

CANTARAVILLE

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MORE TIPSYP THAN LITZVAH

M.J. Nicholls

The more welcome the dawn, the more welcome the day.

Inveterate Obscurist and Curio Collector Fitz McPatrick arose from his squalid sleeping quarters in drowsy Dumfriesshire to the strains of late 1980s indie-pop outfit *Adult Net*.

In his realm, the idea was to conduct a life divorced from commercial tedium and explore the hidden pleasures removed from the mainstream. This meant a forced love affair with pease pudding. It meant he spent hours indoors in summer watching reruns of unsuccessful sitcom spin-off *Going Straight*. It meant he videoed episodes of the independent artist platform *Raw Youth* off Channel Four. It meant he took his showers outside.

It meant he never phoned his mother except on the fourth Thursday of every second month. It meant he lived under a railway arch and rode a tandem bike to work. It meant having an appetite for curling and the discus. It meant he preferred indigo to any other colour in the spectrum. It meant he spoke in awkward apophthegms with members of the general public. It meant sidestepping each and every banality of ordinary life so as not to have his experience chained to that of the corporate man. He was

his own person, and would not be defined in terms of his work, his recreational activities or demeanour.

Never in this specialist life of his did he learn to appreciate the wonders to be plundered in popular 'cult' cinema. Since he refused to touch such 'cult' movies such as *Betty Blue* or *Un Chien Andalou*—their popularity well-known among pretentious students—and since *ET* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* came stamped with the commercial seal of disapproval, he watched low-budget independent films that never made it into cinemas and that no one in their right mind would think of viewing even for a bet.

One such film was titled *Furrowed Alleyways*. It was a languorous art house project looking at the slow decline of a farm in North Virginia around the time of the Civil War. What soon became a source of fascination for Fitz, born Fredrick Albert Jones in 1975, was not the grainy monochrome lens and the sense of pastoral decline it evoked, but the female lead Litzvah Managerial, also born in 1975. Aside from her wonderfully left-field stage name, she had a strange, lopsided charisma and demonstrated the bad acting skills of someone hoping to be picked up for mainstream work on looks alone.

To Fitz, her sloppy timing and ditzzy persona made her depiction of an 1850s housewife more akin to a sixth form student than a lady of the land, making her performance pleasingly bad. From the dim black and white landscape, her eyes shone like two small will-o'-the-wisps that someone had lit on a field simply to gawp at the beauty of light.

"She's like a canoe tipped on purpose. A painting of a blind robot. A very funny joke at a funeral. She epitomises all that is gloriously out of place, all that is appallingly brilliant about the Obscurist life," he said to himself at home while eating some melted cress.

Whenever trouble strikes, trouble strikes whenever.

Fitz was attending a meeting of various independent art types at

the house of one Richmond Flenmop, a 'monetary conservationist extraordinaire' who painted what he imagined the inside of submarines to look like, having never seen one. The evening was not a dinner party, since this skirted too close to convention, so it was labelled 'a miasma of ideas (with nibbles)' to persuade the various weirdoes he required to come. Each individual had their own phraseology to help people understand them, not to define themselves, but to let the inferior masses know what they stood for in life and not to challenge their beliefs.

The only Obscurist there was Fitz, since he had invented the term and no one was willing to join him for the risk it might catch on and become too popular. He got talking with Phillippe Romcock, a director of 'video transmissions of the mind'.

"So my *raison d'être* is to funnel the matrices of convention into a more gluey dialectic. You see?" he asked.

Fitz did not see. He saw the buffet, however, and helped himself to a syrup sandwich. "Yeah. Mind-blowing shit," he replied.

"Indeed so. Take for example my new film about sensitive prison guards. I mean, to have these barbarous symbols of all that is wrong with the penal system dancing around in luminous green jumpers and singing hits from *Oklahoma*, I mean...it is so *dégagé*. You have to see it, we have Brian Fedderned as the guard and Litzvah Managerial as the nutty psychologist," he said.

Fitz became clogged at the mention of her name. He stopped himself squeaking like an excited macaw and listened with the same intellectual and aural detachment most people exercised in the room. Some people left conversations mid-sentence to go and stare at the caged ape in the centre of the flat. "Um... Litzvah Managerial. Yeah, I've heard of her. Where are you shooting this? Where is she staying?" he asked unobtrusively.

"Oh, we're shooting it in Paisley. I think she's staying at Jim & Janey's B&B throughout," Phillippe replied, putting a slice of cake up to his mouth and holding it there for a few minutes to see what would happen.

“Fabulous. Spectral. Wonkle,” Fitz replied, bubbling with priapean excitement.

“Wonkle?”

“Yeah...wonkle.”

“I like it. Wonkle wonkle wonkle! Ha ha ha!” Phillippe chortled.

It was evident this man was a cretin. Looking for an excuse to leave, Fitz began talking about mainstream concepts to keep people away from him. “I thought the last Sofia Coppola movie was whizz-bang perfection. I mean, that £35,000,000 budget was totally justified. Roll on the Oscars, I say!” he tried, overdoing it.

“Is this some kind of ironic statement?” asked Ian Rumn, an avant-garde ‘music vaulter’.

“No, I really...well, I actually have to go. I think I’ll just leave. It would make no difference if I suddenly cut off in mid-sen—”

Never find yourself in cahoots with the damned.

Litzvah Managerial was brought into the world by beatnik parents who encouraged her to study for a degree in teleology and to avoid general drug use and hedonism. Being mildly rebellious, she decided to ignore this advice and studied theology instead. While at college, she realised her interests lay more in alcohol and bad acting than the existence and nature of the divine. To pursue this, she dropped out and became an unemployed actress and alcoholic for almost a decade. It had been 1 May 2005 since she last touched a drop.

She had no real interest in coming to Scotland to star in another obscure art house film, but was optimistic about carving a career for herself with her will-o’-the-wisp eyes and flaky delivery. After checking in at Jim & Jeannie’s B&B, she lay prostrate on the bed and released a strained, confused sigh. Two taps presented themselves at the door.

“Um... excuse me there, hen. Would you like anything fur elevenses? A wee nibble on a crumpet, maybe?” asked Jim, the

portly and amiable co-owner.

“Uh... no thank you. I might have something later, but right now my stomach feels like Voyager Two,” she replied, her response a tad curt.

“Right you are, hen.”

On her bedside cabinet sat a copy of the script, resting primly beside the floral patterned lampshade and a roll of smudged polka dot wallpaper. She perused the thorough description in the opening scene, noting the marked absence of a wilted flower dying in slow motion capture, or a solemn man gathering his thoughts under a stony archway. Rather lost without these images, she ventured into the dialogue.

It became apparent from lines such as “rescue your inhibition from the graveyard of sorrow” that this was basic independent movie fodder and that no new ground was being broken. Aside from the novelty of having a morality tale about the American penal system of the 1950s set in a Scottish prison with local actors portraying Southern men in strong Paisley accents, the film was a pile of garbage. In moments of isolation like this, trapped in a strange town working on another dead-end project, she craved a drop of liquor the most.

The afternoon was looking rather grim. Jim tapped on the door again and she sighed impatiently.

“Phone call for you, hen,” he said.

“Oh...right. Thanks, Jim,” she replied, taking the phone from his soapy hands. “Hello?”

“Hi. Is that Litzvah Managerial?” Fitz asked, a tremolo in his voice.

“Yes. Speaking.”

“Oh, hello there. Listen, I met Phillipe your director the other day and I’m a very big fan. I was wondering if you would maybe like to go for a drink sometime and discuss your oeuvre?”

“Sounds...good.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I think,” she said, musing on whether an acceptable amount of time had elapsed since her last drop of booze, “that would be great. Who are you, exactly?”

“A friend of Phillipe. I’m Fitz McPatrick. So how about the Royal Bubble pub in an hour?”

“I don’t know where that is. Could you come and pick me up?”

“Certainly!”

Throw a spanner into the works. See if it works.

As if to add to his excitement, Fitz noticed there was a second showing on UK Gold of the documentary on Dolby surround sound systems that he had missed the first time round. He was positively frothing with anticipation. The car he would collect Litzvah in was a Daewoo Musso, an unpopular and out-of-production hatchback. Unsure what to bring with him, he took a selection of her films and prepared a few questions in order to stimulate the conversation. This was quite possibly the most exciting moment of his life.

