatious vibrations, couldn’t hear them with the same crystalline clarity that he normally did as most of his ear pulled back to the calls of the calling man.

He strained over the clatter of the ice cream scoop into its container and the tendered thanks of the customer ahead of them. He hoped Andrea would reflect on the small, chalked menu for just a few seconds longer to allow him to hear what only he could.

Risking a glance over his shoulder, Ambrose saw the man leaning and cooing over the fountain now, almost close enough to lap at the synchronized jets spouting arabesque lines in front of his unseeing face. His mouth was open, readying to birth again.

Ambrose stilled his pulse to hear him.

“Lis—... list—... listing on one side, lifting on the other. Ha!”

Ambrose thrilled at another fish snatched from the bear’s mouth. The first shoots of a piece on economic inequality – the listing and lifting of society and so forth, perhaps something on the Trans-Pacific Partnership – were starting to sprout.

“Are you going to let me get away with that, Ambrose?” Andrea asked, catching the distraction in his eyes and following them to the trench coat as it wandered towards the flower beds. “Did that guy say something?”

The man hacked loudly, hollowly, and spit into a bed of catnip so violently that he stumbled. Ambrose couldn't be sure, but he thought the sputum that sprayed over the flower's tiny, pink blooms may have been red.

"I'm not sure. I think so," said Ambrose, now certain that he had lied to her for the first time. "What crime have I left unpunished?"

"Pardon me?" she asked, confusedly returning to their conversation.

"What did I nearly let you get away with?" he asked.

"Oh," she said, regaining her bearings. "I said that you give me the impression that you're a one-scoop vanilla kind of guy. Plain, no toppings, even. What say you?"

"We'll see what say I, won't we?" he said, turning indignantly to the man behind the cart, wide-set and squinting in the sun.

"Oh boy," lamented Andrea.

"How many flavours can you fit on a cone?" demanded Ambrose.

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They went by, weeks and their stories, on earth and in his column:

"Pulp Fact: The Sordid Details of Sri Lanka's Bloody Peace"

"Any Sentence Worth Writing Once...: The Unfortunate Forgiveness of Jonah Lehrer"

"Two in the Bush: Jeb Fails to Outride Father and Brother on the Trail"

Or, if Ambrose were to more accurately trace their germination:

"...long silences often lead to the best conversations..."

"...the only value in a traced line is in its deviations..."

"...for the first time, the king made the jester laugh..."

Ambrose had been an assiduous collector, or collaborator, as he had begun to think of his relationship with the man in the park. He had been arriving earlier than he had before and leaving later, particularly if the man took his time coming in from the trees. They had become quite the old pair, achieving a practiced familiarity sharing space on juxtaposed or parallel benches, or walking with matching gates just outside a radius that would have signalled companionship to an observer.

The man had lately been succumbing to coughing fits of increasing frequency and length which were concerning, certainly, and which sometimes partially obscured his speech or left it altogether uncatchable, no matter how determinedly Ambrose listened. He had been compelled by one whooping eruption to consider a sponsored trip to an emergency room, though he hadn't acted on it, instead taking the time over the following days to monitor his friend's health even when work waited at his desk.

One particularly voluble afternoon when the coughing fits had abated, Ambrose had taken the chance of following the man as far into the thicket as he dared and was rewarded with the "traced line" line, a sentiment that hit him so sensitively that he entertained an abbreviated worry that it was a reprimand for him. But Ambrose dismissed the notion that his friend was privy to his sampling after he watched him take one step off the public path and lift his coat and lower his pants to defecate.

By the time he was home, Ambrose had half of a piece on the nascent attempt at a comeback by the recalcitrant Lehrer written in his head, and with a mere fraction of the plagiarism his subject would have employed.

Andrea had asked him to dinner not long after she had forced three rainbow scoops and half of her strawberry on him, telling him she wanted to watch him eat real food because you

could tell a lot about a man by how he eats real food. He asked if he was allowed to use utensils, or if anything more technocratic than hands and teeth would interfere with her primal understanding of the stuff of his maleness. She had responded that he may use knife and fork, but only because he was a cultured man, which she could tell by how poorly he had fared with the ice cream, which was plebeian and childish, and so outside his wheelhouse. She said they were adults and could eat real food and drink something stronger than tea and coffee if they wanted to. He reminded her that he was more adult than she was and that he refused to keep her out past curfew. She made a bet with him that she could stay up later than he could.

The dinner had tasted good, and he introduced Andrea to the chef, which impressed her almost to the point of irritation, but after all of their back and forth they had confined their relationship to that of friends and colleagues, having stayed far enough back from the threshold to avoid any curdling of their rapport. He had been the one to confine their relationship, actually. For the time being. At least, he thought it was him.

She had certainly surprised him by shifting to the other foot, and though she was sending overtones in his direction, he suddenly felt differently about her after offering his advice in the park, however unhelpful it might have been. Giving counsel had so often been the prelude to sex that he was unsure how to feel in the wake of his unexpected turn from the practice, especially with a woman who held him in such a rare captivity. For her part, she had given the impression of simultaneous relief and discontent at their stalled intimacy. They made plans to share another meal, then another ice cream, then a coffee, but weeks had gone by, and he hadn't been back to the office in the intervening time.

Perhaps the complexity of his reaction to her was his reason for constraining their play to the verbal. Perhaps there was something there he didn't want to ruin, or just hadn't figured out

how to integrate with the other thing. Perhaps he was old. Whatever it was, he wasn't entirely happy about the incompleteness of their outcome thus far, and had avoided it by plunging into his continuing resurgence on the page.

Still, the mouth under the wool cap hadn't dreamed of shutting up, and whatever skittishness Ambrose had relating to Andrea, he had no trouble embodying the good listener for his friend in the park. Between his itinerant savant and the sparkling future Andrea assuredly had in front of her, Ambrose was feeling the stirrings of mentorship more strongly than he ever had. He found a surprising thrill in having shaped, whether as advisor or editor, two such emergent voices.

And with his own work on the rebound, Ambrose had become convinced that another wing would have to be added to the mausoleum he was building around his career before its last kicking leg could be shut in. A new piece on Britain's tenuous place in the Eurozone was taking shape thanks to some garble the man had said about an umbrella wide enough to cover everything collapsing under the water it would have to carry. Ben would hate to love it, which made Ambrose smile as it always did.

He was leaving the barber's, pared back slightly, color monitored and discovered to be holding up remarkably well, even at the temples. He strolled towards a falling sun pierced by the silhouette of his building.

A spasm against his upper thigh notified him that he had a voicemail, a feature newly enabled with Andrea's help at their dinner. He considered ignoring it, but he thought it might be from her, although she did seem to prefer texting.

The phone in his hand told him he had six missed calls and nearly as many voicemails, with two texts on top of it all. Bloody hell, did he really know so many people, and was his upper thigh really so insensitive?

The first text was from Andrea, delightfully.

He tilted his phone away from the sunset and squinted: *Ambrose, I need you to call me right away!!*

Ambrose stopped, his skin cooling the air around him.

He thought about calling her immediately, but looked at the second text first, also from her.

AMBROSE!!!

His phone was at his ear before he was finished reading his name. He realized he hadn't entered Andrea or anyone else as a contact yet and couldn't remember her number. Before he could go back and check the text, the phone asked him if he would like to access unheard voicemail messages. He tapped 1 for yes.

Andrea's voice: "Ambrose, I need you to call me right away, okay? Don't call anyone before me, please, okay? We need to talk about what's going on. Everyone knows, that asshole made sure it leaked all over the office, that fucker, and it'll probably be online soon— Just please, please, please call me."

Ambrose was swimming in place. Next unheard message? Yes, please. Please, please, please.

Fulton's drone: "Ambrose..." His name was followed by a sigh and a longer pause than he should have been expected to tolerate, though silence was not appreciably different from Ben's idea of speech, was something of a relief when he finally noticed it.

Ambrose took his turn sighing when Fulton’s voice returned: “I suspect you’ve been waiting for this call. I can’t describe to you how it feels to have to make it.”

Ambrose skipped to the next voicemail.

Fulton again: “Ambrose, it’s better if you come in and we talk about this in person. Nothing’s over, nothing’s going to be decided right away, but it would take some of the pressure off of me if—”

With a “fucking *hell*” and a “get a grip, you old ham,” Ambrose skipped forward again.

Fulton: “Ambrose, I can’t help you if—”

Next.

Fulton: “Ambrose, at my insistence, Chris and Stefania have both flagged additional passages. The phrase ‘in a whirlpool, everything meets at the center’ was used in your last Syria piece and also in a 1993 piece on Sarajevo from an issue of *Cut/Paste*. I was editor there at the time. Next, the phrase ‘One can be assured that if a boat lists on one side, it lifts on the other’ was used in your Trans-Pacific piece and again – previously, rather – in 1994 about NAFTA. A more minor one was your use of ‘the principle conceit of paganism is refreshing,’ which was found two weeks ago in the Bernie piece and also appeared way back in ’79 in *The Regal Pauper* in the sentence, ‘As a dispersed cosmology, the principle conceit of paganism is refreshing if only for its refusal to center on a single locust of moralistic and existential authority.’ Some of these are minor, some more significant, but they’re all yours, not somebody else’s, so this doesn’t have to be fatal—”

Ambrose brought the silence back.

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At a run, the trail's sleepy decline felt more like a plummet. Ambrose's body made its throbbing demands for him to stop, but he accepted gravity's help propelling him forward, a toy car on a track. His flowers and fountains were far behind, the treed pathway mimicking the curve of the sound back out to sea as it threaded deeper into the woodland in the last light of day.

He went deeper than he had ever gone, deeper than he had ever wanted to go, his body and mind pinched in a debauched paroxysm that only allowed him to vulgarly push forward, push in, push farther than his memory could follow. He had somehow become lost on a trail that didn't turn or split.

He searched for the man in the new night, listened for his calls, which usually did not bow to solitude or impolite hours but yelled on as was their imperative. He wondered where his voice had gone now that he really needed it.

Ambrose's feet slapped three steps more than he intended before he could bring his bloated carriage to a halt. Lying all the way across the pavement was the trench coat, the wool cap at one end and what Ambrose for the first time noticed were wingtip Oxford dress shoes at the other. For some reason he was surprised enough to see the man's face under the cap that he flinched. The man's yellowed eyes were open and saw nothing, which was not unusual; that his mouth was open and said nothing was even more unusual than his sudden, reclining presence in front of Ambrose's aching feet.

Ambrose crouched with ragged breath, beginning several shoe lengths back from the unmoving form before shuffling on his heels until he was within arm's reach, his body shaking and leaping and trying to compel him away as if from a flame. He looked on the man's face, on the starvation belied by the man's sheer size elsewhere. Ambrose's gaze slid from the eyes to the lips drawn back from the teeth.

Ambrose extended a fidgety hand towards the man's mouth that had in some way spoken so many of his words and held fast before it, feeling the stillness from inside even as it was hit by a cold, steadily rising crosscurrent from the water. Then he did what he had seen an interviewee do to a newly dead Cape buffalo in Zimbabwe: he very gingerly touched the man's exposed eyeball. The lid did not flutter or close. Nothing on the body reacted, voluntarily or otherwise. This was death.

Ambrose had gone from being frantically unaccompanied to suddenly and disconcertingly among friend, so to speak, and back to alone in such a short span that he felt a kind of schizophrenic uncertainty about his solitude. He pulled his sport jacket tighter against the rising wind and looked down at the body at his knees.

The man's long, slender frame and its permeability to the sea air, even under the coastal awning of tree leaves, must have been the imperative for the cap and hat. At some point over what Ambrose suspected had been years, the cold had likely settled in his marrow and removed any thoughts of hanging up the winter accoutrements on even the most ripplingly hot summer days.

For several moments, Ambrose's shallow exhalations were absorbed by the dry squall as his eyes and ears, as receptive as he could make them, gave him no answers as to how the man had said the words he had. After the silence between them became too much for him to swallow, Ambrose placed his hand on the man's chest to struggle up from his haunches and felt a hard geometry not found in the natural dominion to which the corpus so clearly belonged. He stopped and studied the unbuttoned opening at the top of the coat.

Pulling the lapel back slightly, he saw the right angle of a book corner; opened further on a spine of a color and design almost as ancient and familiar to him as his eyes in the mirror;

further still to a pocket raggedly sewn into and through the lining of the coat; opened wide on a half-dozen such pockets bulked with emergent right angles and spines and the crowns of familiar letters from familiar words like “Ambrose” and “by all means” and “regal pauper” and “heaven can’t wait” and the white of thin sheets typed over and stacked to a thickness he could stand on and stare over the walls he had built around himself always and still.

He unexpectedly thought of Andrea, and what she might think of him after this.

All of those words, gathered by the winds off of the sea in spite of incalculable gusts and blown against this man’s body and the odds, in their proper order, in his order, to be read and heard and written again, plucked from a hugeness of possibility that drove him on in his youth now brought low by finitude, a starlit arrangement terrible and permanent and unmovable, or was it an echo in a hollow, or an absurdist tautology, or perhaps a repeating incantation exalting an impermeable order, or maybe it was just a taunt thrown back at him from around a corner by a boy he couldn’t quite see but whose voice on reflection had sounded very much like his own—

∞

Andrea paced the second *Panoply* landing in the stairwell, brushing her hair back as she habitually and irritatingly did when her neurons were at peak firing, debating with herself whether she should call Ambrose again or maybe go to his building, which he had pointed out to her on their walk from the restaurant to her car. He didn’t seem to go anywhere that wasn’t in sight of his apartment.

She couldn’t even be sure he had heard the message she had already left, or knew how, as they had only texted a few witticisms and retorts by that point. She pictured him turning his phone over in his hands like a tablet inscribed with an untranslatable rune.

“Fuck, come on!” she shouted at the floor.

Earlier, Genevieve had told her breathlessly what she had heard from Alex that he had heard from Stefania after Stefania had ducked out of Fulton's office to hit the ladies' room with the failed intention of avoiding notice. It was pretty much dead to rights, she had told him had told her had told Andrea, and it could be a big blow to her favorite writer guy.

Who said he was my favorite writer guy? she had asked. *Top five*, she had demurred.

She didn't like the organic, unspoken way the office had pinned her to Ambrose. She had spent more time socially with countless other writers and editors than she had with him, and she had thought any comments about her admiration for his early work had been offhand, not at all gushing. She certainly hadn't indicated attraction to him to anyone, and wasn't yet sure she had even felt it since meeting him. The last thing she wanted was to be a cliché – the younger woman. The fan. The *muse*.

But the complete truth was that since learning of Ambrose's repeated cannibalism of his own work and the desperation that his actions seemed to point to, she felt a helpless teenaged anxiety for the man whose words had made her feel grown-up for the first time, a long time ago. He must have been in a crisis that she had totally missed in her brief friendship with him. It occurred to her now how lonely he must have been.

Even so, she was furious that he would shit on his reputation like this. Sure, his latest stuff had been a little flat, and maybe even tired, though she wouldn't have said it at her snarkest, but it seemed so unlike him to dig through stale-dated juvenilia for clippings to glue sloppily into *Panoply*. He was a searcher, a finder, a world traveler, not a navel gazer, even if he didn't seem to stray far from home these days...

She stopped and looked at a winding crack in the cement wall in front of her and knew she had to search for him, as she felt that he had for her, certainly since knowing her, and

unknowingly since she had known him by reading. She opened the door and slipped into her office on the main floor, steps from her hiding spot in the stairwell. Grabbing her jacket, she locked up and had turned back to the exit when she heard her name.

“Andrea!” said Fulton, trotting in her direction, Stefania and Christopher looking after him blankly as they broke off to their respective offices.

Andrea turned heavily, trying her very best not to grimace.

“Hey, Ben,” she said.

“Listen,” he said when he made it to her. “I just wanted you to know that what you’re feeling right now, we’re all feeling it. I’ve known the guy for more than thirty-five years. And, listen, there’s no denying, he’s a great one, and nothing will change that.”

“I know,” she said, smiling with closed lips. “I agree.”

“And sometimes these things happen, we’re certainly not dealing with the first, but I just wanted you to know that Ambrose will need his friends like you and me right now. He wouldn’t have done this if he felt like he had any other choice,” he said, faking congeniality by leaning against the wall.

She thought about downplaying her friendship with Ambrose as she had earlier, but determined that, no, she was his friend, and he was brilliant, and she would help him back up if she could.

“He doesn’t need anything,” she said, so calm and certain that Fulton seemed briefly thrown off. “He’ll be okay.”

Fulton recovered and reached out to briefly pat her upper arm. “If you see him, see if you can’t cajole him in here. He might listen to you.”

She gave the barest of smiles and turned before Fulton could say anything else.

∞

Inside her was a pounding need to locate Ambrose. Something about this scandal coming out now, together with his withdrawal from her and the office even beyond the usual, accelerated her towards him in his absence. Descending the stairwell, she tried to remember which street he lived on.

She fell past six floors and through the lobby into the revolutions of the front door until shot into the night.

She had covered three blocks at a fast walk by the time she came to a realization and stopped. Turning towards the water, the park, she became convinced that he would wander a night like this away, its humiliations and schadenfreude and the sense of aloneness among so many attentions all forming a collective too big to fit, even in his apartment.

She took off on her new course, hurrying towards a friend falling for the hard, waiting ground.

∞

Andrea navigated the shadows and suggested horrors of a park without sunlight, the colors of the flowers veiled, squatting fountains burbling lewdly, granite sentinels bearing official histories gazing on her. She saw a man not carved from rock sleeping on the rim of a fountain bowl, but kept moving forward.

“Ambrose!” she called at half volume, afraid to draw too many eyes and feeling a bit silly yelling for someone who might at that moment be sipping gin and closing out the world in his living room. No voices reached back to her.

She looked around her, struck by how foolish her impulse might have been. Taking out her phone, she saw that it had been called and messaged numerous times, but not by Ambrose. With a frustrated *ahem*, she hit his number again and started back for the entrance to the park.

A small radiance drew her eye to the ground near the beginning of the coastal wood. Blue light marked the opening of the passage, a set-down beacon signalling back to her.

She slowly ended her call, both answered and not, and the light disappeared. Walking towards it, she touched Ambrose's name again and the blue returned, casting daffodils and snowdrops in a pale glow.