His appallingly gaudy hatchback refused to start. Upon the third turn and a strong kick in the side, it grumbled into power, revving with something close to automotive resentment. The jovial R&B stylings of KWS played on the stereo. Fitz refused to listen to anything other than the B-side on the tape, since the single itself had been a minor hit before the band disappeared in a storm of bad feelings and no musical talent. He decided to play some avant-garde rock from the NY female indie scene to impress Litzvah, and fiddled in his glove compartment for a Kim Gordon solo album. “God, this music is shite,” he said to himself, too excited to keep up the façade he liked half the stuff he listened to.

Litzvah was standing outside the B&B when he arrived, looking strikingly pedestrian compared to how she appeared in her films. Normally she exploited her raw sexuality by applying dark cherry

lipstick or cheek whitener to make her look attractively anaemic under the grainy black and white lens. On the streets, her purple cardigan and blue pullover gave her a disappointingly human feel, whereas Fitz was expecting something close to wings, a tiara and a joint. With a toot of his horn, he caught her attention and parked beside her.

"Fitz?" she asked with a crimped smile.

"Yes, hello! Nice to meet you," he said through the side window.

"Sorry? I can't hear you through the window."

"Um...do you want to get in the back?"

"What?"

"The back...or you can sit upfront if you would prefer?"

She opened the door and climbed in beside him after her final attempt to hear him had failed. He talked very quietly for someone so blisteringly unselfconscious, and people often mistook him for a shy loner, an image that bothered him somewhat. It pigeonholed him into some antisocial 'nerd' box.

"Hello there, Litzvah. It really is great to meet you. I'm Fitz. Thank you for agreeing to have this drink with me. Really...it won't be weird. All I'm after is a little chat about your work. Look upon it as a friendly interview or something for a magazine," he said, tousling his uncombed ginger hair.

"Right, so you're like a journalist?" she asked, not entirely interested in anything other than getting to the pub.

"I'm *like* a journalist, yes, but I'm not one by trade. I don't have an MA in Media Studies or anything like that. I work for the local council, but my job doesn't define me. Oh Christ, I don't want to prattle on, I've just met you!"

"That's OK, Fitz. It'll be nice to have an ally in this town. So far it's been pretty alien to me. So where's this pub you were talking about?"

If the blind lead the blind, who leads the purblind?

Ever since Litzvah became addicted to alcohol, and subsequently kicked the addiction, every bar or pub looked the same to her. Around the glorious, shining glint of beer bottles and beer glasses wisped a myopic smog of irrelevant people, accompanied by a tinny din of tedious merriment. In a swooning trance, she approached a half-finished beer glass at a table, anticipating the soothing tingle of the first drop on her tongue—as sweet and refreshing as a French kiss with God.

“Fitz, there’s something I want to tell you before we order anything. I used to be an alcoholic. Are you alright with me telling you this?” she asked, staring him intently in the eyes.

“Oh right. Yes, of course. I had no idea, obviously! But you’re better now, I take it?”

“Yeah, I haven’t touched a drop in years. Look, I wanted to come back here to see if I could start drinking again casually, you know? Most teetotallers never go near a drink for the rest of their lives, but why should I have that pleasure snatched away from me?”

“Right. Well, I suppose one wouldn’t hurt, would it?”

To call Fitz ignorant of the recidivism of recovering alcoholics would be an understatement. He was aware that some people could handle a slight tippie after kicking the habit, but was in no way prepared for the violent surge that could affect a person making their first slip-up after years of strenuous self-discipline.

They sat down at a table. Fitz ordered a 7-Up. He found beer a little too woody for his tastes, and was content with a popular fizzy beverage for the time being, despite his abhorrence of everything popular. Litzvah ordered a gin and tonic with “emphasis on the gin”.

“Litzvah, I really loved your portrayal of a cradle-snatching transvestite with a morphine addiction in Gail Reichman’s *Mommy’s Gone To Pot*. No one ever talks about the irony and wit in that movie, they all harp on about the love scene, which was

tastefully done, but hardly the crowning moment of the piece," Fitz began.

Litzvah had finished her drink about halfway through his first sentence. "Yeah. Just getting another, carry on."

"I think the concepts of solipsism and nihilism merged perfectly there. With your character, it was evident something had been lost in her childhood, and in that viciously Freudian notion of equilibrium, she was forced to recapture her youth, so to speak. Although in this instance she *captured* a youth, rather than, um, the former..."

"Just getting another. Don't let me stop you."

"Well, I loved you in *Truckstop of Death* too. An underrated B-movie in the 1940s tradition. Shades of Ed Wood in there, but ironically so. There was method in their madness, and um..."

"One more, I think."

This carried on until Litzvah had seven gin and tonics in her system and was perfectly sloshed. It had happened gradually over five or six hours, which was laudable given her two weeks of sobriety, and she showed no sign of stopping. Fitz continued to talk, turning a blind eye to her excessive booze consumption through his own unquenchable desire to hear her thoughts on acting in his beloved movies.

"Let me tell you, Fitz. It's not easy being a female actor...or actress, as sometimes they call ya. You know? It's like a dungeon of thought for the mind, you know? How profound was that! Listen, I'll tell you about that Phillipe Romcock guy...he's such an ass-kissing dick. He went up to Steven Spielberg and went 'like, hello there Jewish dude of films...I dug *Jaws 2*.' I mean, what a putz!"

Litzvah talked clearly and concisely when she was drunk, which misled Fitz somewhat. Had she been slurring her words, he might have caught on that something was horribly wrong, but her relentless non-sequiturs and nonsensical anecdotes only seemed to heighten his enchantment with the sad-eyed actress even further. After her tenth drink, he insisted that she return to his flat and

watch some clips from his favourite movies. She willingly agreed, having lost the power of rational thought.

It became apparent from her graceless stumble across the street that something had gone wrong with Litzvah. Fitz was so unfamiliar with the mannerisms of drunks, and had never expected to be in the presence of one in his life, he mistook her flailing legs and arms for eccentricity and laughed politely at her public display of drunkenness. It was not his intention to do anything untoward with her; he merely wanted her to commentate on the movies she had been in and part as acquaintances. His naivety as a committed fan overrode his baser instincts to take advantage of her, a fact that never once crossed his mind.

Never call a spade a shovel. It should be called a spade.

Fitz occupied a small beige-walled flat under a railway arch. This was partly due to spiralling rent costs in the area, and partly an attempt to be deliberately abstruse. Litzvah had been talking incessantly in the car about her career, rarely making sense but offering cryptic insights into her film roles, along with a great deal of spleen for directors, former lovers and those who generally got on her nerves. Listening to these drunken titbits, Fitz got the impression of her he wanted, of someone living life on the edge and unafraid to be ballsy.

This all changed however, when she plopped down on his couch and sprayed sick across his handcrafted pinewood tablette. His initial reaction was surprise, and although he wanted to put her revolting actions down to hedonistic abandon, he finally gave in and accepted she was drunk, bitter, and lonely.

“Oh Christ, Fitz! I didn’t mean to do that to your table...I’m always ruining it for everybody. Jesus, why I am I *such* a fuck-up, Fitz? Why do I always spoil everything for everybody?” she asked, tears emerging from her eyes in viscous blobs.

“I’m sure that’s not true. I mean in *Handwritten Paydirt*, for

example, you showed up that stockbroker...”

“Shit, Fitz... that was a stupid film, all right! Fuck those stupid films! I’m fed up making all these sleazy, worthless pieces of shit for no money, being screwed around by pervert directors who just want to film close-ups of my ass. Oh, fuck this whole industry, Fitz!”

“I don’t...understand what you mean, Litzvah.”

“You really like these films, Fitz, huh? You really think I’m great in them, do you? Oh, bullshit! Nobody’s good in these films, Fitz. That’s why people make them, they house shit actors...they get rid of them, stuff them away somewhere so they don’t get noticed. Goddamn it, Fitz! What the fuck am I doing in this job?”

“Litzvah...you’re making this stuff because it’s *different*, all right? You’re making it because people care about the spirit of the imagination. All right, so who cares if a film really is crap in commercial or artistic terms? That’s not the point of these films. They’re a call to everyone out there to get their head out from under the arse of commercialism, to spread their imaginative wings and fly! You are doing brilliant work, you hear? The memory of seeing you on screen, in those cheapo black-and-white bullshit art films means more to me than my first kiss, or than a thousand Steven Spielberg masterpieces. I couldn’t care less about that. You embody for me the very spirit of independence and free will.”

His impassioned speech quelled Litzvah for a moment. Aside from one or two repetitious moments of similar, self-loathing histrionics, she caught herself before she flew off the handle again and the two of them fell silent.

“Fitz...I think I’m an alcoholic again,” she said, averting her eyes from his.

“Don’t worry about that. Let’s just call that a moment of madness, shall we? It’s to be expected, I suppose. Like when your character Rachael Dungress goes on one last killing spree before her retirement in *Spears of the Soul*. It is totally forgivable,” Fitz said, riding on his naïve charm.

“Jesus, you might just be the nicest man I’ve ever met,” she said with a twinkle, passing out on the floor.

All’s well that bends well. With the exception of cutlery.

Litzvah was transferred into Fitz’s bedroom with some help from his smiley next-door neighbour Alan, who made a series of blue jokes about a heavily inebriated woman being in his flat. Fitz disliked Alan, partly because he was unaware quite how staggeringly unamusing he was, and partly since he had a flap of skin dangling under his chin that lent him the air of a strutting cock. This was precisely the phrase he used to refer to him whenever he left the room.

She awoke later in the evening in need of an aspirin and a hug. Fitz was reluctant to give her the latter, but was on hand speedily with the former. Seeing her in his bed, her greasy brown hair sucking against her sick-flecked cheeks, with her bloodshot eyes giving way to sagging purplish sacks and encrusted tears of loathing, he realised then and there he was in love with this woman.

“Morning, saviour,” she said.

“Ah...a *Life of Brian* reference? Well, that’s certainly a fine start to the evening. Um...here’s a little pick-me-up.”

“You’ve done enough of that already. God, I feel like a hundred churning turds in a big bowl of spew,” she said. Something about this sentence turned him on immensely.

“Welcome to my world,” he said, stifling a nervous giggle.

“Look, I can’t apologise enough for my behaviour. I really feel like some insane bitch who turns up at a party and hurls her bodily fluids at everyone. I’m such an...um...”

“Putz?”

“No, putz only applies to men. There’s no female equivalent, that’s why I’m hesitating.”

“Trollop?”

“That’ll do.”

Litzvah sounded as though she had swallowed two thirds of a volcano, and forced the aspirin back with a laudable heave. Fitz felt his heart moving into 9/8 time, and took this as a sign that he should express his newfound romantic interest in her. He sat down on the edge of the bed and counted his knuckles from one to nine, realising he had missed one out and started counting again. “Listen, Litzvah...I wondered if I might, you know...I mean, I know your lips are covered in dried bits of puke and your breath stinks of vomit and gin, but in spite of that, I wondered if I could kiss you? I mean, I have brushed my teeth and everything so there’s no threat from me on that front,” he said.

She found his request a little odd, and swirled it around in her mind for a moment. “Well, providing you don’t mind getting a mouthful of hairballs and snot, why the hell not?”

“Great!”

“You’ll have to come closer to me, though. I don’t have magical extending lips that operate on hydraulic pistons.”

Fitz was aroused by the ashy rancour in her words, and moved closer towards her for the kiss. It was surprisingly disgusting for both of them, and although Fitz pretended to enjoy it, he pulled back after the sixth second when their slavering tongues chinked briefly.

“Maybe we should try again?” Litzvah asked, rubbing him on the shoulder.

“OK,” replied Fitz, flashing his golden fillings, “but I have to listen to the new Jarboe album first.”

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MEMORIES OF PHILIP K. DICK

Tessa Dick

I married Philip K. Dick in 1973, which makes me his fifth and last ex-wife. I am also the silent co-author of his novel, *A Scanner Darkly*.

A Clay Pot

A large part of Phil's monumental and unfinished *Exegesis* was inspired by a the little clay pot that he called Oho. It is mostly dry-fired, with just a splash of colored glaze.

Phil saw a vision of that little pot dancing and laughing, "Oh ho, ho, ho, ho, ho!"

The pot finished by saying "ho on", which means "it is" in the Greek of the New Testament. This seems to be a parallel to the name that God gave when Moses asked which God was sending him to the people of Israel, "I am."

A Scanner Darkly, The Movie

The filmmakers tried to make something symbolic out of the drug, Substance D, in *A Scanner Darkly*. They missed the point. The

drug is what it is. It is the MacGuffin, as Alfred Hitchcock would say, the thing that everybody in the story wants.

It doesn't matter what the MacGuffin is; all that matters is that everybody wants it, so it motivates all the action in the story.

The real message of *A Scanner Darkly*, beyond the fact that drugs destroy people, is that the police state is watching everybody, including you.

This is even worse than George Orwell's *1984*. Remember, Phil began writing this novel in 1972, long before that fateful year. Not only does the government have sophisticated video equipment to record your every move, but they also have your friends, relatives and neighbors watching you and reporting any behavior that seems unusual, in their opinion, to the authorities. Ultimately the war on drugs—in fact, the war on crime in general—becomes a war on human rights. You no longer have any personal liberty. You have lost your Constitutional rights.

You have become the property of the government.

In a vision, Phil saw the Roman Empire overlaid like a transparency sheet over the streets and alleyways of Fullerton, California. He saw the United States, like the Roman Empire, spreading peace and prosperity throughout the world and dominating other nations through a combination of military force and economic aid. People welcomed the paved roads, stone cities and metal coins that the Roman Empire brought to them, and they enjoyed relative safety and security when the Roman legions guarded them against barbarian invasions, so they acquiesced to the domination and taxation that the Empire imposed.

Pinky

Phil saw a vision of our cat Pinky walking through a door from another dimension, then touching Phil's shoulder as if to heal an injury by laying on of paws.

Substance D

The drug in *Scanner* is based on the combined effects of methamphetamine (commonly known as meth or speed) and heroin. For example, when Charles Freck believes that aphids are crawling all over him and biting him, he is exhibiting a common side effect of meth in which the user suffers from intolerable itching and finds relief only by standing in the shower with water running all over their body. Some sufferers will actually stay in the shower for several hours, even after the hot water is gone and they are shivering from the cold. One of the other side effects of meth is hallucinations, and the itching often inspires the belief that insects are crawling on their skin, or even under their skin, and biting them. Paranoia, such as Freck exhibits when he is driving his car and spots a police car, is also a common side effect of meth.

Some of the brain damage and physical impairment caused by Substance D is more typical of heroin, which slows down metabolic processes, including brain function. The characters in *Scanner* sit around talking most of the time because the drug has robbed them of physical energy. In addition, their thinking processes are slowed down and fogged up, so they are not capable of thinking clearly. The physical effects can be life-threatening. For example, when Ernie Luckman chokes on his food, it is probably due to the partial paralysis of his muscles caused by heroin, which makes it difficult for him to swallow. Heroin, in large enough quantities, can stop the heart from beating and stop the person from breathing. The scene in which Bob Arctor is in withdrawal from Substance D depicts the classic symptoms of heroin withdrawal, which includes severe abdominal pain, vomiting and falling down.

The unique characteristic of Substance D is that it destroys the corpus callosum, a bundle of nerves which connects the left and right hemispheres of the brain and allows them to communicate with each other. As a result of this disconnection, the victim of Substance D becomes two personalities living in one body.

Ultimately, Substance D is death. Drug addicts, in the depths of their unconscious minds, crave death because they cannot bear to live in this world.

The villain in Bob Arctor's household is Jim Barris, not because of what he does, but because of what he fails to do. He does not directly harm people, but he does fail to help them. For example, when Luckman is choking and in danger of dying, Barris analyzes the situation intellectually but fails to act. He does eventually pick up the phone and call for emergency services, but his long speech about what is happening fails to communicate the information that the operator needs. Moreover, when Bob Arctor says that he is not going to do drugs any more, Barris hands him two red capsules of Substance D and convinces him to take them.

Phil's Philosophy

Most readers and critics understand that Philip K. Dick was exploring the nature of reality in his work. In the Phildickworld, things rarely turn out to be what they appear. He constantly asked questions about the substructure that underlies what we call reality. However, the most important question, in his mind, was, "What makes us human?" A major corollary is, "Why are some people inhuman?" These two areas of exploration, reality and humanity, overlap in the many novels and stories that Phil wrote during his career.

Phil is best known as a science fiction writer, but he also wrote a number of mainstream novels and stories, as well as some children's stories. The most puzzling work, in the minds of fans and critics, is his thousand-page compilation of notes titled *Exegesis*. He attempted to explicate our reality in the same way that religious scholars explicate the scriptures. The basis for this work was a series of visions that Phil experienced, beginning on March 2, 1974. Those visions can be explained, in part, by the strong probability that he was having minor strokes caused by the high

blood pressure from which he had suffered throughout his life. Although brain injury might explain the fact that he had visions, it cannot explain their content.