Taking off at a run, she almost tripped on herself snagging the dropped phone before tracing the line he had left for her along the seam where waves sometimes crashed.

She ran to the limits of her lungs, wondering if she should be looking off the path to the water for Ambrose's back and arms floating on currents growing more and more disturbed. She could barely see the water anyway, unless passing one of the lamps set along the path, though she didn't know how far in they would last. She wasn't sure that Ambrose had the disposition to harm himself, no matter the circumstances, but then the last thing she would have expected from him was to willfully repeat himself or anyone. If anyone hated cliché more than her, it was him.

She felt suddenly bereft of insight into a man that, between years of reading and their recent time together, she thought she should have been able to reconstitute in her mind with some heft and substance by then. But he had raised the possibility that she hadn't even spent enough time considering her own voice, so she supposed everything would have to be evaluated in the morning.

She carried herself forward, losing sight of the park and most of the city behind her, the lamps thankfully enduring. With both arms, she punched her jacket back up from where it had slipped to her elbows. Far off, where sound met ocean, she saw the lights of a ship.

Her hair rose and she was slapped in the face. Bewildered, she skidded to a standstill. More palms assailed her as she peered through defensive forearms and saw in the dim light paper caught in a cyclical current.

She was surrounded by hundreds of swirling pages, some rising and pirouetting, some wavering just off of the ground, some holding resolutely to the pavement as their corners lifted and fell.

Looking through the paper misting up from the earth, Andrea saw a coat, ripped apart and half stuffed with savaged books, then two discarded shoes, dropped in succession leading off of the path. She followed them with eyes and feet.

Pavement became soft grass, overgrown this far from the tended gardens.

Grass sloped down to the water and a small flat on which a bench sat, on which bench sat two men, both leaning against its back, one smoking and the other not as pages swirled about them.

Andrea drew back on her heels and slipped a little on the damp grass until she sat with her knees up against her. She watched their heads, her face blank and a tear running from each eye.

She heard him remark at something, perhaps the ship drifting in. She watched him run his hand over his hair, all three of them sitting back and relaxing and studying the rising wind, its shape given away by torn pieces light enough to lift and be carried where it went.

FEATURE

Care closed her eyes to bring her invented face into focus.

It was Tuesday, and she was home where her latest contracted book cover – *Dovetail*, a treacly romance – waited to be given face with her peculiar aesthetic, which was notably defined by her signature, artily illegible character mugs. Literary and even some genre readers didn't begrudge one or two manageable bites of abstraction in a book's marketing, which furthermore she'd discovered would justify a fashionably unfashionable use of portraiture and character profile. The trick, she had found, was depicting protagonists and antagonists in illustrations vague enough that they didn't eclipse the reader's self-developed picture of what these characters looked like.

Readers could see anybody they wanted to see in her Francis Baconesque renderings, with all the particularities that they dreamed out from the page intact. Truthfully, Care wasn't sure how they got anything at all from the page, considering how often the characterization in her clients' books was so trite and inconsistent that it made her regret her self-imposed rule to read at least halfway before starting a new project. The authors and publishing houses she contracted with could use all the abstraction she could sell them.

So it was Tuesday, and there were covers to be done, and by certain dates. But she worked from home, and in her home – a single-storey house close enough to the suburbs to be affordable but near enough to downtown for her to feel some connection to her younger self (a fine balance) – was an office in which work was done, and in her home was also a television, near which work was not done. There were those waiting covers that, in the most troublesome way, *weren't* yet, and there was also Netflix, which delightfully *was* already without her having

to do anything to make it so except pay the bill, which she did by designing those covers, and such was her conundrum.

Care put another rice chip in her mouth and turned up the volume on her television.

The lady with the nails didn't have Kathlee-Anne's best interest at heart, she was certain of that. Care was first tipped off by the way Nails changed her polish so frequently and ostentatiously, as many as four or five times per episode, and they didn't seem to span more than a few days of filming time each. She thought that the elaborate colors and patterns were a cloaking device. She never selected anything subtler than periwinkle, and frequently reached into the gaudiest shades of pink, magenta, fuchsia, lilac, all the way to chunky glitter, much of which came across as exceedingly tacky for her age, even among the ladies on *Ultimate Grand Supreme*.

The women featured on the show invited cameras into their Memphis studio as they worked tirelessly to help prepare even the tiniest girls to doll up and win the Ultimate Grand Supreme, the eponymous child pageant prize, coveted and incessantly invoked. The weekly pursuit of this title and the toddling careerism, excruciating elocution classes, and emotional bloodletting of both adults and children that went along with it had sustained the show for five seasons, of which Care was through the first three-and-a-half. She ate another rice chip.

The aspect of the show that had recommended it to Care the most was Kathlee-Anne Kolby, a bundle of blonde ringlets and short limbs that looked to be about six or seven in Care's eye, and countless pageant officials had apparently agreed. One of the most successful competitors over the first two seasons, it was discovered between the second and third cycle of the show that she was actually 27 years old and had been kept in the child pageant business since her debut at the age of four by an unclassified deformation in her pituitary gland that prevented

natural growth and visible aging. By competing across seven US states, she had managed to accumulate serious skills while avoiding detection.

Once discovered, she had become the featured character on the show, the *UGS* crew welcoming her into their studio as an employee and mascot of sorts. In the episodes that followed, she taught contestants how to walk, talk, simper, curtsy, and wave, demonstrating her refined techniques at eye level to ambitious preteens. Care wished she could see if her face truly hadn't aged; when she zeroed in on her button nose, it certainly appeared as she imagined a child's should, and her baby blues hadn't lost any girlish luster, as far as she could tell. Care dropped two rice chips in at once.

But it was Tuesday. A book waited for a cover, as they all did. Beyond her conscious aesthetic choices, hers was a style that had been eroded into being by certain neurological headwinds. Care supposed that her work was therapeutic to some extent, a way for her to navigate her condition and its limitations while exploiting its strengths, even on a personal level. Her friends and parents and sister and ex-husband could be, and needed to be, reconfigured and reinvented in her eyes, just like the characters she designed but couldn't quite see.

Their faces, anyone's face, was not an object in her sight, or even an assemblage, really. A pile of disconnected parts, maybe; a dispersed collection of features that she had been told were supposed to relate to one another in some way, but never had for her. She could see eyes and noses and mouths just fine, but could not draw the lines that linked them in such a way that they were suddenly *someone*. She knew no identifying surface or essence, saw only scribbled equations but never the sum and center of what people think of when they think of people: the face.

She radiated so much energy out from her tiring core trying to put faces together, on Netflix and online and at her door, and still didn't see any of them. The faces she saw in real life saw *her*, though, and she felt the power imbalance distinctly. Her vision was still a perfect 20/10, and she was pushing 40, but faces still appeared to her as if on the periphery of her vision, just out of focus, even when she was staring directly at them.

As a child, she hadn't been able to repeat "*pro-so-pag-no-sia*" back to the pediatrician that sounded the syllables out for her, so the woman had smiled sympathetically and given Care the lay diagnosis of "face blindness." This was to be her sanctioned excuse for walking past unacknowledged best friends, plaid skirts whirling with confusion, her name a baffled query. So much of her had been lost in the fragility of childhood friendship and the way it had of shattering on waxed laminate next to shoes that she would find herself drawn to more than the scrubbed out faces of the girls and boys who wore them. Her want of something to remember of friends both lost and losing led her to the fringes, to the accessories and the hairstyles, to the hands, to any feature that could stand on its own.

Those she called best were gradually mislaid and replaced by longest remaining, and they by most recent, but Care still refused to proclaim face blindness or any other name for her condition to anyone, even if she could pronounce it. She would offer no apology. So she was present and absent at the same time, drifting aloof through playgrounds and schools and lecture halls.

After her design degree, she found herself standing aproned behind a coffee shop counter where nobody was a regular unless they wore six rings and had pink hair. These early experiences had established a proud tradition in her life of work-friends and friends-of-friends

chaining out from her, somehow always two and three degrees separated. There was never a friend one degree apart from her, and never a Kevin Bacon, except on Netflix.

Care's own condition had never been more apparent to her than at her wedding, a larger affair than she'd wanted, given the diametrical disparity between the bride's social circle compared with the groom's. She had been forced to dig into the back benches of her casual friendships to match Connor's four groomsmen, never mind his two conceded ride-or-dies from college that she had negotiated out of the party and to a table with her least favorite cousins. She stood opposite the tuxedoed blank that was hers to have and to hold, seeing veins in hands that shook almost invisibly as they rose on command to apply the ring.

Hands had become important to her long before Connor. Faces fresh or familiar remained just out of reach as she imagined newly forgotten ones did for most other people, so she watched hands instead. And hair. And swallowing throats and lifting shoulders. And clothes and keychains and rings and tattoos and feet in their shoes. But hands held the greatest resonance for her, especially when they were on the television and she could watch them without seeming rude.

Watching: hands on a screen draw and paint lines on tiny faces draped in long, lazy curls, outlining features that are apparently already there.

Fingernails were like hair for hands, were likely to reveal conscious choice and style, but everything on hands could be recognized: the cracks on knuckles, the tanned backs and bleached palms, the subtle, segmented arch of phalanges at rest. She watched them talk to each other, attack each other, interlock and hold each other. She gave them independent life as squid-like avatars for her favorite characters and personalities, delighting in the quintuple language of their

motions. Sometimes they sat uncomfortably motionless. She had heard somewhere that bad actors or bad liars or both didn't know what to do with their hands.

Listening: voices of girls intermingle with shrill twangs as audiences roil impatiently.

The best hands on TV rode vocal undulations. They seemed to pick their dialogue out of the air instead of just accenting what the mouth produced. Sometimes it wasn't even trained actors that were best with their hands, but real people that were given their own shows. On her favorite reality shows, hands became the flailing visual accompaniment of overlapping screams and recapitulations to the camera of outrages witnessed seconds earlier. When a finger wiped a dark tear from a mascaraed eye, Care saw more in the finger than in the eye.

Watching: lashes flutter and eyes rotate away from spindly brushes.

Eyes were just eyeballs, moist and lifeless in their hollows. They certainly didn't look to her like a window into anything. Some facial features studied as independent parts could give clarity on their own, though, even if they had no chance for medley. Care watched mouths occasionally, but people seemed to keep their lips rigid on TV even when collagen and Botox weren't involved. They smiled too much and seemed to hold their lips in the positions they imagined suited them best on camera. Care ended up spending her time trying to read teeth.

Watching: glossy mouths stretch and pout and say nothing.

She often noticed the same stiffness and falsity when talking to strangers. Fleeting, nameless encounters had become proportionally overrepresented in the two years since she had exited her marriage and her old job for contract design work from home and a tepid engagement with a social scene that had so often left her feeling lost, even when she had a guide. Bar lighting left her with only pulsating anonymity, and Tinder bordered on cruelty with its emphasis on the face.

She had been seeing, or peering at, a guy named Brett online. He used a filter on his profile pic, which made his face even more inscrutable to her than it typically would be, but his hair was nice – seemingly parted the wrong way and puffy, but thick and darkish and probably very pettable.

Checking earlier that morning and finding that he hadn't yet responded to her last message, she had tried to dig more out of his face: whiskers appropriately designer...decent jawline...nice lips...nose a little on the flat side...eyes...

The filter interfered with the signal from Brett's face so much that it was like her brain trying to interpret screamed static from a sinking ship. Everything on him was softened, granulated, with color inconsistencies paved over, leaving his face a beautiful squint for most and a warm melt through a rain-run window in her eyes.

But everyone was filtered for her, so she lived in their outlines. The periphery betrayed the usually overlooked spillover of personality so often covered over or falsely portrayed in the face. She had developed an intense and nostalgic fondness for the smallest idiosyncrasies of movement and posture in those she knew more intimately. Connor flexed and released the toes on alternating feet when he read. One of her closer friends, Nasreen, dropped her shoulders and slowly swayed when she laughed. Her sister, Cacee, rubbed the folds of her knuckles and finger joints against the grain when she listened to someone speak. Her mother put her hand over her mouth whenever she couldn't prevent a smile at something untoward.

It made Care sad that the peripheral parts of people were usually lost in each moment and from history, attentions instead wasted by study of the same greedy, weather-beaten, forward-facing edges. Care was warmed by her special knowledge of people, the parts exposed to her and only her.

She sometimes felt like she knew different people than everyone else, an alternate set that no one else did or could know. She would be sad if she lost them. Faces had always lied to her, starting with their omission. To be gifted a clear vision of the invented face each person made up and presented with a smile had been her greatest wish as a girl, and was her greatest terror now.

Watching: bright lights shining down on little girls smiling against the glare.

“Kathlee-Anne, you don’t talk to me in that tone of voice!” shouted Nails, jabbing her metallic raspberry with white polka dots at the uncannily calm forever-child, who listened silently.

Another pageant coach trundled between them, chastising Nails.

“Darlene, how many times do we have to tell you, Kathlee-Anne is no child! You can’t tell her how to walk and talk like she’s six years old!”

“She works for me, I’ll tell her what I damn please!” replied Darlene’s nails. “I told you time and again, you watch your goddamn mouth around here, Kathlee-Anne!”

Care decided to take Darlene’s advice literally and watched Kathlee-Anne’s mouth: unspeaking and closed, it remained primly frozen in an unconscious purse of bright, saturated pink. When the show’s edit cut back to a close-up of the furious older woman, Care studied her mouth next, but its sneer of hyperbolic rage, somehow worse for having likely been faked or exaggerated for the camera, made her regret it.

Kathlee-Anne finally spoke: “Or I could walk out of here with half your girls and open my own studio across the street,” she threatened in her pixie voice. “I’d probably bring the show along with me. You think they come here to watch your big ass sashay around the studio? I bring ‘em in, you just scare ‘em away, so what’s the point?”

Care audibly reacted through puffed rice to the gauntlet thrown down.

The doorbell rang.

Nails started to bluster: “What the—”

Care paused the show, interrupting the woman’s gathering tirade and groaning out her annoyance, and a few crumbs. Setting the bowl of rice chips down, she stood, swiped her shirt and sweatpants clear of flakes and sweet chili dust, and walked for the door.

As much as polite conversation was a poor substitute for other people’s misery, the doorbell was always a chance for her to practice and experiment on studying a new stranger. Part of her impetus for challenging herself like she did came from a disappointment that she hadn’t developed powers of unconventional observation on the level of Sherlock Holmes like she should have, given her circumstances. Not yet, anyway...

Pulling open the world, she saw immediately the amiable tan shirt and pants of a deliveryman. A cap over wraparound shades, while justified by the punishing sun, guaranteed she had no shot at remembering anything of his face.

However, she realized with a burst of enthusiasm that this was likely the set of pastry molds she had ordered. If so, her nephew had some dinosaur cookies in his future.

“Carelyne Currie?” the deliveryman’s voice asked in a Southern twang she hadn’t expected to hear. Had she been watching too much deep-fried *UGS*?

More importantly than his accent was the fact of his questioning her name, which guaranteed that she hadn’t chatted with him over a parcel exchange before, or that he didn’t remember it if she had. She felt relaxed and empowered by knowing herself to be unknown. She decided she would scrutinize him mercilessly during their transaction.

She zeroed in on his mouth, nicely shaped but chapped as it waited in a quizzical gape made friendly and professional by a slight lifting of the corners.

“That’s me!” was her sprightly response. She routinely exhausted herself heading off unintentional slights with excessive enthusiasm. She was even worse around her friends.

Looking on the male shape in front of her, she softened her focus and let the accumulation of details fade in:

Hat sat relatively high on head, and a strand of brown hair had slipped out the side. *He must have long or bulky hair tucked up inside.*

Shirt and pants were clean and ironed, but ill-fitting. *This guy took his job seriously, but his employers didn’t take him seriously enough to fit him properly.*

Shoelaces tied and tucked in with his feet. *Maybe a trick of the trade to preserve laces when you’re putting in heavy foot mileage?*

A sinewy, sun-browned hand reached out with an iPad waiting for her signature, battered nails very short and uneven, white scar tissue ground into the index knuckle. *A background in construction?*

“If you could just sign here,” he said.

“Of course,” she replied, struggling with the plastic stylus when putting down her signature, a staple of her artwork in and of itself. It of course looked like shit on the small digital screen.

“That’s that *Ultimate Grand Supreme*, right?” asked the deliveryman. “The beauty pageants with the kids?”

Surprised, she looked up and saw his torso angling to look past her into the living room, and realized he could see the show paused on her television.

“Yes, it’s—I’m just taking a break from work,” she explained, suddenly embarrassed by her sweatpants on a Tuesday. “I work from home.”

“Oh sure, sure,” he said, laughing good-naturedly. “I’m actually from Memphis, so I’m familiar with that studio they have.”

“Oh really, that’s so interesting! You’re far from home!”

“Yeah, but this has been my home for a pretty long while. I actually saw that little girl, or...the woman. The old little girl,” he faltered.

“Kathlee-Anne?” prompted Care.

“Kathlee-Anne Kolby, that’s her! You know, she looks like a kid on TV with the lights and makeup, but you can tell she’s old when you see her in person,” he said confidentially as she handed the iPad back to him.

“Oh yeah?” she asked. “She’s only 27 though, right? Not old, surely.”

“Yeah, but, you know, older than...older than a five-year-old.” He was at a loss again.

She smiled and shrugged a platitude to help him out: “That’s the magic of television, I guess.”

“I guess. Okay, thanks,” he said as he tucked the iPad under his arm. “I’ll let you get back to work.”

“Thanks.” She wished she could see whether he was being sarcastic.

“Have a nice day!” he called, turning to descend her steps.

Closing the door and turning from it, Care almost missed herself in the mirror in the front entryway. She hoped her feelings wouldn’t be hurt.

No one believed that she couldn’t completely see her own face, that she had memorized individual colors and dimensions the way she did with other people. She had used a clearly lit photo of her unsmiling face as her MacBook wallpaper, trying to absorb everything, but some part of herself still felt ungraspable in the hall mirror. It had been placed there by Connor with

the idea that she could warm up on herself before being confronted with hundreds of strange faces.

Looking away from herself, she started tearing into the package, wondering if she should have hit on the delivery guy. He was no world-beater, but he seemed decently built somewhere in that uniform, and she wasn't exactly filling the scandal sheets lately. Besides, he could watch *UGS* with her, and confirm for her how all of the women and girls were as ugly as she suspected. Or they could at least Netflix and chill, as she had read that people said.

She would give it another shot if he came back. She hadn't noticed the same deliveryman twice handing over her frequently ordered art supplies, but then she wouldn't necessarily notice. There definitely hadn't been any Southern boys before.

The packaging hung off in tatters: Dinosaur molds! Four different species! She gave herself a pre-emptive command to wait until she had made some serious headway on the *Dovetail* cover before starting on the cookies.

Setting the package down in the kitchen, she grabbed the half-consumed bag of rice chips to bring with her into the living room to finish the episode she was on. Fuck bowls, she thought.

Her cellphone buzzed on the kitchen counter. Fuck phones, she thought.

Picking it up, she saw a number she didn't recognize and thought it might be a callback from one of her authors. She was annoyed at how often some publishers put writers in touch with her so they could give her their alleged feedback. She wanted to tell them to stick with rearranging their 26 prefab shapes over and over and leave the infinite possibility to her.

She answered the phone: "Care Currie."

"Hello, Ms. Currie, this is Patrick from Revita Insurance. How are you?" asked a smooth male voice in her ear.

“I’m fine,” she said cautiously, anxious that she had made a mistake since becoming responsible for her own health insurance.

“Great, great. Do you have a couple of minutes? I know it’s the middle of the day.”

“Um, I am pretty busy with work right now, but is there a problem?” she asked, bracing for the answer and the interminable paperwork it could promise.

“No, no problem at all! I’m just calling to ensure – see what I did there, ensure, insure – that you’re happy with your current coverage and that there isn’t any more peace of mind I can sell you,” said Patrick, charming her slightly with his self-deprecating pitch even as she knew he gave it a million times a day.

“Oh. Well, yes,” she said, relieved. “I’m very happy and also very busy with work. Thank you.”

“I totally understand, but if you need an excuse to take a break, I can tell you my story for a few minutes,” replied Patrick, armed with his second-tier pitch long before she finished declining.

“Sorry, another excuse to take a break is the last thing I need,” she said, trying to wince him out of her ear, itchy with the desire to hang up. “Thanks for calling.”

“Are you sure?” he pressed. “We’re in the same predicament in a way.”

“Yes. Okay, bye-bye, then,” she said, retracting the phone slowly from her head, choking the conversation to death.

“Okay, well, thank you for choosing Revita—”

“Thank you.”

“I’m always here if you need to call me back—”

She hung up, muttering “thank you” pointlessly into her dead phone. She pocketed it.

She considered then how easily she could have ended up in Patrick's awful position if she hadn't busted her ass to procure clients of her own, and if the house hadn't gone to her in the divorce. Connor got the liquid assets and the car with no alimony payments – fuck it. Still, if she hadn't found some security working at home, she could have been a voice on one end of a thousand mutually unwanted phone calls.

She suddenly felt a very real compulsion to get back to work.

Leaving the rice chips in the kitchen and walking back to the living room, she stood in front of the TV and hit play on the remote so that Nails could finish her thought.

“—fuck did you just say to me, you pygmy bitch!? Those baby legs of yours couldn't carry you fast enough to get away from me if I decide to come over there, Kathlee-Anne!”

Kathlee-Anne's baby eyes and baby limbs would not move, a timeless, plastic inscrutability lacquered over her smallness.

“Are you finished, Darlene?” she asked, blankly waiting for a reply.

“I'm never finished!” shouted Darlene, likely angling for a spot in that week's promos. Other show regulars gathered to witness the exchange hooted their tongue-in-cheek agreement.

Kathlee-Anne, her soft voice an echo lost on its way back: “That's okay, I can wait. I've got time.”

“You're going to need it, because I'm just gettin' started!” declared Darlene, losing some of her fire, which looked more like licking orange cellophane anyway.

Kathlee-Anne, drawing her tiny fingers down a loll of her hair: “I've got all the time in the world. Do you?”

Care hit pause before Darlene could ruin the question by answering.

Thankfully, the camera was still on Kathlee-Anne's cascading girlhood by the time Care pressed the button and froze it to glass, transfixing the screen. Something in the accident of her shouted at Care from far, or deep. Maybe it was the way she went unrecognized for so long. Maybe it was because she was so unaffected since being recognized. It comforted Care to think there might not be much difference between those two states.

The television dimmed before Kathlee-Anne could ghost herself on to its surface.

Care pulled herself out of her extended pause and turned away.

She needed a plan, a schedule. Four hours of work, then bake cookies and watch Netflix before bed. She was running out of *UGS* episodes anyway, didn't want to burn through them too quickly and have to watch *Gilmore Girls* again. She really couldn't tell the mother and daughter apart.

At the desk in her office, the *Dovetail* manuscript sat open to page 17.

Care wasn't sure if her peculiar likenesses would fly on a wind-swept romance like this. The lady of the novel – pert, lithe, supple, determined, and shockingly vulnerable in spite of the determined part – might not be imagined by her intended readers to have the knotty irregularities and half-lit inscrutability she would likely give her. She wondered why the publisher had thought of her for a book like this, and why she had accepted the job.

She might give the publisher a break on this one and give them white gloves folded next to a half-empty wineglass, or maybe orchids tipping against a sunset, or maybe both!

Care found the page break that had announced her own break and carried on with searching the story for a way she could market it that would be somewhat creatively satisfying to her.

Isabella awoke earlier than she had planned to, her hair splayed across the pillow like the sunrays just now cresting the horizon and passing through the bay windows.

Care set the manuscript down. She thought she had better check her inbox quickly before diving back in to *Dovetail*.

Three new emails: a sale at Sephora, a message from Facebook, a message from Tinder.

Ignoring the solicited spam, she read in ascending order of interest, starting with Facebook.

Her sister had sent yet another group message regarding her birthday, providing the 16 people she had invited directions to the venue, a chic Japanese eatery where they cooked right in front of you and angrily turned you away if you were even five minutes late, so please, please, please be on time because I hope to see you all there!!!

Care sighed. She loved Cacee, but those three exclamation points and all of her faceless, slightly younger friends were doing their best to chase her off. She wondered if she could get away with skipping the girls' night birthday and going to the family-fun birthday where her sister would feel less responsible for her. Then again, her sister had been making a habit of coming over and helping her clean the place, including the backyard and mostly unused basement, and Care didn't feel like she had done enough in return. Then once again, she hadn't asked for the help, even though the place was clearly too big for just her and she should probably just sell it.

Care closed the email, threw it back out of her mind. She would respond by tomorrow.

On to Tinder: Brett. Another message, arriving just after she'd checked that morning.

so i seem to recall somebody promised to draw my portrait. Ill trade you one meal cooked just for you by me that people normally pay \$80 for deal? i might even let you do a tasteful nude titanic-style. and ill make it my profile

Brett, once again knocking her legs out from under her and sucking her out to sea in the riptide of his delicate whimsy and romantic suggestion – a real smooth talker. She couldn't tell if she hated him or found him obnoxiously appealing. He was kind of like *UGS* in that way. Shit, she might really like him. She would probably meet him.

She mulled over his profile pic yet again, but the effort was as fruitless as it had been previously.

She wrote back to him:

I'll think about it, but depends what I have to work with. Is that your good side in your profile pic???

She clicked another picture: this time, she saw teeth. He must have been smiling, probably tightly, with the intention of design, the way everyone seemed to. His fingers dangled from the handlebars of a fixed-gear bicycle, scarred by what she thought must have been a nasty spill. He was wearing a loose *Of Monsters and Men* t-shirt.

No facial hair, no shades, no hat, and likely no filter on this one, and still she didn't think there was a chance she could draw him in a way either of them would find recognizable.

She wondered if her abstractions could really come across as flirtatious caricatures. Brett and Isabella were both *so* difficult to please.

Hair splayed across the pillow...

Fingers dangling off handlebars...

Eyes rotating in their sockets...

The doorbell rang.

“What the fuck?” muttered Care.

She breathed out slowly and stood from her desk. If she didn't finish the cover in time, she resolved to blame the random people at her door, and not herself. It was the least they could do for her.

The bell rang a second time. She missed herself in the mirror on the way to the door again.

Opening the door, she saw a white shirt, short sleeves, black tie. *Oh no...*

"Hello, ma'am, how are you today?" asked a pleasant male voice, clean and articulate and empty, necktie hung loosely, knot unraveling. "I'm here representing the congregation of—"

"Hi, no, thank you."

"Pardon?" the voice asked, confused. Dark brown hair, combed awkwardly to the side.

"Sorry, I meant I'm not a member," she said.

"It wouldn't do us much good to only speak to members," he remarked with a good-natured laugh, his full lips retracting. "I'm out here speaking to people who want to give us a chance to share the good news—"

"No, thank you, I get my news online," she reiterated. "I don't want to be a member."

"The world has plenty of bad news," he said, hands folded politely. "Plenty of bad news. Don't you want some good news that you can share with a growing community?"

"I'm busy, I work from home. I wouldn't have anything to say to you because I don't subscribe to whatever belief..." she started, growing frustrated. "Whatever it is?"

She cringed, her voice rising slightly and stumbling into an interrogative inflection, inviting more explanation, reopening the door she had nearly shut.

"If you give me a second I can tell you my story—"

"Listen, I'm sorry," she interjected before he could fully respond. "I'm busy, I just can't."

Shined black shoes, laces tucked in.

“Aren’t we all just trying to recognize each other in our own ways?” he asked. “Until we recognize ourselves, it’s like we haven’t even begun. We’re still children.”

“Young at heart,” she joked, feeling unsteady, unsure why.

She saw a healthy musculature filling out his Sunday best. She saw his hands—

“Young at heart, like Kathlee-Anne?” he asked.

A pamphlet extended towards her.

Care felt an unexplained need to revolt from it.

The sinewy, sun-browned hand gripping paper, a photo cheaply printed, a face she couldn’t see, *focus*:

dark brown hair combed against the part, full lips, eyes, no filter, *Of Monsters and Men*, the paper bent in the grip of strong, slender fingers, the index knuckle dug out and scarred over.

“She’s from that show *Ultimate Grand Supreme*, right?” he asked, his crisp unaccented voice tilting into a thick Southern drawl. “The beauty pageants? The little girls?”

Care couldn’t breathe to speak.

She saw his mouth smile. “I know all about them.”

Care slammed the door shut, not knowing if she hit the man with it.

She took a step back, but immediately flew forward and twisted both locks shut.

She stepped back again. Silence.

She turned around and into a face-to-face with Kathlee-Anne frozen on the television.

Blue eyes popping, lips pressed disapprovingly.

Fingers on handlebars, unfiltered, the scar across the knuckle faded and obscured...

The pamphlet with the portrait she had seen for only a moment. Written by hand beneath the face, barely read as she recoiled: *draw me as you see me*

“—tell you my story—”

Brett from Tinder, Patrick from Revita, Southern delivery boy, missionary

degrees of separation collapsing in on each other

lines between features all connecting at once to form

a monster's face

smiling into recognition in her eyes

Hands pounded on the door. Care screamed off the walls.

“*Why won't you look at me!?*” the face screamed back at her through the door. “*I look at you every day!*”

She ran past herself in the mirror, past Kathlee-Anne on the screen, seeing no one, hearing herself involuntarily giggling.

She slid on her socks nearly past the stairway into the basement, the pounding door following her. Gripping the frame and pulling herself through, she tripped continually down the steps until she felt uninterrupted floor beneath her feet.

Knowing every door and window in the house was locked, as they always were, she ran deep into the unlit, unused basement until she reached the closet that was deepest and farthest from the outside.

She fell inside and unfolded the door until it closed over her, all of her contained in the thinnest light glowing through closed blinds on the only window in the room, dissecting her face from between the panels she hid behind.

She waited for the thumping from upstairs to stop, and then changed her mind and wished it wouldn't, because then she wouldn't know where he was. Her hands put out signals, and two umbrellas and a set of golf clubs sent back replies.

The monster's voice was as illegible as his face by the time it reached her, muffled and distorted.

She hoped that Duane and Dee next door were home and could hear him. She hoped they would call the police for her. She would bring over dinosaur cookies every day forever.

She searched herself frantically. Her phone reassured her from its shallow pocket, having survived the almost literal trip downstairs. She pulled it out and mistyped twice before signing in.

Her face glowed at her in the dark. She had set a picture of herself as her background, though she couldn't be sure it was her.

As she dialed 911, she thought of the sketch she would give to the police if they didn't catch him. She would draw her own, of course, and it would be a face that no one had ever seen before, or ever would. It would only lead them back to her.

She pressed the phone to her ear. She listened to the ringing, and the door thumping.

Care thought in that moment of Connor across from her on the altar. She wished she could picture him now, wished she could call him for help, or to talk about it after it was over, the monster caught, but the divorce had finalized over a year ago. She was glad of it, but still wished she could call.

Care wondered from time to time if he could still picture her.

Connor was replaced by little Kathlee-Anne with the face she couldn't see in its pretense of unfinished youth, the features having the time but not the inclination to form all the way and

harden. She stood on an overturned bucket in heels and pink gown, covered by the cardboard box Care had brought her television home in, alone.

When Care wrapped her arms around the box and lifted it away, little Kathlee-Anne began to turn in her gown, tiny voice humming a somnolent, tranquil tune while tiny feet turned slowly on the bucket, her blonde-framed blankness passing in and out of Care's eye.

A second ring rang in her ear.

The voice from many faces and none screamed its omnipresence down on her.

Care waited for the terror of silence, and watched for the narrow light shining through her eyes to go out.

REFRACT

They lay together in a place where far echoes could reach without much interference, but only the fire snapped at them from its bricks, snapped at their feet intertwined at the foot of the bed, skin sliding on sheets. Their breaths mingled with the heat and the exhalations of the vent traveling along the wall on Steven's side of the bed, ending at the open doorway of the unlit bathroom.

The fireplace and antiquated boiler in the basement worked to keep pace with their modern demands for warmth and comfort in late January. The wood of the ranch house was thick and heavy, but it fit together irregularly in places and left an occasional gap just wide enough to expose them in a small way to the elements swirling about their bodies. An honest-to-goodness bearskin rug faced the breach between the slightly open bedroom door and its jamb, unready to defend them against the infinite possibility promised by the void, pelt shimmering in the sole source of light.

he wants to hurt you

Of course, Allan heard the flames and cooing midwinter winds that Steven heard, but he heard more too. He had always heard more than everyone else, and this had led his mother to believe that his experience of the world was greater and fuller than everybody else's, brimming and overflowing, while his father had said that what he heard and sometimes saw simply wasn't there, was null, and therefore was a waste of his energies and consideration. So Allan thought of his head as a bucket sloshing out of the top and draining out of the bottom, and so rushed through his early adulthood while the remembered substance of his youth and his many dreamed lives splashed down his face and at his feet, which he now turned away from the fire.

your fingernails look dirty

“Are our friends getting chattier?” asked Steven, pretending to read his Sedaris.

were you digging in shit

“Oh, you know them. A little bit,” replied Allan, pretending that he was looking at the fire and not following the bear’s eyes into the hallway outside their bedroom. “You should turn the lamp on. You’ll strain your eyes.”

“It’s fine, I’m not making much progress anyway. I liked the idea of reading by firelight,” Steven said, shrugging without looking up.

hey hey hey hey

“That gas lamp is out in the living room,” pressed Allan. “That’s firelight. Want me to go get it?”

“That’s okay, I’m going to quit soon. So they’re not too active yet?”

“Not too much. They’re surprisingly well-behaved.” Allan tried to smile.

“That’s good. I warned them about it earlier, told them it was in their best interest to leave you in peace,” said Steven, jokingly flexing his bicep.

Allan smiled at him, embarrassed as he always was that his face and body gave themselves away so readily, enough that Steven could sense that the voices were becoming more persistent. He had agonized in his youth about why he couldn’t suppress his reaction to the insistently vocal nothing in his mind, instead of telling the truth of his fear without speaking, as he always seemed to. To wear an unaffected face would be a lie of omission at worst – although it occurred to him that perhaps it would actually be more truthful for the reason that his aural and, on the rarest and most violent turns of his mental gears, visual hallucinations weren’t real,

whatever that was, and so shouldn't be acknowledged. Wherever he finally stood on the ethics of pretending, he wished he could do it.

Their weekend on furs without distraction from any devices except Allan's busy brain was two thirds over, depending on how late they planned to leave on Sunday. It was a test he had asked for, a test for them as much as him, but the lack of insulation and the wood stove and wrought iron cookery were a bit much already. He and Steven seemed to agree on that at least.

He had left his pills at home, his brain naked to the caustic pleasures and whims of its least conscious impulses. This was not entirely unexplored territory, as he had tried on various occasions since he was first diagnosed just after high school to slowly wean himself

you're disgusting

from his recommended dosages. When pushed to a unique desperation by medicated listlessness, he had several times elected to flush the pills and defenestrate himself from the air-conditioned, viewless tower of his healthy mind. He was attempting to survive such a leap now by landing on a pile of knitted quilts and scratchy duvets and bear skins with the man he trusted most, even at their most acrimonious.

Allan had to acknowledge to himself that Steven was making a special effort to be considerate this weekend, though he detected the mechanics of performance in some of his solicitude, the same gears and pistons that produced proper deference for portfolio managers seated next to Steven and Allan at Christmas parties, or that produced the veneer of comfort and ease around Allan's family's kitchen table when Steven confessed that he still couldn't bring himself to genuinely feel it. But that Steven cared enough now to perform his care was enough for Allan – it had to be.

They had cut wood together in the morning, Steven needing half the swings to

come here

do twice the damage that Allan could muster. Later, they had fried up some chili dogs over the fire pit in the backyard at Steven's enthusiastic suggestion, which Allan ultimately felt gave more of an impression of the cheap seats

over here

at a baseball game than roughing it in the wild.

The animals mounted on the walls aided the latter perception, though, and Allan and Steven had spent time over cocoa – Steven's spiked – naming the beasts, trying to reanimate them with personas they never could have had in life. An antelope in the hallway approaching the large kitchen and dining area was christened Lewis by Allan, and was determined by him to have been a studious creature in life who had one day put his books down and, his hoofs thus unencumbered, was overcome by the desire to use his natural athleticism to achieve the land speed his body was capable of, only to find that he had read too long and advanced too far in his years to run as he once might have.