A major source of his philosophy and religious views was Phil's friendship with Bishop James Pike, the Episcopal Bishop of California. He met Pike through his wife Nancy's stepmother, who was working as Pike's personal secretary. In addition, Phil had been a member of the Episcopal Church for some years. The Episcopal Church is that American offshoot of the Anglican Church (Church of England), and it is basically the Catholic Church without the Pope. Also, unlike Catholic priests, Episcopal priests are allowed to and often do marry. Phil's religious upbringing, which included a Quaker education early in life, led him to question tradition and dogma. He explored dualism in his *Exegesis*, in particular the Manichean philosophy, and early Christian heresy.

He believed that the Holy Spirit is female, and that she is the same entity as the Torah, the five Books of the Law, or Books of Moses, which Phil regarded as a living entity and a part of God.

He spoke about the Sybil, which is a title, not a name. In ancient Greece, the Oracle at Delphi was known as the Sybil. In the myth, she is described as a lover of the god Apollo who asked for the gift of eternal life, but forgot to ask for eternal youth. When they broke up, Apollo was too angry to grant her any more wishes, so she grew incredibly old and shrank until she was so small that she had to be kept in a bottle for her own safety. There she was, inside a leather bottle hung on the wall of a cave, giving out prophecy. Apollo was, among other things, the god of prophecy.

I shudder when I remember that Apollo gave Cassandra the gift of prophecy, but he also cursed her so that nobody would believe her when she warned them not to bring that wooden horse inside the gates of Troy.

IN HER GARDEN

Jane Hertenstein

When the regional rail line was extended north, Carol Ann and her husband Bob decided it was time to move out of the city and their second-floor walk-up and out to the unincorporated hinterlands where new suburbs were being planned. They were tired of thin walls and hearing their downstairs' neighbors squabble. They wanted more space, room to spread out—especially as Carol Ann was pregnant with their second child.

She surveyed the back acreage of the lot-and-a-half upon which their new house sat. The surrounding land was open, for the time being. It was an area once impacted by the Ice Age. Receding glaciers had left fields of moraine and mostly flat treeless prairie. She imagined what it must have been like for the early settlers: a tabula rasa upon which they worked from sun up to sun down draining the sloughs and farming the land. She thought about how all things must eventually pass, erode away and decay. She was the last of her line, originally a LaMott. Her father was brother to five sisters and she, Carol Ann, was an only child. She'd already lost her name and some day she'd be gone too, buried she supposed under that same prairie. Her thoughts often strayed toward

morbidity when she was pregnant, a consequence of carrying life.

The house behind her was a one-story contemporary (presuming that the style would always be in vogue) with an attached garage. Bob designed the simple floor plan, having in mind adding on rooms as the family grew. She had met her husband while in college and dropped out soon after they became engaged. When the war erupted in the Pacific, Bob signed on, but was never sent to the front because of his feet—so flat they were like slabs. In basic training after quick-stepping eight miles he simply gave out. Instead he worked in a unit building prefabricated barracks. There was a prisoner-of-war camp for German soldiers downstate in Galesburg, Illinois. He oversaw that project as well as the dismantling of the shacks used to house Japanese internees in Alabama. After the war he started his own company. He was particularly proud of his fleet of twenty-foot trucks with “Hackles Construction” emblazoned on the cab doors. He built for Carol Ann a life, a home.

She instructed the landscapers, who were hurrying to finish the sodding before frost set in, to leave a patch bare. She had in mind a garden.

That first year it was all she could do to prepare the ground. Her first spade of dirt revealed black loam and an engorged earthworm cut in half. She got down on her hands and knees and kneaded the earth, breaking apart a clod. An aroma like baked bread warm from the oven wafted up to her. Soon she was engulfed in memories of growing up on her parents’ farm and the vegetable patch they used to keep. In a time of great poverty those few acres had sustained them. A blessing, her mother had declared. Times were different now, and Carol Ann decided she would grow flowers.

“Flowers!” Bob blurted. “Why bother, they only end up dying.” Not intending to deride her, he only wanted to protect her. With a toddler and a newborn, he was afraid she would exhaust herself.

She hoed deep furrows while the baby slept in a baby seat propped up in a shady corner next to the side of the house and while three-year-old Bob Junior threw rocks at a fence post. Occasionally the steel blade would chink, nick a stone—she dug up so many, they were as abundant as potatoes. After work one evening Bob pulled into the driveway with a gasoline-powered Roto-tiller in the bed of his truck, the spiral blades glinting as if throwing off sparks. He pitched in and helped her plant a windbreak of blue spruce on the northern edge of their property and agreed that a border of poplars along the back would offer much needed shade when the sun hovered on the western horizon. Only saplings, they would grow fast. That fall she set in one hundred tulip bulbs, ordered direct from Leiden, Holland.

The immense yard wasn't hers alone. She shared the space with a swing set anchored into the ground and a carousel clothesline, the children's initials etched into the cement base. To separate their play area from the garden she planted a hedge of forsythia and created a walkway. Wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow of crushed limestone filled in a raised edge. Over the next couple of years she enlarged her tulip beds by adding crocuses, daffodils, and grape hyacinths, the purples so lush she was tempted to eat them. By then she was pregnant again, carrying Teddy.

Always the sight of green blades pushing up through ice-rimed snow, tamped down by thawing and refreezing, revived her. Breathing in the biting air, she would tell herself that spring wasn't far off. Indeed, a few weeks later while lumbering down the path she spied a baby bunny huddled beneath a clump of snowdrops.

The subdivision grew around them. The county came out and tore up part of the front lawn to widen the road and install sewer pipes. That summer Bob Junior and his group of friends climbed in and out of the big cement cylinders, playing hide-n-go-seek and GI Joe. Frequent storms hampered the roadwork and rain filled the recently dug trenches. One day, as she was cutting back creeping

phlox about to consume the walk, Carol Ann heard shouting and ran around the house to find Bobby's friends peering into one of the holes. There he was at the bottom up to his neck in muddy water, screaming. They formed a chain and Carol Ann fished Bobby out only to spank his bottom and kiss his face.

After that his father grounded him and Carol Ann made him haul and spread mulch. Perhaps it was then that Bobby came to see gardening as a type of punishment. Noonie also wasn't much help. Occasionally Carol Ann asked her to keep an eye on little Teddy while she did a bit of weeding, but Noonie quickly forgot about her brother and let him wander. None of her children had an interest in watching things grow; none of them shared her passion.

In 1965 their house was picked for the Fall Home Tour. Carol Ann made dainty fours, baked a Lane Cake, and arranged into vases zinnias and asters—stunning reds, yellows, monarch orange, russet brown—as well as mums and coneflowers with beehive centers. Her garden was the talk of the Tour. It won an award and was even featured in the suburban newspaper.

An artist new to the area contacted Carol Ann; he worked in metal, welding what he called “found” objects. He proposed a sculpture for the garden. Bob wasn't so sure. There was at the time a battle raging at city hall regarding a controversial wall panel at the new library. It was unveiled and subsequently shrouded until further notice. Bob suggested that they ask for a design; that way if she didn't like his concept then she wouldn't have to pay.

After giving Emile the go-ahead and settling on a price, Carol Ann threw herself into transforming that part of the yard the swing set used to occupy into a classic garden. Next to a wall constructed from the stones pulled from the ground years before, she planted blue purple delphinium, lupine, gladiolus, and hollyhocks. Vines of ivory clematis spiraled up the wall and sunk its tentacles into the sandy mortar. Bob Junior, home from college, made a trellis for her climbing roses. She tied up a flamboyant variety called Mae West, a lurid lipstick red. The calla lilies bloomed extra large that summer,

curvaceous and deep-throated, with an alabaster spathe and erect yellow spadix. Carol Ann sunk her face into them. Emile laughingly brushed pollen dust off her nose with his fingertips.

In mid-autumn the sculpture was done and installed. Carol Ann had been out running errands and came home physically wrought from dealing with traffic. The area was quickly getting built up. Not just housing developments but also shopping centers. Everywhere she looked it seemed there was concrete and asphalt. She drew a glass of water from the tap and looked out upon her garden—and there, casting rainbow colors—was a spiral of galvanized steel tubing. She stepped outside and down the walkway, the crunch crunch of gravel beneath her feet, and stopped in front of it. Even the titmouse and sparrow hushed in awe. Emile had been sitting cross-legged, silhouetted in the shade of a poplar. He got up and stood behind her. The tiger lilies swirled in the sun. It's called Bird of Paradise, he said softly.

Later she would go in for gentler, more subdued colors: mauve, melon, shades of pink, a mix of perennials, annuals, Queen Elizabeth roses, irises with tissue-thin petals, easily bruised.

By now Noonie was out of the house, eloped with a boy she'd met at the pool, and moved to California. Bob Junior was busy starting up a business and Teddy had joined the army. That winter was the worst; it seemed to last forever. Sunlight, when there was any, came sporadically in stray rays. Carol Ann caught a cold, which went to her chest. It hurt just to move. As a get-well present Bob assembled for her a mail-order greenhouse, a frame of metal with glass panes set in. Rubberized matting protected her feet from the cold ground. Every morning she'd wake up, drink her coffee, and putter around in the greenhouse—nearly fifteen degrees warmer than the rest of the house. There was a long workbench for re-potting, as well as shelves for her terracotta pots and plastic flats sectioned off for seeding. Petunias. Pansies. Cosmos. Marigolds. The flower packages alone were enough to raise her spirit,

Victorian illustrations, sumptuous photographs, botanical and common names. When the weather outside was miserable, day barely breaking before succumbing to nightfall, she'd hardly notice, immersed within a minute world. Before leaving she'd cover her seedlings with plastic sheeting. In some ways they were her children, certainly easier to manage. Sometimes in the middle of the night she'd get up to check on them. Wind would rattle the panes, like teeth chattering. The arc street lamps streamed in, illuminating the crystallized patterns of frost formed on the inside of the greenhouse. It was there in the winter of '69 that Bob came out to tell her they'd received a call. Teddy was dead. Shot down by snipers while patrolling an abandoned rubber plantation outside of Bien Hoa in Vietnam.

In the early 1970s Carol Ann added a Japanese garden. She'd been taking yoga at the Y for her lower back pain and thought the idea of reflecting pools, water lilies, and bonsai might bring relief. She wasn't sleeping much lately. Bob's construction company was booming, framing up houses in a new subdivision called Prairie Farm. They each had their own routine. Carol Ann special-ordered pea-size pebbles gray with blue threads, representative of the sea. She sought to simplify by applying the rules of feng shui to her garden. She pruned one of the blue spruces to resemble a flowing waterfall and shaped the shrubbery to look like waves. Water was supposedly good for her chi. She banished reds. Beside the pool was a weeping willow. Her hair had turned white after lying dormant for ages in a static state of dishwater blonde. Sitting in the garden at dusk all alone, she attempted to summon peace, wring it from the atmosphere. Nothing seemed to calm the ache; her tears fell like hydrangea blossoms all around.

Occasionally the kids would come to visit. Noonie, after several false starts, all of which ended in divorce, came with her life partner, a man from Santa Fe who worked as a consultant. Carol

Ann always felt a little tense when Bob Junior and his wife came over. He was oblivious to his kids running wild through the garden. They made mounds with the gravel and threw pebbles at the goldfish swimming in the pool. Little Madison begged for bouquets, but when Carol Ann clipped some for her she'd snap the heads off and scatter the petals in the yard. It was impossible to redirect the children, as their mother didn't want anyone else disciplining them.

One summer their oldest boy Bart came to stay with Carol Ann and Bob. As opposed to popular theories regarding birth order, he did not display traits of determination and self-assuredness. He was having a rough time of it in high school. According to Bob Junior he needed to stand up to the bullies who were tormenting him. While visiting, Bart got up early and helped Carol Ann in the garden. After a heavy dew, he observed that the flowers resembled jewels, sparkling like a ladies necklace in the morning light. He lifted the head of a salmon-pink poppy and was enthralled when a spider emerged out of the black eye.

That same summer a terrible storm blew up. The day had started muggy. Even pouring a glass of sweet tea caused Carol Ann to break out in a sweat. Late afternoon she scanned the sky for a break in the weather. She called Bart out of the house to come look at a tower of clouds, the color of an avocado. A stave of lightning impaled the horizon, immediately followed by a contusive boom and then the faint odor of a burnt-out motor. Across the field came a sudden updraft, a burst of chilled air. "Come inside *now*," Bart shouted. He grabbed his grandma's hand and together they hurried inside and crouched behind a couch away from the windows. The drumbeat of hail on the roof and hood of the car filled their ears and heart.

Afterwards they went out to the garden to assess the damage. Lashed and beheaded stalks lay crumpled and bent in two. The lacy baby's breath, purple statice, and daylilies were a total loss. Pompom blossoms of the Persian onion littered the ground. The

roses were in tatters. Carol Ann's legs quivered. She and Bart cleared away pellets of ice and picked up twigs and stray debris. Bob came in from the Prairie Farm site and said I-94 was blocked off by the exit. Apparently a twister had touched down not more than four miles away. He sought to console Carol Ann. "I'll make waffles for dinner."

On the last evening before Bart was to leave, Carol Ann got up to check on him and found his bed empty. Bright moonlight lit up the counterpane bedspread sprawled onto the floor. In a panic she raced to the window and saw a shadow glide along the garden wall. Outside, the warm night air betrayed a hint of fall, September and school were right around the corner. Crickets chirred a concert within the crannied wall. Already the garden showed signs of staging a valiant comeback. Carol Ann still hadn't gotten her panic under control; she was anxious for a number of reasons. Suddenly she thought about Teddy and felt guilty, though she was not sure why, just wished she had loved him more when he was alive.

In a corner of the garden she came upon Bart wearing only his sleeping shorts. He sat on his haunches and rocked back and forth, sobbing. Carol Ann came over to him and draped her arms around his shoulders. They stayed there awhile in the dew-jeweled moonlight, listening to the rise and fall of insect voices.

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VICKI MILLER

[Hold for Copy]

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MARRIED TO AN ANGEL

Simon Barker

Elizabeth knew the baby was about to come. Since dawn she'd been having two-minute contractions and now she felt the uncontrollable urge to push. But the obstetrician was still in the car park looking for an empty spot.

"I've got to push!" she screamed at the midwife. The midwife was used to being screamed at.

"Hang on. He'll be here in a jiffy. Do some more of your breathing."

Elizabeth had a feeble go at panting. Then her phone did a little dance across the bedside table. The midwife stuffed it into Elizabeth's hand.

Hello," Elizabeth gasped. There was no answer. It was a text message. She squeezed the phone until the words appeared. She had no glasses on. "I can't read it!" she howled.

The midwife took the phone. Elizabeth screamed for fifteen seconds, then the midwife read out the message.

"Hi hon. Hope u n d bb r fyn. wl cll u later... when Im fre."

"What?"

"Hi, Hon. Hope you and the bb ... What's bb? Oh, right. Baby... Hope you and the baby are fine. Will call you later, when I'm free. Love

ed. What's ee dee? Is it *Every day?*"

"No, *Ed,*" Elizabeth gasped. "*Ed.* That's his name. Oooh, God! Give me the phone. Please!"

The midwife gave Elizabeth the phone and she pressed the call button. Ed answered.

"Oh, hi, Honey. Sorry, we're in the middle of a meeting. I'll have to call you back. How's the baby? Does he look like me?"

"I don't know!" was all Elizabeth could say. "Oh, Jesus! Where are you, Ed? I need you."

"I'm in Hong Kong. Sorry. I'll be back home tomorrow. Is Charles there?"

"What?"

"Is the ob there?"

"No, he's parking. Oh, fuuuuuuuuck!"

"It's okay. I'll call him on his mobile. Bye, Honey."

Elizabeth dropped the phone. "*I've got to push,*" she insisted. "I can't hold on any longer!"

"Okay then, push," said the midwife reluctantly.

Elizabeth gave the most tremendous push. The capillaries in her cheeks ruptured.

"I'm going to tear!" she announced.

"No, you're fine," the midwife assured her. "Just keep pushing."

"No, I'm going to tear like a paper bag!"

"No, you're not." The midwife couldn't help chuckling at the melodramatic simile. "You're fine. Just keep pushing. Everything's fine. Oh. You've torn."

"ARRRRRRRRRRRRRRR!"

All of a sudden the baby was out and crying its head off. It was a girl. Doctor Small hurried into the room with his briefcase in one hand and his mobile in the other. He put them down on the escritoire and set to work sewing Elizabeth back together.

Ed rang a few hours later. Elizabeth was asleep, so he left a message.