Steven had named the bison over the cavernous fireplace in the living room Gregorius and claimed that he had devised the first ever calendar, using his hoofs to draw squares in the dirt – Steven was quick to note that Gregorius had invented the square at the same time – and that he eventually had become so obsessed with the movements of the sun and moon in relation to his calendar that he began running after them, the other bison following their brilliant leader until they all ran off a cliff together. Allan was impressed enough with the story that he didn't bother noting that one Pope Gregory, not some fellow named Gregorius, was the namesake of the Gregorian calendar, and that it wasn't the first or best. He did warn Steven on that first night on

the ranch that he would only be able to win at storytelling for another day or two before the parts of his brain that his medication kept tightly tucked would burst free of their swaddling.

The house was owned by a widower who seemed particularly unprepared for widowhood, even by the standards Allan would have expected of any man in his position just barely post-middle-aged. He seemed to Allan to have lived under the belief that his work on the ranch would fell him before his wife had lost her first youthful step, and that her impending aloneness was a great pain and shameful relief to him. But the opposite of the supposedly inevitable had without legible reason come to pass, and he now found himself living the solitude he had imagined for her, staring at the expanse of his walls and wondering what on earth there could be that was worthwhile for them to hold up.

So the rancher had rented the house out every year in the four years since, just after Christmas and the anchor of its familial obligations, and hauled his motorcycle behind his motorhome to Arizona, only returning in time for each summer and its daily opportunities for alighting from his (their) hulking husk of a house. He had shared these aspects of his wretchedness to Allan unbidden, a voice in his phone. So Allan and Steven had pitched in to cover three of his many absent days, making sure water still moved in the pipes and the chimneys still had smoke to expend.

he's lying to you

The widower's sister stood ready a few driveways down the road to take the keys back from them when they left and bring in the house's next surrogate occupants during her brother's purposeful flight over the long and cold winter. Allan had thought it so typical of himself when he wondered, after the rancher had hung up, if Steven would be similarly despondent after losing him.

“They’re not being mean to you, are they?” asked Steven, pausing mid-turn on a page he had been giving his consideration for more than ten minutes. “I know you said they’ve been quiet tonight, but they could be quiet and mean at the same time, couldn’t they? Like sneaky asides? You can tell me. You need to, actually.”

Allan was warmed knowing that Steven had been paying so much attention to him, and snuggled a little closer, instantly regretting it when the vent started noisily breathing on them again. He wondered how long he would have to wait before he could politely re-disengage from the suffocation of their shared body heat.

“A little surly, maybe,” he replied. “Rude.”

“Yeah?” asked Steven, raising his head slightly to meet the oncoming threat.

“They repeat themselves, but I’ll tell you if they get worse. I know you’re here to stick up for me.”

“Of course. Any time,” Steven said with an insouciant masculinity that was absurd next to the faint, murmuring, not-at-all-real bullies his biceps were supposedly warding off. “Don’t be afraid to be more specific.”

Allan felt the bite of implied criticism. “It’s not always helpful or easy to get into the gory details of what I’m experiencing. But I’m trying. I’ve been trying all weekend.”

“Like I said before, just say what they say. Just repeat it,” said Steven, exposing his frustration.

don’t fucking like you

“But I can’t just recreate it like you want,” Allan protested. “When I’m going through this, I react how I would if I heard somebody say a thing, but I don’t

ha

actually hear it. Not physically. My brain just reacts like it did. So I have to backtrack and piece together what I think they said or meant based on how I feel and which

ha

reactions have been dredged up in me. I hear the words, but I don't. It's hard to just transcribe it."

ha

"I understand," nodded Steven, signalling his patience. "I'm trying to understand."

"Thank you. I'll still try," said Allan, leaning over to kiss Steven on the cheek. They settled back into silence and let it be called peace.

Allan was starting to wonder if Steven's interest was flagging the longer his condition remained relatively manageable, as if he had bolstered himself for a fight that had been promised and called off too many times to be taken seriously. Allan bristled at the idea that his health bored him. Still, he was fairly sure that Steven would be ready when it got worse.

Steven went back to pretending to read for only a few seconds before stopping again.

ha ha ha ha ha

"You know, I can think of one way we can show them we're not bothered by their tone of voice," he said, nudging Allan's shoulder with his and trying with predictably limited success to interlock their toes.

Allan had been nearly ready to extricate himself from their sweaty proximity, and was

don't trust him

forced to delay again. He hesitated

he's laughing at you

speaking.

“Unless...” started Steven for him.

“Is it okay if we don’t tonight?” Allan asked, taking the opening gratefully.

“Yeah, yeah, of course. I’m here for whatever you need, it’s just I wasn’t sure if that would help now that they’re getting slightly more active, at least compared to yesterday,” said Steven, a hitch in his smile.

“I don’t know. The bear’s looking at me funny. I think he still hasn’t gotten over last night,” said Allan, intending to be cheeky but immediately feeling the need to clarify. “It’s not literally looking at me, I’m not – it hasn’t gotten anywhere close to that bad.”

Steven laughed, putting one arm behind his head and picking the open book up off of his chest.

“I know what you meant,” he acknowledged, starting to read again. “We traumatized the poor thing.”

Last night *had* been quite spectacular, partly because of the stimulation of the unfamiliar setting, and Steven’s spiked cocoa, and also because Allan had discontinued his medication less than 48 hours earlier and was still running on fumes. The voices had been there but subdued. What few whispers there were felt tantalizingly like a small audience to him, like two or three awed witnesses.

Tonight the voices felt different, and so did he. They were talking about him, which was to be expected, but seemingly about Steven also. Allan usually bore the brunt alone. He thought if he and Steven had sex again, the rumble from empty corners might feel more like disgust or shrill opprobrium or, worst of all, jeering. He didn’t want to risk drowning himself in a chorus. He couldn’t risk the physical vulnerability that Steven made him feel to such great effect when

the rest of his mind was already laid open for perusal and commentary from the voices steadily gaining confidence along the edges of the room.

Steven turned another page he probably hadn't read before opening his mouth to speak again.

"I can't remember... Did Dr. Brenner say that one of the side-effects of the Clozapine was lack of drive? So reducing the dosages and then dropping it altogether like we have would bring that back up at some point, wouldn't it?" he asked gingerly.

"Yes, eventually..."

"I'm only asking because I couldn't remember, not as a complaint or anything," he rushed to say.

"No, I know, I know. It should definitely improve. Everything related to mood and self-expression and, just, life, should get better. The sun should shine brighter," said Allan.

"Although I doubt Dr. Brenner would have said that if we told him our plan."

"No, I don't think he would have," agreed Steven. After a pause, he appended with guarded excitement, "You might be able to start drawing again."

Allan allowed a cautious smile. "Maybe, I just – let's just take it a step at a time, I don't want to feel shitty if I'm not cranking out sketches in a week."

"Not at all, it's a process, like you said," said Steven. "First we get you back to you, then you back to me, then us back to the world, then the world back to us. Right?"

Allan smirked, picking up one of the unnecessary wool socks he had rolled off and left between them on the bed.

"That's quite the plan for world domination you have there, sir. Would grandiloquent be the word?" he asked, offering the sock to Steven.

“I just wanted you to know that I have it all laid out. I will even have it all diagrammed when my partner in crime is ready to pick up a pencil again. No pressure,” said Steven as he set the book back down and took aim, sending the sock towards the bear’s mouth in a smooth arc with a gentle backspin. He narrowly missed.

“Dammit! Now the pressure’s on me!” shouted Steven, delighting Allan with how genuinely aggravated he was.

“Only one more shot,” cautioned Allan, producing his second sock. “Bear is hungry. We need to name him, by the way.”

hey

“‘Bear’ works for me if it works for you. And he better open wide, because I’m using my left hand,” declared Steven.

fuck

“Oh god,” lamented Allan as Steven pulled back his less dominant left arm, bulky yet alarmingly useless in any endeavor athletic or calligraphic.

ccccccuuuunnnntttt

Steven made a show of his care and precision as he slowed his respiration and lined up the shot. Allan held his breath on behalf of Steven as he let the sock

HEEEEEEEYY

fly.

Allan lurched at the violent male scream from the hallway as Steven spasmodically tried to will or wave the sock off of its disastrous course and towards its intended destination in the teeth of the dead carnivore on the floor. Neither noticed the other’s paroxysm: Allan’s innards fluttered in the fresh aftershock

hahahaha

as Steven followed his gyrated plea to an implacable physics by bellowing his grief as the sock overshot the bear's mouth and landed on a thick log engulfed in the whipping conflagration they had put to their service. The sock was immediately overwhelmed

he hates you

and began to blacken and fall in on itself.

"Oh *god*, that was so brutal!" shouted Steven through his hands as Allan pushed out a jangly laugh and tried to skip from the shock of his brain's command to survive in the face of a threat with no face back onto Steven's narrative of low-stakes egoistic bruising. "And your sock! Allan! I'm so sorry!"

Allan felt his hand trying to shake even as it was pinned under Steven.

hey

"I can't believe you did that!" said Allan tremulously, thankful for the ruckus of Steven's fumbled play for glory, and thankful that Steven couldn't hear what he heard.

"I honestly don't know how the fuck that happened. It sailed on me or something," griped Steven. "What's the elevation out here? The air seems weird."

Allan kept cranking the handle on Steven's noisy distraction to push away any recurrences from the hallway. His skin was tingling, as if it could sense a lightning strike before one landed.

"Listen to this guy! He's blaming the air..." Allan prodded Steven desperately.

"Come on, I have to blame something. You've never seen me make a throw

he wants to hurt you

that bad."

“But I’ll never forget it now that you have,” Allan promised.

“Thanks,” said Steven, folding his arms and pretending to pout.

hey

“I’m sorry, sweetie, I didn’t mean it,” cooed Allan, trying to hear only his voice, trying to spur more of Steven’s. “Do you want another try to reclaim your past glory? I’ll give you another shot.”

hey hey hey hey hey

“You can’t, we’re out of socks. And what past glory? There’s four feet between us, and I missed every time. Bear’s still hungry,” lamented Steven, barely joking.

“What else could we use?” asked Allan, looking

i don’t want to see your fucking face anymore

around the bed and at the bedside tables for an alternative, trying to keep the game playing.

“How about Tedward?”

The teddy bear

look at your face

sat unassuming on the table nearest Steven.

“That’s cannibalism!” exclaimed Steven.

ha ha ha

Allan looked around some more.

people are laughing at you

“Uh, what about your shirt, that could throw quite nicely,” suggested

look at your ugly face

Allan, trying to keep the responses coming from Steven, even as he was losing interest and getting ready to pick up his book and—

look at your FAAAAAAAAACE

Allan abruptly stood up and out of the bed. His pale, thin-limbed body stood over Steven, who effortlessly smothered the surface of the sheets with his sinewy girth, his summer tan still not done fading. Steven paused the search for his neglected page and looked up at him.

Allan could see himself through Steven's eyes: the blonde, twiggy shock of his sudden uprightness, his lips hovering apart as they tried not to quiver. Allan returned to his own vision in time to meet Steven face-to-face as he knelt on the creaking bed to match Allan's height, his hands grasping his and pulsing through

hey

“You're not okay.”

their skin.

Steven scanned over Allan's eyes. Allan watched him looking left-to-right and up-to-down, but also looking through him in a way he hadn't seen before, looking inside his head, trying to discern how much of him was still in there and how much of him was leaking from the holes punched out by the rising voices. Allan pulled their clasped hands to his chest.

“I'm still okay, okay?” he insisted.

“You don't seem okay. You look different, you look scared.”

“So do you,” laughed Allan.

“Of course I am, look at you! I don't know what you're experiencing right now, and you're not telling me!” shouted Steven. “You need to tell me exactly what you're hearing, what

you're seeing. If you start forgetting what's here and what isn't, I'm the one you ask. I'm the one that can answer for you."

"How do I know you're here?" asked Allan.

Steven pulled his face against his and kissed him. Allan opened his eyes a second before they separated and saw that Steven was watching him the whole time.

"That's how you know," said Steven as they broke, his gaze unwavering.

"I guess that's real," replied Allan.

"Your brain can't lie to you that good, can it?" asked Steven.

"I wish it could," said Allan. "Life would be simpler."

Steven laughed and pulled Allan to him again, wrapping him up.

"Don't bother with the lamp, I can get it."

"No, it's okay. I can do it," said Allan into his bare shoulder.

Allan let himself be twisted back and forth slowly in Steven's embrace.

"I know you *can*, but— Just ask me if you're unsure about anything," said Steven as he refused to let go of Allan.

"Okay. Well, for starters, obviously... *Obviously* there isn't a guy outside the bedroom asking about you..." started Allan, asking without admitting the question.

Steven shook his head. "It's just the two of us. He wasn't invited."

"Obviously," agreed Allan.

"What did he want to know about me?" asked Steven, vain as ever.

"Why you were so fucking sexy." Allan's lie was a quaver, barely audible against Steven's skin.

"Only you get to know the answer to that," replied Steven, brushing his hair back.

“He would know everything I know, wouldn’t he?” asked Allan.

“Then why does he ask?” asked Steven, finally letting him go.

“I don’t know,” answered Allan.

Steven looked through his eyes again. “I’m going to get the lamp,” he affirmed.

“No,” said Allan, restraining him from leaving the bed. “I can’t spend my life hiding under the covers. I have to teach myself what’s real and what isn’t. This is a safe space for me to learn in so that when I’m in an office or drawing in front of a class full of people and this shit starts, I’ll recognize it for what it is. You won’t be there for me every minute of every day, and I won’t always be alone with you on a ranch with no one else to see me make a mistake. Let me learn while I can.”

Steven seemed more resigned than convinced. He let go of Allan’s hands.

“I’m fine now. It ebbs and flows,” Allan reassured him, surprised that he was telling the truth. “Believe me?”

“I guess,” said Steven, sinking to his haunches. “The gas lamp’s on the table next to the guy’s collection of dreamcatchers. Nailed to the wall by the bookcase, remember?”

“Right. Okay, one sec,” said Allan, passing the fireplace on the way to the door. Even though he thought it might lighten the mood, he decided against bringing up the immolated sock again.

“I’ll put our last log on,” said Steven, standing as Allan exited.

Allan left the cloistered heat of the bedroom and stepped down the main hallway towards the expansive living room, the railed opening to the stairway into the basement on his left and the

firelight retreating from his back. No one spoke to him from the dark. He tried not to listen the silence away, straining for a sleepy carelessness he had rarely known in his natural mind.

The corridor opened out onto a wide hardwood floor on which the rancher's apparently handmade furniture orbited the hearth presided over by Gregorius, the bricks left cold this evening. Tall, gridded windows faced the long, grassy plain running from the back of the house. Moonlight fell from the sky and splashed off the snow-covered ground, passing through the panels and irradiating every object with a shocking but indistinct brightness.

do do do do

Allan looked to the place where he remembered the cheaply fashioned dreamcatchers hanging and there they were, accumulated from how many tourist centers and gift shops he could not know, now pinned and clumped against the wall, their webbings imbricating into a dream tunnel without terminus, their feathers intertwining promiscuously. Next to the dreamcatchers sat the gas lamp, alone on a side table. He was halfway across the room when he stopped in the pale light.

He felt instinctively as if the space of the living room was filled differently than it had been over the two days he had occupied it. He looked to see if another recliner had somehow been added, but the layout looked unchanged. Without intending to, he lifted his gaze to the high corner of the two-storey wall perpendicular to the windows.

The night was bright enough to see that the surface of the wall was interrupted in some way. Allan's depth perception sensed it before he could apprehend any shape or detail. He squinted into focus a hilly, organic unevenness about the size of their bed, an abrupt denial of the clean geometry of the wall, only a shade darker than the greyish-white paint.

Allan's body stood in its underwear, stilled and held in the center of the moonscape by the inexplicability of the mass that clung to the wall five meters in front of him. He found himself in a perceptive stalemate, probing over the irregular consistency with his narrowest attention but finding no solution to its presence. He forced his eyes to stay open until they dried

i'm leaving if you don't tell me

in their uncertainty. When he had no choice but to close them, he made sure to rub away any lingering afterimages from staring at the fire before he opened them again and returned to the fata morgana hovering on the interior horizon.

The substance did not disappear or gain clarity; it was still there, still covering the wall from about halfway up, tendrils rooting along the ceiling as well. Nothing moved or sounded. Several long seconds passed with neither he nor the mass budging from their implacable stillness. Allan raised his palms as a bewildered entreaty to some nameless authority to please give name to what he saw, clearing the constriction from his throat with a hem he hadn't intended to be quite so loud.

i told you, i'm leaving

Again, his depth perception was the first to notice, and only the passing of a shadow from the window's gridded frame confirmed to him that some part of the mass on the wall was extending across the room towards him. As the oncoming projection re-entered the light, Allan could see on its leading tip a vague guess at a human face, bearing no readable expression, eyeless except for shallow indentations.

Allan tipped backwards across the room, his feet kicking out in front of him as if wearing roller skates. He frantically rewound his passage down the corridor without ever turning, banging along walls as the pale mass in pale light became thankfully distant. By the time he reached the

end of the hallway and the prematurely evacuated cocoon of the bedroom, he was laughing absurdly even as he slapped backstrokes against the hardwood to get farther away from the still open door.

Steven wrapped him up around the shoulders, crouching over him and shushing him and asking him what was wrong, what was wrong?

“Allan, Allan, *shh*, tell me what—”

“*No! Wait!*”

“What? Allan—”

“*Please close the fucking door!*”

Steven’s concern stalled for two blank seconds before he let go of Allan and walked purposefully to the unshut door, peeking out into the hallway half-interestedly, as if doing so in spite of his knowing that, of course, there was nothing to see.

that was funny

“*Now!*” screamed Allan.

Steven slammed the door shut and remained facing his hand against the doorframe, his shoulders hanging.

Allan waited for him to turn or speak, watching his breaths in his back.

“I...” started Steven.

they all lie to you

He wanted to tell Steven to get away from the door, but he saw something in his posture that made him feel too ashamed of what he had seen – too ashamed for having seen it – to sound a warning. So they both waited.

“What?” asked Allan.

Steven breathed into the door, unable to face him.

At last:

“This was a mistake.”