Dr. Small had discussed the possibility of going home that afternoon, because of the insurance. It was okay to go home so long as you stayed at the Birth Centre for three hours. But Elizabeth came down with a fever. She was moved to the ward and kept under observation. When she got a chance she listened to her voice mail and heard the message from Ed telling her that something had come up. He wouldn't be home until the weekend.

When Friday came Elizabeth was still in hospital. Ed rang from the airport to say he'd be home that night. Then an hour later he rang from the plane to say they were turning back to Hong Kong because of a cockpit warning light. Then he rang again from the airport to say he was leaving; the light had been fixed. By the middle of the next day there was still no sign of him.

"He must have stopped at the office," Elizabeth told the student nurse who was preparing to take her temperature.

"Did you see the newspaper?" said the student in a cheery voice. She was wrapping a thermometer in something that looked like a condom.

Elizabeth glanced at the front page. The top half was filled with a picture of smouldering wreckage. She opened the middle of the paper and started to read the ads for the mid-year sales.

In the afternoon, while she was feeding the baby, two police officers paid a visit. They chatted for ten minutes and admired the baby. One of the officers had a wife who'd just given birth. Then, when they'd finished their small talk, they informed Elizabeth that her husband's plane had crashed the night before. No one had survived. Elizabeth looked blank for a few seconds, then burst into tears.

Ed's funeral was held a week later. Elizabeth was still feverish. She rode in the back of the dark limousine with her mother and her six year old twins. Ed had nicknamed the twins Debit and Credit. The baby, still unnamed, stayed at home with the nanny. Nobody spoke during the journey.

Ed had believed that he deserved to live forever. So his funeral was held at the Institute of Cryogenic Research. His charred remains were to be stored there until science discovered a way to reverse the barbecuing process. The ICR looked like a factory, lined with batteries of enormous tanks. Fog cascaded from giant pipes and floated across coiffeured lawns. What was left of Ed had been sealed in a coffin-shaped refrigerator decorated with a hologram of a floral wreath. "It'll never wilt," the Institute's director assured Elizabeth. She burst into tears again.

She was still crying in the limousine on the way home. Beside her, Debit and Credit seemed unaffected by their father's death. They sat still for a while and stared out the window, then they started to fidget in their seats and argue.

"I'm getting Daddy's watch," Debit claimed. The watch had been key to identifying Ed's body.

"No you're not."

"Yes I am. Daddy said I could have it when he died."

"Sssh," said the children's grandmother, who'd been humming a tune she'd heard in the ICR chapel.

The children fell silent briefly, then started up again.

"*I am* getting Daddy's watch, and it's a Gold Rolex too!"

"No you're not! It got all burned up in the plane."

"*It did not*. Daddy told me it lasts forever."

"He never!"

"Ouch! That hurt. When Daddy gets warmed up again I'm going to tell on you!"

"Oh, for God's sake!" Elizabeth snapped. "Can't you keep quiet?"

A deathly silence fell over the passengers in the limousine. Elizabeth immediately wished she hadn't opened her mouth.

When they were home her mother said to her, "You shouldn't talk that way to the kids. What'll they think at a time like this?"

"I'm sorry."

"Why don't you go upstairs and take a nap?"

Elizabeth went upstairs and lay on the bed. For a while the children's arguments kept her awake. She heard her mother offering them money to keep quiet. Then she must have fallen asleep.

She was awakened a few hours later by the phone. "It's me," said her mother. "Bub's awake. Can you feed her?"

"Where are you?"

"In the lounge."

Elizabeth came downstairs blowing her nose and dabbing at her eyes. When she'd finished feeding the baby her mother handed her a slice of microwaved pizza. "It's a bit burnt," she apologized. Then, seeing the look on Elizabeth's face, she quickly added, "Sorry. I guess I shouldn't have said that."

Elizabeth's tears dropped onto the pepperoni.

"Here, let me get you something else out of the freezer."

Elizabeth started to sob and her mother lost patience.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, Elizabeth! This is ridiculous. It wasn't as if you and Ed were really close. You hardly ever saw him."

"Don't say that," Elizabeth blubbered. "He always used to phone me. Wherever he was."

"Of course he phoned. He was a telephone salesman. It was the least he could do."

"He was a software engineer, Mum, not a telephone salesman."

"He sold telephones, didn't he? He was a telephone salesman. Not that it matters now."

After some toast Elizabeth trudged back upstairs. She lay on the bed and cried. Hours passed. The next phone call from her mother was less sympathetic.

"What are your plans, Beth? You know I promised Enid I'd go scuba diving. How much more crying have you got to do?"

"I'm sorry, Mum. You go. I'll manage."

The next day Elizabeth's mother flew to the tropics and Elizabeth let the nanny run the house. With the children taken care

of she could just about manage. The biggest problem was the crying. Her eyes never seemed dry. Sometimes it was a trickle, sometimes a flood. One night she lay on the bed talking to her mother on the phone, still crying.

“How’s the weather been?”

“Hot. It’s hot even under water here.”

“Well, we’re supposed be having storms. There’s a warning out.”

While Elizabeth was talking, the tears trickled down into the phone. She rolled over. Out the window she saw lightning a little way off. Within a few minutes the wind came up and blew the trees. Then it started pelting. The dogs barked. There was a terrific flash and she was cut off. She pressed the redial button, but nothing happened. *Network search*, the screen informed her. She waited. *No network found*, the screen said after ten seconds.

She put down the mobile and tried the landline, but there was no dial tone. She sighed. She blew her nose on a tissue. She went to the window and looked out at the driving rain. She remembered the skylight in the kids room, went to check that it wasn’t open, then returned to the bedroom. She sat down on the bed. She picked up her mobile again. The network still couldn’t be found so she started scrolling through the recently dialled numbers, idly trying each one. Eventually she came to Ed’s. Just as she redialled it the network came up and the call went through to Ed’s voicemail. She heard his familiar recorded message just as if he were still alive and too busy to take calls. “Hi there. This is Ed. I’m not available right now. Just leave me a message and ...”

Without considering what she was doing Elizabeth started to talk. “Hello, honey. It’s me, Beth. I’m at home. It’s pretty late. It must be after twelve. I just thought I’d call ...I know this is silly. You’re never actually going to hear me, but I really, really miss you. I do. I miss you all the time. I just can’t help it...”

She kept talking for thirty seconds until the voice mail terminated. Then she sat up, thought for a bit and laughed. It was

weird, but she felt better. She felt as if Ed were still alive.

Within the next few minutes she received a text message that she had voice mail. She dialled. *You have...two...hundred...forty...seven...new messages*, she was told. Well, that was odd. How could she possibly have that many messages? She checked. The first was from her mother.

“Hey, we got cut off. Look, don’t worry. I’ll talk to you tonight.” Elizabeth pressed the delete key.

The second message was from her mother.

“What am I talking about? I mean, in the morning. I forgot.”

She pressed the delete key.

The third message was from Ed.

“Hi, Beth. Got your message. Call you later. I got another meeting just now. Probably an hour, an hour and thirty. Bye!”

This time she left the delete key alone. She stared into space. How odd!

It must be an old message. Ed had left tons of them like that. She pressed the 0 key to find out when it was sent. *This message was sent on...April...30...at...12...48...pm.*

She looked at the phone and frowned. How even odder. It was April 30 today and it was now 1am. What? Elizabeth immediately thought of the ICR. After all, they had been paid a whopping great amount of money to bring Ed back. But surely not this quick? It was only weeks and they’d been talking years, decades, possibly next century. And, anyway, even if they had brought him back, he wouldn’t go straight to another meeting, surely. Not without telling her.

It must have been the storm. There must have been a power whatsit. Some old message with the wrong date, sort of like when your computer’s clock battery went flat and all your files went back to 1904. Elizabeth dialled 6 to check the message again. *You have...no...new messages and...no...stored messages. There. See.* It was gone. The system had just hiccupped.

All the same, it was a bit whacko. If she’d deleted that message

before and the storm had made it come back that must mean that when you deleted messages they weren't really gone. The machine just said they were gone. Maybe the law required it, in case there was a trial or something.

Elizabeth looked at the bedside clock. It was now really late but she didn't feel sleepy. She tried the TV but there was nothing on. She started reading an old *New Yorker* but couldn't concentrate. She checked on the baby. After an hour she dialled Ed's number again. Maybe she'd get another old message. She waited for the phone to connect, and sure enough she heard Ed's voice, only this time it was different. This time it wasn't a recording. It was a live voice.

"Hi, Beth. How's it going?"