“I haven’t told you what I saw out there,” said Allan, his voice falling to a demure whisper from the treble heights of seconds earlier.

“You haven’t told me anything this weekend.” Steven turned from the door but still wouldn’t leave it. “I can’t believe we thought this would work.” Steven was speaking more to himself, leaving Allan behind, when he needed him most.

“You said you would fight with me. For me,” whispered Allan.

“We agreed to try, and we’ve tried. This has failed,” came the level reply, ripping Allan slowly like a hydraulic lever increasing its applied force by degrees.

“You haven’t given me the chance to tell you. Please get away

they all want to hurt you

from the door.”

“If you’re experiencing visual hallucinations this early, then your disease is unmanageable. We need to get you back to the city and resume medicating you right away,” said Steven flatly, turning from the door but still not leaving it.

“Steven, *please*,” begged Allan, his terror coming across like petulance from where he sat on the floor.

“Okay,” reassured Steven, walking towards Allan. “Listen, you didn’t do anything wrong. I’m not blaming you. How could I ever?”

“Please, just listen. Please.” Allan cried down his face.

Steven crouched in front of him, forearms on knees, and flipped his palms expectantly supine. “I’m listening.”

Granted all of the autonomy to speak and the demands to be cogent that always seemed to accompany this privilege, Allan found himself struggling. Thinking of what he was certain he had seen, cogency and his voice both failed him.

“Allan...” started Steven, his patience waning.

“Okay, okay, listen,” said Allan, crossing his legs in front of him and leaning forward. “I can’t exactly describe what I saw.”

“Jesus...” moaned Steven.

“But I saw it! I don’t think I hallucinated it!”

“Of course you don’t think so, that’s the point! You’ll never think so! That’s why this was a terrible fucking idea! Because you won’t know!” bellowed Steven.

“It’s fucking real!” Allan pushed back with reedy persistence. “It’s in the living room right now. I just don’t know how to say what it is. I don’t have a word for it.”

Steven rocked back onto his ass and muttered through his hands. “So you can’t hear what your brain makes you hear, and you can’t see what your brain makes you see. Is any of this actually happening? Even in your head?”

“Are you really asking me?” Allan leaned forward blankly. “Is my face really in front of your face?”

“Are *you* really asking?”

“If my face is here, then so is that thing in the living room. I don’t know what it is, but I think it’s alive,” said Allan, startled by his sudden concision.

Steven dropped his hands. “Are you trying to say that there’s an animal in the living room?”

“Maybe, but not like any animal I’ve ever seen. It’s not a fucking bear.”

“That’s probably a good thing,” remarked Steven as he stood, flicking the ear on the rug by the hearth on his way up.

“You can’t go out there,” said Allan, his voice bouncing back towards hysterical.

“Steven...”

“If it’s there, it needs to be dealt with. Or at least I need to know it’s actually out there so we can call the dude’s sister. What’s her name?”

“Cheryl,” said Allan, nearly screaming.

“Right. We’ll call her and she can bring a gun over or something. I don’t want to wake up tomorrow morning and go make breakfast if there’s a fucking bear in the house,” said Steven, reaching for the door handle, a floral baroque that was in odd disagreement with the rustic minimalism of the rest of the house.

“I said it wasn’t a bear! It’s worse!” cried Allan. “I’ve never seen anything like it! But it can move, it seemed aggressive!”

Steven turned from the door and bent over his suitcase on the floor near the bed. Digging beneath his neatly folded sweaters, his hand emerged holding one of Allan’s sketchbooks and a case of pencils and charcoal sticks. Allan hadn’t know they were there.

Walking to Allan, Steven handed him his supplies with a paternal sternness. “Allan, I will be very careful, but I am going to take a look. Okay? If there’s any way I can actually help you, this is it. In the meantime, I need you to draw what you saw as closely as you can.”

“You’ll see it yourself,” whispered Allan.

“Draw it anyway. I’ll still be interested to see it the way you saw it.” Steven turned to finally leave.

Allan passively let him go. If he couldn’t speak what he saw, then he had no argument with which to persuade Steven to remain safely with him in their room, the room Allan wished they never had to leave. He watched Steven’s back slipping out, the door securely shutting after it. The latch clicked. Allan sat down on the bed and watched for Steven’s return, wishing for any voice to break the silence, even the false ones, but now none spoke.

Allowing himself to look away from the door, he opened his sketchbook to the first blank page, which followed a sketch of Steven baking, though Allan couldn’t remember what was in the oven, despite the novelty of the event. It had been a while since he’d touched pigment to paper. He tried to imagine where to begin with what he had seen in the living room. It *was*, that he was fairly sure of, but there was no centering feature around which to represent it on paper.

He thought of the sort-of face it had presented to him, and whether he could recreate it. He started with a single, charcoaled line, curved, the bottom lip of the eye-like depression on the face he had seen, but found himself unable to form the unformed as his charcoal abandoned the line almost immediately for a new page.

Part of him wanted Steven to return and tell him that, as expected, it wasn’t real, there was nothing on the wall and he needed to take his fucking pills already because he was losing ballast and lifting off the ground towards chaos. He wanted the sketch that he knew he could not accomplish to merely be of academic interest anyways, something to show Dr. Brenner even if he could finish it, so he could otherwise leave what he had seen where he saw it. To be dismissed this time would be a comfort to Allan, in its way, or at least familiar. He put down a few more

hey

cursory slants and coils, defeated gestures on a wasted page, as he waited, alone, listening to the flames and the wailing winter through the walls because he didn't want to miss the one voice that mattered to him.

Seconds became more conspicuous as they passed. He wondered how long it had been, and if he should stand and do or say something. He wanted to yell to Steven, or maybe go find him and drag him back with him.

"Fuck!"

Allan was momentarily fazed, unsure if it was Steven or a head-voice that had echoed the length of the hallway.

He jumped to his feet as there was a slam at the door and a skittering along its middle section. The baroque handle joggled several aborted attempts to turn before the door burst open and Steven nearly fell in but stayed standing so he could slam it behind him. He tried to find a lock on the handle, but its intricate design delayed his discovery that it had no lock for several seconds. He sat down and buttressed the closed door with his feet, his hands planted white against the floorboards behind him.

"Did you see it?" asked Allan, forgiving himself the stupidity of the question.

"I saw it! I fucking saw it! It's there, it's really fucking there!" shouted Steven, and he began laughing the way Allan had. "What is it? What the fuck is it?!"

"We have to leave, now!" cried Allan. "We have to escape on foot!"

"What the *fuck* is it?" Steven again, asking

you are so fucking disgusting

no one.

"Steven, we have to run!"

“Look at that window, we can’t!”

Allan saw immediately that Steven was right: the window was divided by the same hardy grid work as the larger ones

why are you such a liar

in the living room. They could have possibly teamed up and put a metal safe or something of similar density through it, but nothing comparable was available to them in their place of soft internment. Suitcases, duvets, towels: none would open the world and its unlimited paths to safety. The only logs available were burning.

“Could you break it with your shoulder?” asked Allan.

“Are you nuts, look at that shit! It’s fucking solid, Allan!” Steven was looking upside down at the window behind him, unable to turn his head around far enough to study it from where he was barricading the door.

everybody says you’re a liar

“You’re right, it’s too thick,” agreed Allan.

“I can’t do it, Allan!”

“You’re right, you’re right, I wasn’t thinking. Please get away from the door.”

liar

“I’m not letting it in here!” said Steven.

liar

“I don’t think it can get in. Here, wait,” said Allan, grabbing hold of the bedside table on Steven’s side, nearest the door. It was more of a dresser with three full drawers and the heft of its handcrafted pedigree. Allan clumsily tried to labor it over to the door as he wished for the insubstantiality of prefab.

Steven watched him struggle with a pained expression. “Just walk it, just walk it,” he said.

Allan did walk it, unused electric lamp, books, and Tedward all tumbling to the floor, the bulb in the lamp shattering and the books fluttering open. The top drawer and its bibles had fallen out by the

your dirt fingers are lying

time Allan had the dresser in place to relieve Steven, who crab-walked out of its way as Allan pushed it flush to the door. The dresser stood high enough to prevent the handle from turning downward. Steven was already halfway to augmenting the first dresser with the second by the time Allan turned from his, satisfied. Allan stumbled out of the way as Steven crashed them together, doubling their meager protection.

“That was good, good idea,” wheezed Steven.

“Thanks,” said Allan. Both of them short-winded, they stood side-by-side and evaluated the security now offered by the rearranged room.

“It’s all we have,” said Steven finally, still breathless. “We’ll have to stay in here until morning. Hopefully it’ll leave by then. If not, at least we can see it better in daylight and make a run for it.”

you’re a liar

Allan nodded wordlessly.

“I don’t think we should try to get through the window now, because if we bust out the glass and can’t get through the wood, we’ll freeze all night,” said Steven, still looking at the dressers as he spoke.

Allan nodded again.

“Worst case, we wait until Cheryl comes by looking for the house keys we haven’t brought her yet.” Steven turned to Allan briefly, skittishly. “Did you draw it?” he asked.

“I tried,” said Allan. Steven smiled and his eyes fled back to the door.

They were silent for a moment.

“Did you see it move?” asked Allan.

“I saw it move,” confirmed Steven.

everybody lies to you

After several moments had passed, Allan walked to the bed and sat. He didn’t know what else to do. After a long time, upwards of ten unspeaking minutes, Steven joined him, sitting against him, closer to the foot of the bed, between him and the door. They heard nothing from outside the room.

did you fuck lately

After another long while during which the fire began dying down, leaving the two of them in near-blackness, Allan lay down, almost involuntarily, without any energy left to dedicate to their shared vigil, or his private one.

kill me

Steven stayed sitting, only visible to Allan by intercepting light from the embers. Allan lay in the peace of his shadow, in the cool and dark of his silhouette, in their tiny, shared room, listening to Steven breathing, listening

∞

hey

Thinnest blue. First shades of morning. No fire.

He breathed into stitching. The bed felt weightless and empty, no one against him.

Allan sat up. Fluorescent light from the open bathroom.

hey

Dull thumping. Reverberations against metal.

He looked to the door – the dressers still standing guard.

He slid across the bed and covered the few steps to the bathroom, glimpsing his compressed face in the mirror before he crossed the threshold and turned the right angle to face the bathtub and toilet and an incomplete Steven there in front

knives

of him, in the tub, hanging from the ceiling, wobbling.

Most of him wasn't there for Allan's eye, was inside skin paler than his own, skin wrapping him up tight down to the middle of his chest. One arm was up and inside, the other hanging down, held tightly against him, his hand flapping

so dirty

with the rest of his body, which at first seemed to be trying to resist and wrest itself from its confinement, but Allan realized that the only movement was from whatever was holding him up and trying to swallow him. The pressure on his upper body had crushed a purple swell into his lower extremities.

The distended, mottled skin holding Steven tried to work itself farther down his body. Steven's feet walked limply in different directions, plumped toes six inches off the bottom of the tub, moving in a way he never

knives

would, walking

are in the kitchen

nowhere. Their thoughtless dance bumping against the walls of the tub made Steven feel so impossibly gone from Allan and the only real world they shared that he felt lifetimes expanding between the dancing feet and their time together and alive, on couches, on sidewalks, on bicycles, in beds, so suddenly in the past.

Across the breadth of Steven's back, the eyelike impressions Allan had seen in the moonlight stretched and distorted into a mournful slant as the gaping mouth tried to accommodate the body's girth.

kill me

Allan screamed three or four voices at once to Steven, as many overlapping pitches as he could pull from himself, wrenching his chords ragged as he tried to reach his voice out to Steven through the skin around him so he could hear him inside and not feel so alone.

"Steveeeennnnnnnnnn..." Allan pleaded with a throat already raw and tearing inside for just one sign that Steven had heard him. He needed him to hear him.

Steven's calves waggled again, but Allan knew it wasn't him and he started to sink down the doorframe, his neck ready to burst its vessels with the permanent cry – now rasping to its limits – forcing its way out of him. As Allan's perspective fell towards the floor, it revealed the oppressive smallness

somebody wants to stab you

of the bathroom. The massed skin, pallid and varicose, occupied so much space on the ceiling and the perpendicular walls supporting it that it made everything in the room feel closer together, its maximum depth at the center of the amorphous body in the tiled corner near the shower head, the rest diminishing outwards in all directions towards its fringes. It had reached the small

somebody wants to stab you

of Steven's back.

"Steven..." breathed Allan, no more cries left in him, all the cries he could ever have taken out of him so sharply and unexpectedly. "Steven..."

Allan saw that the skin had, without him noticing, come within an inch of the mirror directly across from him. He watched it for a moment, moving at an almost imperceptible pace along the wall.

nobody loves you

It paused next to the raised edge of reflective glass. Allan waited, transfixed.

He fell out of the room as the skin, faster than a blink, slapped over half of the surface of the mirror with a loud thud, gripping it tightly.

Once outside the mesmerized proximity of the bathroom, as soon as Steven had left his field of vision, the terror and the basic, cellular twitch towards survival

people you know want to murder you

cascaded through him. His damaged throat gave a jittery mewl as he crawled on stiff, heavy fours, preposterously slowly, away from the hell of the bathroom, hating his own safety all the way.

"Stevennnnnnnn," he wheezed to no one, dragging the last syllable out to a slobber, hating his self-preservation as he approached the bed skirts. Without pausing hand or foot, he altered his crawling course, looping around and back towards the bathroom, not slowing or speeding up.

The mirror came back into view, most of it now covered thinly and semi-translucently. Allan moved towards it while his limbs violently mutinied from him and each other. Nothing he could see in the bathroom moved as he pressed forward through the headwind of his seething fear.

Getting close enough to peek his head around the corner and see Steven, he found him submerged to mid-thigh. Allan wailed again, an intensely painful abuse of his ravaged voice box, his grief hitting the walls and collapsing back to the middle of the room.

He was almost gone. He was already gone. Allan wanted to crawl for him so badly and grab onto his feet and pull, but his body would not allow him to get any closer.

“Steven,” he croaked to him.

Steven’s feet wagged. Allan quivered uncontrollably on the floor.

He turned away and saw that a narrow, tortuous finger was sightlessly reaching for him, having extended more than a meter from the already tenuous skin on the mirror by the time he could notice it through his grief. With a sharp crack, the mirror splintered along dozens of lines under the skin’s squeezing pressure but stayed together, engulfed.

Knowing this was goodbye, he wretched the only sound he could possibly project to Steven and looked to him one last time – his toes, his heels, his ankles – before he pulled himself back out of the room and reached from his knees to the door handle and pushed it shut and stood. In a halting amble entirely unlike him, as if physically wounded, he returned to the bed and reposed himself gently across its middle, on his back. He folded his arms over his chest and looked to the ceiling and waited to die.

He settled into scrutinizing the wooden slats above him, the only view available to him in his waning moments. He could see them now in brilliant definition in the cold morning, a definition he had never seen before, floating particles passing in the early light. He followed the lines of the grain, the layers of organic material accumulating over time and in a single instant.

hey

He spread his arms and legs wide, free to drift. He had nothing left to do but marvel at the smallest details of his only real world.

hey

He tried to hum an aimless tune, just to hear himself one last time, but his voice couldn't.

hey

He rubbed his hands over and over his drying face and babbled under his breath.

hey

Allan closed his mouth and listened, eyes between fingers, the voice speaking from under the bed.

sweetie

He pulled his hands away quickly and sat up, shaking all over.

"No, no," he pleaded to himself. "I can't do this."

hear me please

"No, please..."

so many things didn't happen

Allan sobbed onto his shirt. "I know..."

so many things I wanted to see for the second time with you

Shaking: "Please stop. You're not here anymore."

didn't see the first time without you

Back and forth shook his head: "Please stop. We can't see anything together anymore."

couldn't see until you saw with me

Becoming still: "Tell me. Maybe I could draw them and show them back to you."

need you

He turned onto his stomach and hung off the edge of the bed, knowing what he would see and what he would not see but frantically pulling up the skirt anyway and looking underneath to find only hardwood and a flat box with extra pillows spilling out of the top and one of Steven's t-shirts.

Allan cried up his forehead, quietly, accepting the dull ache of absence.

Retracting himself back onto the bed, he smelled Steven in the blankets for a few minutes until he was ready to turn back over.

The ceiling was still brilliant, now in a greater variance of color with the higher sun.

Allan breathed.

The space between the slats directly above him – splitting his forehead and sifting dust from the attic onto their bedsheets the entire weekend, to Steven's irritation – filled as he watched. It was as if the terribly pregnable cracks that were everywhere in the house were sealing themselves over.

The gap overflowed into the slow fall of a curtain on the stage of their bed, a pale, fleshy curtain falling, their show drawing to a close despite continuing demand. The bottom folds of the curtain began to separate, and from within, the face with its scrubbed-away features, appearing half-remembered even as he saw it, emerged and lowered towards him without expression, swaying in the air over him.

allan

The toothless mouth shuddered open.

run

Allan leapt over himself and off the bed and crashed into the dressers against the door in his best imitation of Steven playing rugby, managing to knock one dresser ninety degrees off of

the other, and his shoulder from its socket. Grabbing the second dresser with his painless arm, he violently tipped it back until it was held up at an angle against the first. Unlatching the door, he forced the best opening he could with the dressers still in the way and began pushing his body through, turning his head back into the room so it would fit.

His skin caught and dragged along the wood of the door and jamb as he slowly emerged on the other side of his gap, pushing through, all the while watching the curtain and its head as it collectively lifted away from the bed and towards him, gathering and bending to him like a plant towards sunlight. His healthy shoulder pressed out into the hallway.

He realized that the room was entirely draped now, the forward projection unsteadily advancing towards him, hovering nearly parallel to the ceiling and floor. Allan roared savagely with frayed chords as he pushed himself away from it, his own skin breaking against the house and running with blood as the part of him still in the room got smaller and smaller.

His wild eyes and bared teeth, his dropped shoulder, and one planted foot were the last reachable parts of him, and with a final effort and an explosion of pain, he burst out of the void and down the corridor towards freedom.

He cradled his arm like a baby as he ran through the empty house, past the flooded windows, past Lewis and Gregorius and the dreamcatchers and the chairs made of knotted wood and the hanging pots and pans. Reaching the bright entryway, he tried stopping his run and nearly fell into the front door. He scrambled for the nearest winter boots, the air charged with threat. The boots were Steven's, and so too large, but he stomped them on without hesitating.