She nearly dropped the phone. Her heart pounded, and she could barely speak.

"Hello?" said the voice. "Are you there?"

"Jesus. Who *is* this?"

"It's me."

"Ed..."

"Yeh. Did you think it was going to be someone else?"

"No, no I...I didn't. I...but...how can it be you? You died two weeks ago. In a plane crash. You're dead."

"I know. I was there."

"But...this doesn't make sense. How can you be talking to me?"

"You phoned my number," said Ed.

"But...Where are you?"

"Now? I'm in an elevator."

"An elevator?"

"Yeh, I'm surprised you got through. There's usually no signal in here."

"What's going on?"

She heard the elevator door ping.

"I'm trying to find Conference Room H," Ed said. Elizabeth could hear him breathing heavily into the phone as he walked along a corridor. "Maybe it's this way?" he muttered to himself.

"No, not this way. Maybe through here. Is there something you wanted to tell me, Honey?"

"No, no, not particularly. I just...Oh, this is so amazing. All I wanted to do was to speak to you again."

"It's good you caught me. You been okay?"

"Yeh, I suppose so."

"And the family?"

"They're fine. They're all fine. Well, I mean we're not great on account of you being dead. But they're okay, considering."

"That's great."

What should she say to him? There must be a million things.

"Ed?"

"Yep."

"When do you think might be getting back?"

"Hard to say, Honey. This meeting's liable to drag on all afternoon."

"No, I mean, when do you think you'll be getting back home to us?"

"Back to *you*. Oh, sorry, I didn't know what you meant. I don't know. It could be a while. I think they've got a lot to figure out before that happens. I don't think we can schedule anything yet." Then he added, "Hey, I'm sorry, I've got to go into this meeting now. I'll have to say bye."

Elizabeth could hear in the background someone asking, "Are you going to do the PowerPoint?"

"I'm sorry, Beth" said Ed. "I'll call you later, OK?"

"What?"

Call ended.

Elizabeth pressed the phone to her forehead and lay still on the bed for a long time. This could not be happening. She must be dreaming. But before she could think about it, the baby started crying.

After she'd fed the baby she tried to make sense of what had just happened, but it was too bizarre, too extraordinary. Was it

hallucination? Was it reincarnation? She couldn't make any sense of it. All she could manage was to get undressed and go to bed.

It was better the next day. For a start, she'd stopped crying. She looked in the mirror, weighed herself, got dressed and organised the kids. Then she went shopping. That night, when the kids had gone to bed, she phoned her mother. She didn't say anything about the conversation with Ed. She just listened to her mother describing Enid's dental work. Then, lying down on the bed again after she'd hung up, she had time to wonder. She couldn't help herself. She pressed Ed's number. He answered straight away.

"Hi, how you been?"

"Fine. How was your meeting?"

"Not too bad. I think I wowed them with the PowerPoint. What've you been up to?"

"Not a lot. It's been quiet. Just looking after the baby, shopping. I had a talk with a lawyer."

"What about?"

"About the class action."

"What class action?"

"Some of the families have started a class action against the airline."

"Really? Why?"

"Well, because we think the airline was at fault."

"You're wasting your time. Those things never work. You'd be better off saving your money."

"It's okay. There's no cost unless we win."

"That's what they tell you. No, forget about it."

"But shouldn't somebody take them to court?"

"They'll tell the judge the plane crashed because somebody used their phone during takeoff or something. I know how these things work."

"Oh."

They talked for half an hour until Ed complained he was tired.

He'd had an exhausting day and he had to be up early. They said goodnight and went to bed.

The next time Elizabeth spoke to her mother she told her about Ed's calls.

"Remember when you called me from the resort and the network cut out and you couldn't connect again? Well, I was trying to fix the phone and somehow I dialled Ed's number."

"So you wasted a call."

"No! That's the thing. It actually answered. I spoke to him!"

"You're kidding me?"

"No, I really spoke to him."

"Are you sure it wasn't someone selling insurance? You know they get dead people's numbers and wait for the relatives to phone."

"Mum, it was Ed's voice."

"Hmmm," said her mother. "Did he have anything to say for himself?"

"We didn't talk very long that time. He was going to a meeting. But he called me up later and told me not to sue the airline."

"Why not?"

"He said it'd end up costing me money."

"Sue them, Honey. They owe you."

"Well, what Ed said was that it wouldn't be worth it in the end."

"Did he offer you child support?"

"Mum, he's dead."

"Yes. I'm forgetting."

"Don't you believe me, Mum?"

"Of course. But, honestly, if he's dead he should get out of your hair."

Elizabeth didn't see it that way. She kept phoning Ed every night. She filled him in on how the kids were doing at school, what

she'd bought at the sales, how much the baby weighed, how much she weighed.

One night she took the phone downstairs while the kids were watching TV.

"Kids! There's someone special on the phone."

The kids were glued to the screen. They didn't seem to hear.

"Kids!"

She stood in front of them and they instinctively shifted, so they could see round her. She put the phone to Credit's ear. After a minute he turned his head and frowned at the thing.

"Dad?" he said with a puzzled look. Then he remembered. "Hey, Dad, where's that gold watch?"

"How would I know?" said Ed. "It probably got stolen by the salvage people."

"Oh! But I wanted it!" the boy whinged. Then he went back to watching TV.

Elizabeth held the phone up to Debit's ear. She pushed it away. "Not now."

At the end of the month there was an excess charge on Elizabeth's phone bill. She told Ed.

"Do you want me to call you?" he said.

"Can you?"

"Why not?" Then he paused and added, "Um, there's something I've been meaning to ask you. Just a formality, really."

"What?"

"Well, I think we need to get a divorce."

"What?"

"It's nothing personal, oney. It's only so I can get married again."

Elizabeth was stunned. "*Get married?* But...but...you're dead."

"Yeh, I know. It's crazy. But what can I do? They make you get divorced before you can marry anyone. It's the rule. It's bureaucracy. Beth? Hello? You still there? Beth?"

"Yes."

"I thought you'd dropped out."

"No, I'm still here. I'm just shocked. Really shocked. Who is it you want to marry?"

"Oh, nobody you know."

"Who?"

"Well, actually, come to think of it, it *is* somebody you know. Remember Helen Simpson?"

"Helen? You mean from high school?"

"Yeh."

"You want to marry her?"

"That's right."

"Is she dead?"

"Mmm."

"Really? I never even knew. How'd it happen?"

Ed hesitated.

"She was...in an accident."

There was something fishy about the way he said these words. Then all of a sudden a nasty thought came into Elizabeth's head.

"Not a plane accident?"

"Err..."

"Oh, Ed! No! You weren't. No. How long has this been going on?"

"Oh, a while, I suppose. Um. Since high school."

"No!"

"Honey, I didn't want to have to tell you..."

"And now you're dead you're going to leave me and get married to her?"

"Don't get upset, Honey. It's not as if I'm in love with her any more. It's just work."

"*Work?*"

"Yeh. They are so old fashioned here. If you're not married you never make it. They just pass you over. You remember Doug Parsons? Well, in all the time since he died he's only had one

promotion. And it's because he's not married. They take it really, really seriously. You wouldn't believe."

Elizabeth tried to make sense of what Ed was saying. But her head spun.

"I don't understand, Ed. What do mean 'work'? Why is there work? I thought..."

"Yeh, so did I. So did everyone. But here I am, trying to get ahead just like I used to. And being single's just about the biggest handicap you can have."

Elizabeth felt bewildered.

"But, Ed, I don't want to get divorced."

There was silence. Then Ed said to her, "Look, to be honest, Honey, I didn't expect you to decide straight away. I guess it's a big deal for you. But please think about it. After all, it's not going to make any difference to us."

The following day Elizabeth told her mother what Ed had asked her.

"What did you say to him?" she demanded.

"I told him I didn't want to get divorced."

"Not even after the Helen Simpson thing?"

"No."

"Well, fine, it's your decision. It's not what I'd be doing. Just make sure the house stays in your name, okay?"

Ed kept nagging, and it became impossible to have a decent conversation with him. Elizabeth still called, but when she got hold of him there was always tension, and when the subject came out into the open they argued. In the end she reluctantly consented to grant him a divorce.

But this was easier said than done. Ed gave her the name of a lawyer and she made an appointment. But after she'd explained what she wanted, the man leaned back in his chair and said to her, "You know, Mrs Black, over the years people have asked me to do some strange things, but this really takes the biscuit."

"Can't you help me then?"