He grabbed a long, thickly lined canvas work coat that must have belonged to the rancher and threw it on one arm, then worked it over his injured shoulder as carefully as he could as his whole body shook

you're disgusting

before stumbling out the door with one boot half on and fleeing the cracked confinement of the house onto a vast, open landscape under the fading firmament of early morning, just then illuminating.

The cold threatened to seize his lungs in his back, his skin burning and his wide mouth trawling the air, catching gently gusting specks of snow in an otherwise calmed atmosphere.

Buried in the rancher's coat, one

who's been going through your drawers

boot flopping over mercifully thin snow cover, he heaved out his breaths in clouds that tore over his face as he ran.

When he had run for what he thought was a long

hey

time, he felt the need to assess how much distance he had put between himself and the house and its occupants. He stopped and turned to face it, nearly half a kilometre away.

The ranch house, smaller on the outside than the inside, sat cozily at the center of a once idyllic homestead abandoned to multiplying griefs. Steven's SUV sat next to the rancher's rusted work truck, resting until the summer. An aging shed crumbled on the other side of the yard.

fuck me

The skin covered the house in an immense sheet, rising and falling in the morning air, blanketing the roof and nearly the whole exterior surface like an untethered circus tent. At the highest point of the house, pulled huge enough to be clearly visible to Allan from where he stood, the shapeless hollows of the face draped over the chimneys, sightlessly staring not after

him but up at the cosmos, now invisible in the pale blue of daylight, thoughtless and blank and unremembering.

Allan turned his back and pressed forward, feeling his hands, thighs and face beginning to numb in air that offered him no comfort or respite. He wrapped up and carried himself onward.

Not long after he finally reached the ditch and climbed onto the gravel road, a truck approached him and stopped. A burly, thickly mustached rancher alighted and left his door open, trying not to show his bewilderment.

“You okay?” he asked, standing well back to assess the younger man who, though slight of build, was bloody and nearly naked in ill-fitting winter wear that obviously wasn’t his.

Allan found himself unable to answer, found the question too large. His lips already sluggish in the frigid air, he tried for several seconds to form any fragments that might grant him access to warmth.

The bigger man looked back towards the yard Allan had fled, hidden by distance and the gradual rise of the plain Allan had spent twenty minutes climbing up and away, and seemed to rightly guess where he had come from.

“Come on, come on, get in. Can you open the door?” the man asked.

Allan nodded, though his frozen hand struggled to grip the handle. Already inside the truck, the rancher leaned across the seat and popped the latch. Allan leapt in, his shoulder screaming at him for it, and pressed himself in front of the hot blast from the vents that the rancher had opened wide to meet him.

“You’re staying at Ken’s place?” the rancher asked.

Allan nodded again.

The rancher kept assessing him in the closed truck, sitting against the driver's side door.

"What happened?" he asked.

Allan could only answer in a rasp: "Attacked."

"Attacked?" asked the rancher, alarmed. "By a

they talk about you when you're away

person?"

Allan shook his head.

"Animal?"

Allan nodded, not knowing what else he could say. "Animal," he whispered, still shivering

don't trust him

in the baking heat.

"Like a big cat? We get them out here sometimes."

"Don't know what it was." Allan looked at nothing through the windshield. "Killed my boyfriend."

The rancher sat unmoving. "Your boyfriend?"

Allan glanced at him before silently returning to the windshield, watching the road as it waited for them.

Allan felt the truck shift into gear and start carrying him farther away.

"I left my cell back at the house, but Bill and Cheryl's yard is closer. She's who you would have rented the place from. We'll be there in five minutes and we can get an ambulance and animal control or police or somebody out here."

Allan watched scattered trees pass. "Thank you."

“How bad you hurt?”

“I’m alive,” Allan whispered.

They fell silent again.

everybody lies to you

He watched the earth flowing underneath the truck, his body drifting against the terrestrial current towards safety.

everybody lies

Allan dragged as much of Steven with him as he could. He held the sounds and pieces tightly to him, because it was up to him to do it. Without planning to, he began the work of cataloguing his memory, storing him away for the many years he knew were still ahead, stretching out before him in the cold and the light.

PLANE FACES

Addelaide looked on the pane of glass, one moment transparent and revealing the shapes beyond it, the next opaque and reflective as the tunnel enveloped the train car, leaving only her on its surface as air roared and metal screamed on metal. The pale florescence in the car intensified with the loss of natural light from outside, leaving only her face and the faces of the other passengers around her, pushed tightly together, expressionless in their unacknowledged intimacy.

Look directly at your reflection in the glass. Now look down or away so that it is not visible even in the periphery of your vision. Now look at your face a second time.

An older man in a gray suit seemed to notice what Addelaide was doing, and seemed to be puzzled or off-put. Addelaide flinched at the recognition on his part that her actions were likely not legitimate to him, in that they served no purpose but their own realization. The man looked too old to still be working, unless he had to be.

Look at his face now, as innocuously as you can. Now look away from the man's face completely, until the last of his skin is gone from view, or else start over. Now look back a second time for confirmation.

The trick, she thought, was masking the mechanical, repeating motions of her rituals with casual disinterest. She adopted the subtle shifting of arms and legs, the sullen examination of phones and surroundings which seemed to her the default behavioral mode of most people in public. This seemed particularly true of those her age, those commuting and drinking and eating and texting and driving and sitting, and whatever else people did among people.

She retrieved her phone from her pocket and opened Cuddlr. She saw the names, invitations: Hayden – *hey, message me, looking for a lunch break snuggle*. Matt – *Hi, are you new?* Karen – *Hey, get in touch if you'd like to meet! Free after 6!*

She tapped open Matt's message. He looked about 35, curly hair, looking at her sideways.

Tap out of Matt's message. Now tap back in. Tap out again, then in again for confirmation. Good.

She wondered if such an arranged meetup could shock her the way she needed it to.

Her response to Matt: *Yes – are you available today? Looking for a lunch break snuggle.*

Some internal balance beam wobbling precariously between her ears notified her that the train was in the process of halting.

A stopwatch behind her eyes buzzed that the time that had elapsed on their trip fell within the standard deviation when travelling from the downtown station nearest her apartment to the university campus.

A geolocation process deep in the core of her brain signalled that she had travelled the distance between the only two points of any relevance in her life, and that this was likely her stop, and it was.

All of these natural mechanisms had to work persistently and conspicuously to ensure that she would notice them through the dense prism of her ritual. She stood and exited the train car.

The older man in the gray suit looked up at her from under his eyelids as she passed.

∞

Subject 137 stared past the lens, her gaze just off-centre to camera-right, as all the subjects did – 136 of them having gone before her, 167 of them to follow. They were of course addressing the interviewer, but Addelaide was always vaguely perturbed at the off-centre looks, wanting to fix them, to drag their eyes with her fingertips until they stared straight into the camera lens, straight at her from the screen that glowed in the dark of the editing bay.

Addelaide's headphones murmured into her ears. Her backpack sat at her feet.

304 subjects in a yearlong study cataloguing parallel memory and physiological responses to three spoken paragraphs: one detailing a sexual encounter between two women, the coupling that previous studies had shown would be physically arousing to the largest cross-section of genders and orientations; a fictional genocidal massacre claimed by the research assistant to have been carried out in a fictional village in a real, plausible country – the Central African Republic – some six days before each subject was informed of it; and an elaborate dinner served in four courses over as many hours.

Interlace your fingers. Disengage and separate them completely before interlacing them again. Repeat the incantation “yes, yes, yes” in your mind several times to signal confirmation.

Then followed the follow-up quizzes, the videos of which Addelaide was in the process of editing to cull a digestible series of responses from the morass of chair-settling and equipment-adjusting and questions about comfort, the drive, the need for water, the best method of receiving their small stipend in return for listening and reacting and having those reactions measured and their meanings analyzed. In the quizzes and subsequent data on physiological responses – which would be synced up in the video by an editor more experienced than Addelaide – the massacre had so far cumulatively ranked second and third, respectively, in the memory and physiological responses recorded by the MRI imaging, pulse oximeters, and blood

pressure meters that had been made available to them by the generous grant the study had received. The details of the sex scene were remembered the most clearly, and the meal was the narrative found to be the most engaging to the viscera.

Addelaide had at some point stopped wondering to herself what the purpose of the study was.

“After Laura stimulated Susan’s clitoris with her fingers, what did Susan do?” The lead researcher’s dryly posed question came through with stark clarity on Addelaide’s headphones.

“Uh...” Subject 137, a younger woman with the plain, shoulder-length hair and experienced sexual reticence of someone older, shifted uncomfortably, briefly breaking into a smile before gathering her thoughts. “Well, she, uh, gathered the pieces of her son’s head together after the rebel militants raided her family’s home, I think. That was Cathérine, right?”

Touch the desk once. Now remove your hands, retreating completely past the vertical plane produced by the front edge of the desk. Good, now touch the desk again. Good.

Addelaide continued skipping forward in the video, trying to find the end of 137. She had been reciting criticisms of the study to herself in silent monologue for the seven weeks she had so far spent editing down the footage. To start with, the details of the feast were so numerous and esoteric, and the questions so specific, that only foodies would have strong verbal recall, even as their guts forcefully attested that they had in fact consumed and digested the roasted chateaubriand with pan jus and escargot bourguignonne and almond biscotti, while simultaneously grumbling about not being given the opportunity to do what they claimed to have already done.

The massacre was fictionalized to avoid the problem inherent in real tragedy that, as it became dated and was shuffled out of the news cycle, later subjects would experience it as more

remote or less urgent in its demands for emotional rejoinder and the imperative of cataloguing its details. However, Addelaide felt that, instead of adding fictional deaths to the real ones always accumulating, they could have simply used an actual massacre having occurred in most any of the regions likely to host one at any particular point in geopolitical history. The measurable effect on the study and its North American subjects in terms of their knowledge of the verity or falsity of the atrocity, and the response to its proximity or distance in time, would have been minimal, she thought. She had begun feeling this way around Subject 40 and hadn't changed her mind since. It was Subject 42, actually.

As for the sex scene, it was between a married couple, both spouses described as being in their thirties, the event occurring spontaneously in the afternoon, on a Sunday, in their living room. But it was obvious why the subjects tested so high on recall of the scene. Who couldn't remember "finger?" Who couldn't remember "tongue?" Who couldn't remember "clitoris?" Who couldn't remember "lips?" Who couldn't remember "anus?" Who couldn't remember "eyes?"

137's eyes lit up: "I remember there was tongue on the side, with that sauce – the beurre blanc!"

The line of your vision is perpendicular to the monitor, making it appear as a two-dimensional rectangle. Lean to the left until you pass the edge of the plane produced by the monitor's face. When the perpendicular edge of the monitor becomes visible, take visual note of it, then return to the starting position, where only the front plane is visible. Then repeat the previous step to confirm.

∞

Addelaide's mother had originally thought to name her Adelaide with the customary spelling, but, having seen it in a book and being relatively unfamiliar with the name herself, anxiously added the second *d* to avoid mispronunciations like Aid-elaide, which she imagined but had never heard, and likely never would have. The second *d* was simply there to make sure, to add some certainty, she had rather reasonably explained to her young daughter.

Addelaide's fingertip passed over her phone's touchscreen, scrolling through the Cuddlr interface, which displayed a map of the 40 or so city blocks surrounding her position, where she stood next to a bus stop sign, though she wasn't waiting for a bus. At various points along the map, arrows indicated the location, within meters, of a person who, at that moment, according to the app, wished to cuddle with another user. Addelaide was one of those arrows.

Tap any part of the pavement contained within the chalked square that somebody drew on the sidewalk in front of you with your toes. Remove your foot entirely before tapping inside the square again.

It was late in the afternoon. She had reached peak exhaustion and left after Subject 138 was completed. She looked at her own profile pic: 24 years old, with light brown hair, longish, often up or in a ponytail, the former in her profile. She wasn't fit so much as she was thin from a lifelong ambivalence, though not aversion, towards food. She sometimes allowed the thought that her face was pretty, though it wasn't quite as symmetrical as the dictates of popular beauty were purported to demand, and which her brain very unambiguously demanded for its own independent reasons.

In her teens she had spent hours pressing the right side of her face against her hand or the wall, attempting to reset the bone structure to conform to the left side so that they, in their mutual resemblance, would form the kind of elven, estrogenic, delicate proportion she demanded of

herself, her face. She nearly had it, she told herself, but the nearness of it agonized her more than unattainability would have. When red welts and rashes began appearing and growing on her face from the slow friction and sustained tectonic pressure of her attempts to reconfigure herself, her mother pushed her to attend therapy. She stopped pressing her face, and her mother stopped pressing her.

Touch your face gently before the next car horn honks. Now touch it again, as confirmation and with no requirement to beat the car horn or change the shape of your face.

She tapped one of the arrows on the map: Matt again. It was an innocuous guy name, if there was such a thing on a cuddle app. Addelaide was vaguely annoyed by the idea of cuddling with another woman, which felt too much like therapy. But then, cuddling with a guy felt too much like sex, maybe, even though that's not what it was for, maybe.

She felt jittery and tapped the chalk square again, twice.

A message popped up. Matt asked her if she was available now. She responded that she was.

∞

Matt – probably – sat on a park bench.

Twenty minutes had passed, fifteen of them spent walking and five spent watching.

Matt was reasonably well-dressed, though relaxed enough that he didn't seem to think this would be a date. His hair was shorter than in his photo, but she could see that it would have been curly if it was longer.

Addelaide was relieved to see that the park was well-populated thanks to the weather and the hour. There were a lot of moms and children, and a dad or two, none of whom having retreated against the vanguard of rush hour yet. She didn't hear their voices.

Look at his face. Now look away—

He glanced in her direction and chased her face away. She looked out at the pond in the middle of the park, arbitrarily counting ducks until she felt the alarms at her back slowly begin to recede. She needed to finish it, to confirm the first act. She couldn't even contemplate touching him until she had confirmed the first act.

She tapped her teeth together gently to sieve nervous energy from her hands and feet. Part of her was relieved that the potential for collision with a stranger had interrupted the looping requirements of her anxiety, if only partially and temporarily. She wanted to force more interruptions, to pressure the first hairline fractures into her endless loops.

She thought enough time had passed. She didn't want him to notice her second glance and mistake it for a communicative gesture, which she wasn't ready to offer yet. She would have to be subtle.

Complete the second look for confirmation. Good.

By confirming, she saw that his gaze was still on her, a curiosity that she didn't take to be leering. Still, there he was, still looking, still waiting. He knew who she was.

She looked away again, walking to a bench near the water and sitting with her back to Matt, who was maybe five or six meters behind her.

She waited in the pulse of mutual expectation. In the space where a ritual would normally have inserted itself to be satisfied, none came. Perhaps it had been driven away by her throbbing wrists and neck. Perhaps she had expected this to happen, or at least hoped for it. She looked back a third time, this time for her own reasons.

He was distracted by the rising bawl of a baby three benches over when her eyes first landed on him over her shoulder. He responded to her head movement by returning to her

immediately. His gaze fixed on her more persistently this time, his eyes squinting against the midsummer sun.

Her body hummed in the transcendent fear of being witnessed.

...drying custard made her fingers sticky as she tried to put Matt's head back together...

She felt as if she had been struck as he gave her a confident smile and pointed at his own chest: *are you looking for me?*

Her turning head brought her eyes back to the screen that had fallen blank in her hand in the intervening tremor. They could only stare back at themselves until she stood and walked hurriedly from the park.

Blink. Blink again for confirmation.

∞

Addelaide imagined herself as Subject 144 as she saved the final edit on Subject 143. She, 144, would, after all this time, be able to achieve perfect scores on each of the quizzes – sex, massacre, feast – and yet by now did not experience even the slightest physiological response to any of the scenarios the research team had conjured. She couldn't be certain that she ever had, in spite of what she thought were her relatively normal appetites and moral faculties. She had had sex enough times to know that time could pass in its absence without her crumbling, or even particularly noticing. She ate every day – was she to be expected to react as if it were the first time every time, as others seemed to? And as for people dying, or being killed, that happened every day, too.

Earlier that particular day, a number of days after the near-miss with Matt, she had been in her supervisor's office. Dr. Carey, or Bruce, as he insisted he call her and she never could

more than once after being reminded, was sitting as he usually did with both feet flat on the floor and knees apart, long, thin hands clasped between them. He never looked comfortable.

“So it’s going well, you’re firmly established in a pattern of – sort of – preview, edit, review, move on...?”

“Um-hm, absolutely. Almost to a fault.” She sat straight-backed, also uncomfortable.

“Okay, that’s good, I think. I have to say I’m a little concerned that we haven’t reached the halfway point yet. The MRI didn’t leave much for the rest of this project, so I’m trying to budget out the remaining funding for your work, and the visual effects wizards behind you in line. It’s starting to feel like I’m rolling pizza dough so flat that I can see through it.”

Touch the front surface of his desk in front of your knees— No.

Addelaide laughed in the slight, curt way she found herself using when a joke was delayed traveling imperfectly through the semiconductor of ritual. Dr. Carey had his head cocked slightly, as if gauging whether his message was really landing.

Addelaide tried to placate him: “I’ll increase my hours. I’m making solid progress, though. The problem isn’t encountering anything new that I have to learn how to fix, it’s dealing with the fact that nothing new is left to encounter. In terms of the technical side...”

“Yes, nothing new for you, but you’ve benefited by having unfettered access to this study. For the first-time audience, this information has to make sense. And it’s been so long since I conducted some of these interviews – not because of you, but just the way this study was structured – that some of them are going to feel new to me, too, so—”

Touch desk— No.

Touch desk— No.

Touch desk— No.

She had deleted her Cuddlr account and gone out and purchased pajama bottoms with half-moons on them and a new t-shirt on her way home from editing, not comfortable wearing any of the t-shirts she usually wore to bed, and not having owned pajama bottoms since she left high school. Everybody sat in the dining room of the host apartment, the return cuddlers and a few of the more sociable first timers chatting. The Cuddle Coordinator had them all sit in folding chairs that had been arranged in facing pairs.

Addelaide faced a man who introduced himself as Evan. He was slightly heavy, about her age, lightly bearded with dark hair and a kind face. She found she could look at him without going off-centre.

The coordinator led them through the warmup, which doubled as an exercise in establishing nonsexual intimacy and a seminar in the ethics and practice of setting physical and psychic boundaries – saying “no,” in short. Addelaide hardly thought she needed that, and initially found it to be oddly at cross purposes with a community of this kind.

Touch your face— No.

“Are you Bigfoot?” asked Addelaide.

Evan couldn’t help but laugh, taken aback. “No.”

“Is your name Evan?”

“No.”

“Would you like to cuddle?”

“No. My turn.”

Addelaide put her hand over her mouth. He smiled but didn’t laugh.

“Are you here from the future?”

“No.”

“Is your name Addelaide?”

“No.”

“Would you like to cuddle?”

“No.”

“Is your name Addelaide?”

“No.”

“Is your name Addelaide?”

“No.”

“Is your name Addelaide?”

“No.”

∞

“Would you like to cuddle?”

“Yes. I almost said ‘no’ out of habit,” said Addelaide.

“I was worried that might happen,” said Evan as he sat down on the living room floor, which had been entirely covered with blankets, pillows and sleeping bags.

Addelaide stood for a moment, unsure of how to approach the situation, in spite of their training and the research she had conducted earlier in the week. The dozen or so other cuddlers were pairing or grouping off. One uncertain older lady was being guided by the coordinator, who had paired with her.

Evan made a show of lying on his back and folding his hands across his stomach. “You pick how,” he said.

Addelaide lowered herself to the floor and sat looking at his supine form, his belly not quite flat even when he was on his back, his face pointing up at her, askance. She shifted and stretched her legs out, lying down beside him. She looked towards him, their faces aligned.

Turn your head and look at the intersection of the ceiling and the wall—

“If you want we can just lean our heads together,” he said. “It’s a good way to ease into it.”

“Sorry, did you say you had done this before?”

“Twice, but this is my first time here. I just moved.”

“So you’re a veteran, then, huh?”

“I guess? I’m not sure how many times is a lot with this. Some people go twice a month, every month, for years. You said it was your first time, though, right?”

Addelaide nodded in her horizontal fashion, looking at him for a second after she stopped. She abruptly turned her back to him and slid closer.

“Little spoon,” she said.

“Good choice,” he said.

She heard him shifting onto his side, felt his arm come around before she saw it. She felt the front of his body against the back of hers at the top, the bottom of his a respectful distance from hers at the bottom. Still, she steeled herself for the appearance of an errant erection, and only when none had arrived after several minutes did the tension leave her.

She didn’t look again at the masses of entwined people surrounding them on the floor, but felt the immediacy of their presence in the quiet chatting and giggling which surrounded and permeated her even as it slowly faded and broke up into sporadic murmurs. However, in her

position facing away from Evan, she was left looking at the back of the coordinator, who was propped on one elbow, her arms protectively ensconcing the head of the older woman.

Pieces of her head charred medium rare stroking sensitive fingertips together—

Intertwine your fingers—

Without warning, Addelaide pivoted around to face Evan, who raised his arm to accommodate her sudden movement.

“Not working out?” he asked.

“It’s fine, but let’s try this,” she said, wrapping her left arm around his big middle and settling in fairly close, front-to-front. She tucked the top of her head under his chin, and his right arm settled back over her. Facing him felt less sexual to her than his approach from the back had. She smelled his t-shirt. She approved.

Over time, their bodies improvised several additions to their entanglement. Addelaide’s foot found its way on top of his foot, while his bottom arm slid out from under him and created a perch for her head to rest on. They found an arrangement of their limbs and pieces that, as much as Addelaide prodded and tested it, didn’t have the structural weak points and architectural flaws that she had previously come to find when she had made herself one half of a shared human form as she was now, in an admittedly new context.

She felt the oxytocin already pooling in her brain.

Touch—

She felt everything quieting.

Touch ...

She felt herself quieting.

There her left hand was, on the middle of his back. There her right hand was, knuckles against his chest. There her head was, under his chin. There her knee was, against his knee.

There her foot was, on his. There her pulse was, throbbing a minute ago, having slowed since.

There she was.

∞

About half of the group was the same the second time she went. Evan was speaking to the coordinator when he saw her come in and smiled.

The coordinator spoke first when Addelaide got her shoes off and joined them in the entrance to the dining room.

“Hey, you came back for more, huh?” she asked, smiling.

“Yeah, I thought it was really fun. I got that high that you talk about people getting on your website,” she said, only looking at the coordinator even as all her other senses were directed towards Evan.

The coordinator beamed at her. “Excellent, that’s what we want. That means you had a good cuddle, and we only want good cuddles here.”

Evan adopted a mock arrogant posture. “No big deal,” he shrugged.

The coordinator laughed and Addelaide smiled.

Fifteen minutes later, Addelaide had changed and she and Evan had again paired off after the warmup. The older woman previously consigned to the coordinator had joined a group of three, making it four.

“Same?” he asked.

“Same,” she replied.

They sat down on the floor at the same time. A middle-aged woman's head appeared on the floor behind Addelaide.

“Don't mind us,” she said, eyes twinkling good-humouredly as another woman joined her.

Addelaide smiled and turned back to Evan, who was already on his side, waiting. She tilted her axis until they were face-to-face again. He raised his arm. Hers slid along and over his waist.

Place your left hand on his right shoulder blade—

He shaped his left arm to fit her head in its nook and instinctively raised his chin even before she placed her head under it.

Place your head on his arm and under his chin. Place your knuckles against his chest—

He shifted slightly, but she was already settled.

Place your foot on his foot. Now remove it again –

She disguised it as settling.

Now replace your foot on his foot for confirmation. Good.

He sighed peacefully, something she hadn't heard him do the last time.

Place your knee against his knee.

∞

When Evan wasn't there the third time, she initially felt confused. They hadn't exchanged numbers, because the Cuddle Club was their only meeting place thus far, wherever it was to be held for that particular session. She had already changed, having arrived early and assuming he would follow her through the door, but when he didn't, she wished she had pockets

in her pajama bottoms to put her hands in and hold on. She chastised herself for feeling lost in his absence. He had nothing to do with the benefits of this process for her, not specifically.

Touch your face— No.

She ended up pairing with a woman of about sixty named Jeanne, who told her that she was a nutritionist starting a holistic health and healing company with her partner, himself a nutritionist. Jeanne said that they had both waited many years to make their passions a reality. She was a veteran of cuddle clubs, but this was her first here. She and her partner had just moved.

Addelaide had rested her head against Jeanne's for as long as she thought polite before making her suggestion: face-to-face; head tucked under the taller Jeanne's chin; arm around the bigger Jeanne's body, hand on her shoulder blade; knuckles on Jeanne's chest, which Jeanne didn't mind, though Addelaide asked first, as they were told to; foot on foot; knee on knee.

It all felt the same as last time. Nothing had changed.

Remove your knee. Now touch it to Jeanne's. Remove again, with complete separation.

Now touch again. Good.

∞

She stared blearily at 219 on the monitor. She didn't move, couldn't.

"Um, I believe she stimulated her seared liver with the butt of his rifle," said her headphones.

Touch the monitor when 219's eyes are open. If they blink when your fingertips are making contact with the monitor, start over. Repeat for confirmation. Good.

∞

Addelaide stood in her half-moon pajama bottoms as Jeanne walked in the front door, hugging the coordinator and giving Addelaide a wave over her shoulder.

∞

It seemed to her that something resided in the shift or passing where the edge of one plane became a quoin at the meeting of two, when a new dimension revealed itself, having always resided perpendicular to the one visible. She saw this again, in her phone, tilting it slightly, then repeating for confirmation.

These revelations were everywhere for her, imbuing banal objects with vast meaning that she felt powerless to filter or ignore as she navigated the shapes and signs littering her life. Addelaide considered how the weight of so much significance pressed on her, how it slowed the footfalls that echoed inside her mind, how it made her smile arrive too late, when the joke had already passed.

Her body leaned slightly to the right, and she knew this was her stop. She stood and waited at the door, the only one leaving the train car.

The door opened and she stepped out.

The sound of the man's cries reached her before her foot touched the platform, his voice already proximate, already there.

She had time to begin to turn towards the sound, compelled to see instead of flinch, before she was enveloped by the screaming man, his clothes and hair thick and heavy with neglect, a tangle of clotted hair against her lips, the smell of unsheltered years woven into the blotched red of his shirt, the man's voice trembling and roaring as if into a storm that had been coming over the horizon every waking moment of his life. His eyes were wide with terror and wonderment.

Her first impulse was to pull away sharply, but his arms were around her too quickly, their bodies meeting inextricably on the platform.

She saw faces around them, sparse in the mid-afternoon, but all of them seemed distant and unmoving. She felt the strange clarity of being unable to move her own body, now held and traveling along the same tumultuous edge that the man traversed in abject terror with an eternal constancy.

Transit police swam through the distant faces towards them, black-gloved hands pushing and reaching.

She was transfixed in a singular moment that would never occur again exactly as it was, no matter how many times she repeated its motions, its mechanisms.

She saw all of its dimensions at once, and tears came from her eyes.

The man cried too, his elbow bending as he raised his hand to his face. The startled voices around them sounded muffled and removed.

Place your head in the nook of his elbow.

Addelaide shivered with an internal cataclysm but outwardly appeared perfectly still, her tear-run face resolutely blank.

Wrap your left arm around his back and place your left hand on his shoulder blade.

Good, now remove it completely and replace it for confirmation.

The man stopped screaming. She placed her knuckles against his chest. He interpreted this as an attempt to push him away and held her tighter, as if letting go would mean he would drift into the violent, indefinite chaos that their shared plane was cutting through.

Remove your knuckles. Replace them. Good.

She held him tighter too, with the hand she had on his back, elements colliding around them. He raised his face slightly to open his neck and allow his silent cry to escape into the storm.

Tuck your head under his chin. Place your foot against his foot. Place your knee against his knee.

They held on to each other in their perfect configuration as the roiling significance buffeted their passage through parallel interior spaces. There they were.

Remove your knee. Replace it for confirmation. Good.

There she was.

CRITICAL AFTERWORD

Roiling Significance: Humour, Horror, Denial and Excess in *Penetralia*

In a treatise on Franz Kafka and his use of humour alongside horror, David Foster Wallace writes that “great short stories and great jokes have a lot in common... Both depend on...a certain quantity of vital information removed from but evoked by a communication in such a way as to cause a kind of explosion of associative connections... [The] effect of both short stories and jokes often feels sudden and percussive, like the venting of a long-stuck valve” (61). The stories in *Penetralia* likewise seek to open a number of valves – sexual, social, political, psychological, and technological. Occlusions are burst through, or crushed against. Characters break free or reaffirm their confinement, but either way, the body suffers change and recapitulation equally.

To point out now that Wallace also writes in his analysis of Kafka that “there is no quicker way to empty a joke of its peculiar magic than to try to explain it” (61) may seem like an auto-condemnatory sentencing of this piece. However, in this context, and also Wallace’s, his comment would probably count as an example of irony, and therefore a reclamation of critical analysis from the realm of the unfunny, at least for a few pages. At the risk of spoiling the joke, this afterword will attempt to analyze some of the methodologies by which the stories in this collection function.

If this collection manages so much as a pale, emaciated resemblance to Kafka’s work, it may be because of a search for the hilarious and the horrific in the quotidian. Humour and horror accompany each other to varying degrees and ratios in each story, variously reinforcing, undermining, and reconfiguring each other. Both rely on a vertiginous combination of hyperbole

and revelation: the uncanny followed by unmasking in horror, and exaggeration followed by punchline in humour.

Writing of the Baroque period, Christopher D. Johnson makes a point no less relevant in modern literature: “the hyperbolist...acts to deny the stringencies of circumstance...[refusing] to recognize faults, aporias, and limits, and...is also able to express what is most transcendent, outrageous, or sublime in the human condition” (280). For this and many other reasons, humour and horror, and the hyperbole inherent in them, are extremely germane to this collection; both styles operate conceptually *and* viscerally, a relationship that is of key importance. These two elements function as the essential scission between the conceptual-linguistic and the visceral-emotional, states that have been profoundly alienated from each other in the lives of these characters. This is a divide that is traversed or fallen into in each of the stories here.

The scissions are various, and variously dealt with. In “Wisdom,” Craig can only puzzle over and attempt to explicate his own literal and inexplicable dismantling in a dentist’s office, though he can’t speak his horror without any teeth and so finds smiling to be his only recourse. In “Plane Faces,” Addelaide is inundated with surplus relevance from even the most mundane physical surfaces as she cycles through constant obsessive-compulsive rituals, but she cannot establish any meaningful physical or emotional connection with another human being unless the surface of their body becomes part of a new ritual. In “Refract,” Allan is confronted on the one hand by human voices without human form that insist on their presence anyway, and on the other by an entity of undeniable physical presence that is totally devoid of voice or definition.

For all of these characters as fallible, breakable humans, to laugh is to recognize and gutturally react to the absurdity and brevity of their existence. Laughter marks the equinox where intelligence meets its own insufficiency. To scream in horror is to run from one’s own laughter

and reach for a salvation that is not on offer, except by laughing again. Claudia Claridge, in analyzing hyperbole in a *Monty Python* sketch about a joke so funny that it kills all who hear it, posits that “the murderously funny nature of the joke is underlined by the contrast with sad or tragic surroundings which are more likely to induce sorrow than mirth.” This leads her to conclude, seemingly counterintuitively, that “the comic effect is heightened by the extreme seriousness with which the characters in the sketch deal with the situation... There is thus an incongruity produced by combining a funny joke with multiple deaths and intentional killing” (235). Seen here, humour and horror somehow undercut and multiply each other’s potency simultaneously. They both begin as a conceptual tension or inversion and end with a physical and tonal embodiment of same, vibrating down from the brain, along the vocal chords and out of open mouths as laughs or screams.

In *Penetralia*, characters don’t scream or laugh *at* so much as *against* a variety of existential strictures. To elucidate this point about the primal motivation for intellectual and sexual constriction, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari believe that the human body is an assemblage bound by “the surface of the organism, the angle of *signifiance* and interpretation, and the point of subjectification or subjection. You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body... You will be signifier and signified... a subject of the enunciation recoiled into a subject of the statement” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 159). In this paradigm, bodies are compelled into speaking by a system which demands that they embody and transmit a hierarchical, productive, codified language, and, in this way, the sub-linguistic recoil and revulsion or rebellion undergone by so many of the characters in *Penetralia* can be better understood.

Each body in this collection screams and laughs, even if not literally, and screaming bodies and laughing bodies are speaking bodies. They are enunciating without codified language the divide between the conceptual and the visceral. As Deleuze and Guattari perceive it, the speaking body, individual and social, contains “multiplicities that coexist, interpenetrate, and change places – machines, cogs, motors, and elements that are set in motion at a given moment, forming an assemblage productive of statements” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 36). As suggestive as these descriptions are of technologized bodies, of bodies as parts in a mechanized social system, Deleuze and Guattari complicate the relationship between the pieces and functions of the body and their productive potential when they mention Kafka’s one-time fiancé, Felice Bauer. They note that she “is inseparable from a certain social machine, and, as a representative of the firm that manufactures them, from parlograph [dictation] machines... But at the same time, Felice’s teeth, her big carnivorous teeth, send her racing down other lines, into the molecular multiplicities” (36). How kind of Deleuze and Guattari to mention teeth.

Even though they are clearly and quite well-adapted to productive purposes, something in the nature of teeth as parts of the technologized body can disassemble its machinery or functionality. The teeth are certainly destructive in quality and purpose, being useful for tearing and crushing organic material, but they are also constructive, allowing the speaking body to shape and articulate words. This is a fact Craig is only too aware of in “Wisdom” as his teeth are removed without explanation or obvious reason, leaving him without the ability to destroy organic bodies *or* create words, and so finds himself in a silent stasis. Two communicative options still available to him in his reduced state would of course be the laugh or the scream, enunciations containing no distinct phonemes that would require the structuring geometry of teeth, but Craig chooses to forgo speech of any kind and smiles a terrible acquiescence as a show

solidarity to other people, like the scarred girl on the television used to sell an app, who have been disassembled in the gears of the social machine.

These stories can be roughly divided into four categories based on the relationship of their various protagonists to speech within the organic/conceptual systems they occupy. The first group might be called Silence Stories (“Wisdom,” “Feature,” “Plane Faces”), rather cloistered, internalized narratives in which the characters navigate the inside of their own discursive, organic prisons, with occasional and highly disruptive interventions from outside. Then there are the Monologue Stories (“Ha Ha,” “Idiolect”), in which the prisoner begins articulating their cell, often literally. They attempt to animate themselves through voice and search out the dimensions of their confinement, though they aren’t quite ready to extricate themselves.

Next are the Dialogue Stories (“Rear Projection,” “Mid,” “Idiolect” again) in which individual characters reach out of their prisons and attempt to allow others to reach in, but find that these attempts at penetration and exchange between the bars only confirm that the bars exist. In the case of “Rear” and “Idiolect,” they are also (not so) secretly monologue stories. Miranda merely justifies to herself (in the appropriated voice of Marlene Dietrich) her decision to exploit a dead person’s body. Ambrose only listens to the voiceless in society when they literally repeat his words back to him, as the bearded stranger does. Miranda’s dialogue affirms her position while Ambrose’s dialogue causes him to run from his. Finally, there are the Shouting Stories (“Soft Serve,” “Refract”), in which characters escape from their prisons and raise their voices to exult their freedom, but find others still in the dominant systems unresponsive. Tara and Allan can never describe or depict their prisons to anyone still enmeshed in them, and so they live alone in the knowledge of what they escaped at the end of their stories.

As the prison metaphor might suggest, power relationships abound in *Penetrabilia*, given the subjection of its characters in hierarchized, productive systems. These individuals are either subsumed by, or (attempt to) escape from, the systems of signification and enunciation that the conception of the body as an organized assemblage of functions compels it into, and the speech these bodies produce is often evocative of power relationships and exchanges. The conversation in “Rear Projection” between Miranda and Marlene Dietrich is an exchange of reverence for exploitive jurisdiction over Dietrich’s body as a purely ordered and productive signifier; the conversation in “Mid” is an exchange of deference for a salvific restating of a body that will soon cease to enunciate anything except absence; the declining body of Ambrose is similarly recapitulated in “Idiolect” by a deranged man who has internalized and privileged his entire corpus of written work to the seeming exclusion of his own speech; and in “Feature,” Care converses with a stalker who uses her disability to decontextualize his speech and invent multiplicities of himself that could not otherwise exist.

The characters in these and other stories make different choices about how to resist or capitulate, but there is no clear salvation on offer, regardless of which choice is made. In keeping with the traditions of comedy and horror, the protagonist must never be fully successful or safe, or else the revelatory power of the laugh and the scream would not need to exist. For example, in “Idiolect,” Ambrose fails in his attempts to destroy the system of enunciation he had thought himself to possess ownership over before discovering that the opposite was true, and that he had written himself into a prison that precludes new thought and speech. I made this decision chiefly to avoid the original ending, depicting Ambrose physically tearing apart his surrogate speaking body, the bearded man in the park, who has died of an unknown illness or malnutrition, or both. The more sentimental ending with Ambrose sitting next to his personal, once-living human

parlograph machine as they stare out at the ocean and its dream of chaos and possibility is more tragic in a way for Ambrose, but gentler on the reader. The original would have been deliberately if imperfectly evocative of Francisco Goya's painting, "Saturn Devouring his Son," in which a wide-eyed, fearful old man commits a barbaric act of filial (and so auto-) consumption in order to emancipate himself from the threat of usurpation through propagation. Ambrose's ambivalence about figuratively dying and allowing "his" language to be disassembled and reconfigured by usurping children is not enough to justify the extreme violence necessary to free him, so the tension between his body and its finite, orderly speech causes him to collapse.

Speaking of Goya and power, the artist's so-called Black Paintings are examined in *The Nation* by the primary inspiration for Ambrose, Christopher Hitchens, who sees in the images condemnations of "priestcraft and the worship of mediocre princes and tycoons," which resulted in "etchings [that] pullulate with freaks: depraved, slobbering bats and goblins and ghouls" (Hitchens 303). In Goya's bacchanalian, heavily peopled expressions of cruelty and ignorance, there is a sense of caustic satire being visited on the deformed bodies both perpetrating and receiving lashings of social inequity and imaginary moral adjudication alike. Hitchens gleans from the tongue-in-cheek body horror – linking as it does the human assemblage of organs and base compulsions to the toxic speech expected and produced by the body politic of the late Inquisition period in Europe – an indication that "Goya appears to have guessed at the latent connection between sexual repression and the other kinds. There is...a definite and felt relationship between those qualities and the use of torture and slavery. Very little about the atrocities of our great twentieth century would have astonished this artist" (303).

Hitchens makes clear that these images are in no way anarchic in a modern eye, but more importantly, he identifies sexuality and its corollary, sexual oppression and repression, as self-

preservative mechanisms of hierarchical, authoritarian social systems. Deleuze and Guattari affirm this position by identifying suppressive reactions to rebellious or deterritorializing speech: “Bodies are disciplined, corporeality dismantled...a jump is made from the organic strata to the strata of *signifiance* and subjectification. A single substance of expression is produced...the abstract machine is triggered that must allow and ensure the almightiness of the signifier as well as the autonomy of the subject” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 181). That such systematic and suppressive measures are necessitated in the hierarchical interior/exterior by expressions of sexuality implies their positively destructive, and therefore emancipatory, potential in the conceptual/visceral duality of the speaking body.

In fact, sexuality can be found in the same Venn imbrication between concept and viscera as *Penetralia*'s core components of humour and horror. Michel Foucault asserts that it is from the “technology of the self” that a modern, hyper-analytical but also neurotic and irrational mindset, and the attendant “development of a form of uneasiness about sexual acts and their effects,” emerges (90). To take one instance, in “Plane Faces,” Addelaide lives in anxious avoidance of what Foucault calls “the connection established between the sexual act and the substantial, violent, paroxysmal [author’s note: the original title of this collection was *Paroxysms*], and dangerous expenditure of the vital principle that it involves,” with the principle in this case being survival of the speaking body contemplating or undertaking sex (91). Survival as a productive sign in a codified system is achieved either through the resulting pregnancy and genetic reconstitution, or avoidance of the sexual act and its risks. Addelaide feels a desire to reconfigure her rote, auto-discursive existence, but can’t bear to face the violence of intimacy, however controlled or mitigated it may be by something like cuddling apps and rules, which would be required by this reconfiguration.

Foucault notes in the Roman, Hellenistic, and Christian traditions that so heavily inform the Western systems in which Addelaide and other protagonists in this collection operate an excessive emphasis on “the complexity and tenuousness of the relations established between sexual acts and the life of the individual: the sexual act’s extreme sensitivity to all external and internal circumstances that might make it harmful; the immense range of effects of every sexual act on all parts and components of the body” (91). Because she is so compulsively and protectively interior in her thinking to the exclusion of other, differently speaking bodies and the frightening intimacies they offer, Addelaide has made herself both subject and object. She has objectified herself with her obsessive study of the planes and angles of her organized body as it interacts with other non-speaking surfaces, including human surfaces similarly objectified and made mute by her rituals. Perhaps no other character in this book is as constricted by the linguistic demands of her body as an assemblage of functions navigating an infinite grid work of signifiers.

As previously established, when expressing the conceptual/visceral tension, bodies become the basic phoneme with which the ideas of *Penetralia* are assembled. In each of the nine stories in this collection, the body engenders or undergoes a revelatory trauma of some kind, violently or melodramatically or (a)sexually embodying a perceptual shift or, in some cases, reiteration. These traumas are all enacted on the bodies of characters, or are perceived on the bodies of others and so affect the way those bodies interact. The inherent functions and drives of the reactive and interactive body are thus equal and interchangeable as vital fulcra around which the motions of each story turn. Eroticism, violence and trauma, the survival instinct, and hunger all become expressions of the conceptual/visceral relationship and discordance.

Continuing with “Plane Faces,” the diverse forms that the disagreement between concept and viscera takes is most clearly articulated in the somewhat cryptic, apparently well-funded research project that Addelaide assists with. The triptych of “sex, massacre, feast” presents an array of physical enticements and revulsions – reactions, regardless of any value judgment – that Addelaide cannot fully engage with in her anxious remove from all physicality except by intellectualizing and digitizing the most basic and most extreme stimuli, which are left to her to imagine. Questions of morality, ideology, empathy, and even baser passions like hunger and titillation, are almost beside the point in her state of mind. While ideas about, for instance, global instability or evolutions in societal attitudes towards diverse forms of sexuality might be of academic interest to Addelaide, the physical basis for these concepts, like the uncomplicated fact of violent death or sexual intercourse, are alien to her.

As such, Addelaide locates her best chance at dismantling her compulsivity in physical intimacy, arguably a form of or variation on eroticism. When she attempts to close the gap between the conceptual and the visceral through the use of a ritualized cuddling culture that employs apps, websites, and meetings to manage and codify the basic human embrace, she finds that her compulsive mind only invents more layers of arbitrary signification and ritual. Physical connection, however mechanistically employed, is still kept at bay. Even when Addelaide is attacked – or embraced, depending on how one reads or politicizes the encounter – by a mentally-ill, indigent man on a subway platform, she turns a non-consensual and unanticipated collision, with its potential for an organic and propulsive inversion of her seemingly inescapable habits, into yet another ritual. Though her attempt at breaking out of her rigorously encoded remove from physicality without taxonomy is unsuccessful by the conclusion of her story, a

window looking out of her mechanistic compulsion is briefly and uncannily opened in the story's final passages.

The simultaneous benefits of preservation and reconfiguration inherent in reproduction never come easily to the characters as sexual agents in *Penetralia*. Of course, there is the unease that Ambrose feels for mentoring and its implication of fatherhood, and thus the completion of his usefulness as a (re)productive speaking body. "Soft Serve" ends with a protest outside of a courthouse that represents a descent of discourse to a confused and animalistic nadir. In this sequence, a sea of screaming bodies coalesces around a trial deciding the culpability of a group of women who have rebelled against the racialized, misogynistic policing of their (notably asexual) reproduction. The bloody question of childbirth comes across as pristine next to the filth, violence, and utter moral confusion of the protestors. And in "Mid," Christie can only simulate the regenerative possibilities of her deceased, infant, pre-linguistic son by symbolically and ritualistically reconstituting him under the guidance of a death midwife. This act condemns him to a proper, hierarchical order that he had not been alive long enough to be subsumed into in his actual life.

On the humour-horror continuum, eroticism and its emancipatory effects are almost always absent or denied. Unsexed bodies atrophy and function like unspoken words here, aching and rotting in the constriction and neurosis of signification and subjection. The toothless Craig is passive and voyeuristic, the neurological condition of prosopagnosia causes faces and their possibilities for intimacy and danger to become totally inscrutable for Care in "Feature," Ambrose is consigned to de-sexed Platonism by age and a heavy corpus of unfashionably hyper-masculinized literary achievement in "Idiolect", and Miranda finds more intimacy with the

bodies of the dead that she reconstitutes and reduces to pure signification and production than she does with her living coworkers in “Rear Projection.”

Correlative to the use of occluded eroticism in this collection are various collisions of gender and sexuality. Because of the emphasis on the body as an assemblage of external and internal – social and psychological – phenomena, gender, sexuality, and race all have relevance here as acutely signifiable states of being, particularly when the use of traditional sex as an interlocking mechanism promoting cohesion and intelligibility has been precluded. Discussing *The Little Stranger* by Sarah Waters, Joanne Bishton sees in the text a “constant flux between male and female and a regenerative coopting of emotional states” (219). She perceives in the location and the relationship between a male and a female character in the story “an exploitable place for queering. Therefore, Caroline and Faraday’s inability to achieve and maintain a sexual relationship can, in itself, be seen as a form of denial... Queering the text in this way means that self-denial can be reversed and be reinterpreted and experienced as self-fashioning” (219). Abnegating the pleasures and connectivity of sex can be seen as a radical act in the case of many of the characters in *Penetrabilia*, who replace the desire to experience the bodies of others with reflexive loathing on one end of the spectrum all the way to excessive empathy on the other. Sexual denial becomes a prism that deconstructs and reconfigures rigid systems of bodily speech.

However, penetration can arguably perform the same function of redistributing the privilege of speech and physical agency. Graham J. Murphy identifies this process in the way that “the gender exclusivity...in [William] Gibson’s fictional worlds is made permeable through specific instances of stray penetration.” Murphy believes that urban locations are positioned as “sites that perpetuate gender permeability, urban interstices occupied by monstrous entities that are in excess of heteronormative designations.” Finally, the Gibsonian digital world, with its

microsoft ports allowing information to be plugged in to human heads and its simstim technology allowing people to occupy the first-person perspective of others (fiction in a nutshell), is seen as “possessing its own penetrative capabilities that can disrupt gender coding and potentially crash the gender(ed) matrix” (123).

A significant example of the digital/conceptual disordering of a high-functioning body can be found in Gibson’s *Neuromancer*. The character of Riviera performs an avant-garde show for an upscale audience in which his thoughts are skillfully projected as detailed holograms. The body of the character of Molly, a skilled assassin, is dissected and reassembled in an erotic simulation and abstraction: “A hand, Case saw, but not a severed hand; the skin swept back smoothly, unbroken and unscarred... A second hand lay on the bed. When Riviera reached for it, the fingers of the first were locked around his wrist, a bracelet of flesh and bone” (Gibson 135). The separation of the parts of Molly’s body decontextualizes them, changing the sign that others perceive in them (hand becomes jewelry) and the function they perform (adornment). As the performance progresses, “Riviera and the limbless torso [writhe] together on the bed, crawled over by the hands with their bright nails” (135).

The deterritorialized parts gain agency and mobility as a result of their removal from the orderly hierarchy of the body, the organized organism. This is highly redolent of the technique Care develops in “Feature” of overcoming her prosopagnosia by breaking strangers down to their individual parts and concomitant features and accoutrements in order to identify and familiarize herself with them. For her, the hands, hair, feet, and mouths are freed and so replace and become the person that would normally be identified by the organized face. While *Penetralia* avoids the ideal of a technocratic transcendence of Deleuzian subjectification that Gibson suggests, it does employ technologies that range from real or believable (archived, digitized facial tics from dead

celebrities in “Rear Projection”), to borderline speculative (an app that digitally erases scarring and trauma from social media imagery in “Wisdom”).

Bodies in *Penetralia* are in some way disassembled or reduced by technological intervention, neurological disorder, social or political disenfranchisement, supernatural events, and violence and death. The resulting selective focus on or amplification of one part of the body to the exclusion or reduction of others serves an illustrative purpose as an intensifying perspectival confinement that allows the stories to achieve what Wallace calls “the technical achievement of great short stories...*compression*” (61). Metonymy of this sort has the ability to “shift focus of attention from one part of a domain to another, and to form chains of association. By doing this, it has a unique capacity to make people see things from different perspectives” (Littlemore 105).

Taking up Deleuze and Guattari once again, metonymy is a feature of governing social systems like the law that “Kafka so forcefully developed” and which, from his perspective, had the potential to undermine the organizational principle of the social body in the same way that Felice’s teeth undermine the organization of the organism they ostensibly work in accordance with. This occurs because of “the paranoid-schizoid trait of the law (metonymy) according to which the law governs nontotalizable and nontotalized parts, partitioning them off, organizing them as bricks, measuring their distance and forbidding their communication...in the name of a formidable but formal and empty Unity, eminent, distributive, and not collective” (*Anti-Oedipus* 212). When Molly’s hands are free to redistribute themselves by crawling on fingertips in *Neuromancer*, or when the mouth speaks in place of the face for Care in “Feature,” then the orderly, brick-laid unity of the organism has crumbled and reconfigured in a violent but possibly redemptive gesture.

Retreating from the digitized future back to the 19th century for a moment, the often cruel but, in their own way, iconoclastic written and drawn representations of Oscar Wilde in his declining years reflect the generative and destructive power of the signification of body parts. Exaggeration and emphasis virtually (not digitally) remove or decontextualize certain organs and features from the rest of the body, so that they serve as metonymic representations of Wilde as a public figure. This imagery “focused on Wilde’s mouth and hands... His mouth both consumed excessively and was the source of his famous conversation. His hands touched the bodies of other men...while simultaneously being the part of him that produced his poems essays, reviews, plays, and one novel” (Skelly 145). In a more precise progenitor of *Penetration*, representations of Wilde’s “teeth may have signified the Wildean phallus” (146). As with Goya, the method is as timeless as it is incisive, or savage. By focusing excessively on teeth, hands, eyes, or skin, a single part of the body becomes a peephole through which a broader, deeper modern malaise can be witnessed. These parts become the sites where that modernity’s injuries are found, fresh or imperfectly healed.

Body parts decontextualized as signifiers become multiplicities. As Sarah Hayden says of the possibly transgender character Matthew O’Connor in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, his “polymorphous identity renders him capable of inhabiting and understanding myriad other minds, other ‘positions’ of class, race, and gender, allowing him to play the role of enabling, facilitating analyst” (76). O’Connor’s fluidity, multiplicity, and excess of signification, representing maleness, femaleness, neither, and both, matches his (her; their) excessive and florid speech to create a character that continually reconfigures other characters in the novel with nothing more violent than analysis and enunciation. As he proclaims to Nora of his unchosen disassembled nature, “The blessed face! It should be seen only in profile, otherwise it is observed

to be the conjunction of the identical cleaved halves of sexless misgiving!” (Barnes 157). Hyperbolic empathy in *Nightwood*, and that found in characters like Craig from “Wisdom” and Tara from “Soft Serve” – not to mention the multiracial Cassie from the latter story – shares the same disruptive, disassembling qualities as the dental implements, invasive social media, neurological disorders, and interdimensional predators of other stories.

Excess is represented in *Penetralia* as the reaffirming opposite of denial. Notably, “Refract” employs the monstrous aspect of penetration mentioned by Murphy using both the abusive aural delusions that permeate Allan’s brain as a result of discontinuing his antipsychotic medication, and the pervasive mutability of the creature that interweaves itself through the ranch house and terrorizes Allan and Steven. After Steven loses his life and is slowly consumed by the creature, Allan is left to contemplate his legs and feet as the only visible avatars of his partner in the final moments of his physical existence. Steven’s feet are described as dancing and wagging, as if communicating, or moving of their own volition – as if they had inherited Steven’s volition upon his death.

However, this omnipresent permeation immediately follows the early pages of the story, in which healthy sex is denied, partly because of the oncoming effects of Allan’s neurological disorder, but also because of Allan’s identity as a man and a gay man in a social order that, despite many revolutionary convulsions, still applies reductive valuations to his body as such. As Wendy Gay Pearson notes, “it is on the body – whether human body, alien body, virtual body, body politic, body of work, body of writing – that queer exerts its greatest effects. But it is also the body...that is threatened by queer’s potential disintegration in the face of a defensive and frighteningly powerful heteronormative hegemony” (73). Though this hegemony is personified

in some stories, as with Dr. Kintner in “Soft Serve,” it is often left disembodied and vibrating as an undercurrent, distinctly felt by the characters that are affected by it.

Using speaking bodies – the “*machinic assemblage* of bodies” combined with the “*collective assemblage of enunciation*” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 88) – as the basic phoneme of the book encourages the use of tonal devices which capture both the conceptual signification and visceral stimulation inherent in conscious physicality. For this reason, humour and horror, elements conceptual and visceral in equal measure, are the essential components of the stories in *Penetralia*. These distinct but parallel currents coalesce in this book, forming an assemblage of comingling wounds both physical and psychological. To once again subject this collection to an unfavorable comparison, Peter Fifield identifies in the late writing of Samuel Beckett a “constrained hyperbole, a rhetoric of fixation rather than flamboyance, which never strays far from its preoccupations” (153). This passage brings to mind Selma in “Ha Ha,” an amateur comedienne who is to some extent a much less accomplished simulacrum of Maria Bamford, who chooses every night to “approach the unsayable worst” (153) and say it in a repeating recitation unremembered by her audience. Creating an imbricated nexus realized through excess and repression, humor and horror work to reflect and reinforce, but also mutually undermine, each other. This dynamic creates an inherent tension that, if it is relieved, is only so by the laugh, or the scream, or both.

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