"Mrs Black, I'd love to help you. But I'm afraid this falls way outside my area of expertise. Maybe you should try my brother."

The lawyer's brother turned out to be a psychiatrist.

Elizabeth tried some other legal minds. But with no more luck. Ed made her keep trying until he ran out of names and they had to give up.

"It looks like you're stuck with me," Elizabeth said.

"Don't worry," he replied. "I've had another idea. It's a bit tricky. But if it works, we won't need a divorce."

"I'd prefer that."

"So would I, Honey. Okay then, what I was thinking was this. You know if you'd been on the plane with me..."

"...instead of Helen..."

"...yes ...instead of Helen. Then we wouldn't be in this situation. Would we? We'd be together. You understand what I'm saying?"

"I suppose so."

"Think about it. If we'd crashed together, we'd still be living together."

"Living?"

"You know what I mean. What I'm saying is that if you went and had an accident now—and I'm talking about a *serious* accident—then after it was all over, we'd be together again. We'd still be married. Right? And we could be just like we used to be. I wouldn't need to get married to anyone else. Do you understand?"

"I'm not sure I do."

"Look. It's not really a big deal. All I'm saying is that if *you* were in a plane crash, say, like I was, then afterwards we'd be together again, wouldn't we?"

"I suppose so. If you say so."

"You don't sound very convinced."

"Well, I guess I'm wondering about the kids and that sort of thing?"

“Oh, the kids. Well, they’d have to be in the accident too.”

“I don’t know, Ed. It’s starting to sound a bit scary.”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“It’s not that. It’s just that, I don’t know, what about my mother?”

“Your mother? Beth, what about *me*? Would you rather be with your mother or with me?”

“I don’t know, Ed.”

“Oh, great! If that’s the way you feel.”

“No, I didn’t mean it that way. I’m just confused. I’m not sure about anything anymore.”

After this conversation Ed went silent. When Elizabeth phoned he didn’t answer. The silence went on for days and days, and soon Elizabeth was in a terrible state. She started crying again, uncontrollably. It was even worse than before. The first time, she’d cried because he was gone forever—or at least until they unfroze him. But this time she cried because he was still out there, or up there, or somewhere, but he wouldn’t speak to her. It was awful.

Finally, after a few weeks, there was a very unhappy message. “Beth. It’s me. Ed. I’m just phoning to say that things aren’t going very well here. I really need you. If you still think about me, or care about me, and you still want to help me, I suggest that you and the kids go for a drive in the hills, in the Miasma.”

The Miasma. She’d forgotten about it. It was the car Ed had bought a year before he died. Elizabeth had ridden in it once and been scared out of her wits. It weighed almost nothing and had the power of a rocket. Ed had driven her along Skyline Boulevard. She’d covered her eyes each time they rounded a bend. Back at home they’d argued and she’d sworn that neither she nor the children would ever ride in the car again. It was sitting in the garage under a tarpaulin.

Elizabeth went downstairs and uncovered it. She opened the little door and sat in the driver’s seat and pressed down the clutch. It was like a toy. She shifted the gears and listened to the greasy

clunking sound they made. One, two, three, four. Five? Or was that one reverse? She dusted the windscreen with her handkerchief. She found the key upstairs in one of the drawers of the bedside table. When she turned it in the ignition lights came on. The battery had outlived its buyer. The clock showed almost the right time. She could see from the needle that the tank was half full.

On Sunday morning she made snacks for the kids and herself and they squeezed into the car. The baby capsule had to be fitted into the front seat. She had a feeling that was illegal. Still, did it really matter? The twins were thrilled. They kept standing up in the tiny area behind the front seats and shouting. The car lurched a few times as she changed gears on El Camino. You only had to touch the throttle and the little beast seemed to leap forward. She turned into Woodside, crossed Alameda de las Pulgas and headed southeast.

They passed through the flat open fields filled with dry grass and live oaks; then at the junction they turned onto La Honda and followed the road up the incredibly steep incline towards the ridge. As they climbed higher the curves sharpened. The children squealed with delight and urged her to drive faster.

Elizabeth put her foot down. Needles on the dashboard twitched. The engine screamed. The car shot forward like a greyhound. The sign saying 35mph whizzed by. She braced herself thinking they were about to slide off the road, but the machine refused to let go of the surface no matter how fast she threw it into bends.

Then it happened. They turned a blind corner and there on the wrong side of the road was a skateboarder, trailing clouds of dreadlocks as he hurtled downwards. By instinct Elizabeth spun the tiny wheel, the car lurched to one side, and they were airborne amid the redwoods.

When she woke she found herself resting in a white bed. The sun shone through the half open window. The breeze gently

moved the curtains. She heard the noise of a plane flying overhead. She felt calm as she turned her head. On the table beside the bed was a phone. She took it up and dialled Ed's number. It rang for a long time, until finally a voice answered. It was a voice she recognised from long ago, a female voice. It was Helen Simpson.

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HAPPILY EVER AFTER *Excerpt*

Ron Heacock

The main character of Happily After Ever, Harry Steele, is a fiction writer. In this scene we catch him contemplating the meaning of prayer (in his own strange way). He started a writing session but lapsed into this memory when he began wondering about gratitude and its overpowering emotional sister, love.

He used to play with the younger brother Tommy and he spent countless hours spying on and speculating about the mysteries of his teen-age sister Patricia. But Harry was in love with Marla Reeseman. Marla was in his seventh grade class and he would go to unheard of lengths just to be breathing the same air as her.

Of course, being a major lame-ass nerd, Harry could not be seen with or even look at Marla in school. There were such stiff unwritten rules and penalties in Middle School. Harry reflected that it was a wonder that anyone learned them at all, let alone survived the breaking of one or more of them. Harry had broken enough to know his place was at the nerd table in the cafeteria, in the corner near the poison ivy end of the dirt play yard at recess, and on Stevie Dobin's side of a dodge-ball game in gym, no matter

what side Stevie was on. And Harry was never allowed anywhere near girls like Marla Reeseman.

He saw Dave Dixon standing face to face with Marla, fiddling with her left breast in a hallway between sixth and seventh period one afternoon and it nearly broke his heart. Harry's seventh grade mind couldn't articulate a feeling of that immensity, but the image stuck with him all of his life. He still felt a yearning for Marla to this day some fifteen years hence—though he had completely lost track of her over the years.

During the summer Harry's little street was far away from schoolyard politics and the cliques that governed them. There, he and Marla were just neighbors. So Harry would rake leaves for Mr. Reeseman, go to ballet recitals for Marla's younger sister Stacie with the family and generally suck up to all the Reesemans in order to be near Marla. She treated him with the respect reserved for lesser life forms. But because she was from a large Christian family raised mostly in the Midwest, Marla acted politely. And during those summers Marla was still a kid and shared Harry's love of the trees and woods and creeks. They were not best friends, but friends by default.

Besides, Marla's older sister was instructing her, unbeknownst to Harry, in the subtle art of tease-flirting. Marla knew Harry had a crush on her, everybody but Harry knew that. That is how Harry found himself at Thanksgiving dinner with all ten of the Reesemans nearby clan. The main problem with that picture was Harry's allergy to turkey; an allergy he was ignorant of because he had never even tasted turkey.

Harry had a deep visceral aversion to any food that was unusual in texture or possessing a strong smell. His favorite foods, actually what he lived on largely, were Velveeta Cheese, Skippy Crunchy Peanut Butter and Krispy brand Saltine crackers. Harry could not tolerate vinegars in either smell or acidity and thus would not eat salad. At this point in his life he was suspicious of potatoes because his father had once used a tablespoon of sour cream in preparing

him one, as a young child, and sour anything caused Harry to retch involuntarily.

To say the afternoon was a disaster would be like calling a frothing rabid pit bull a “nice doggie”. Afterwards Harry would seldom even show his face. He actually avoided going in through the front door of his house to get to the bathroom one day before Christmas that same year because he was too embarrassed be seen by Mrs. Reeseman. Harry nearly crapped his pants on that winter day.

It began well enough if not just a little uncomfortably. The Reesemans, though not fundamentalists, believed in observing the Sabbaths and thanking the almighty whenever they broke bread. Because Harry was a guest, he held a position of honor at the table. Marjorie Reeseman, Marla’s mom, asked Harry, “Dear, would you like to say grace?” Marla knew Harry had never attended any church service and would have no idea how to begin even if he could get over his general terror at having all eyes at the table upon him. Marla and Patricia were secretly marveling at his obvious discomfort. The older sister stifled a laugh; it sounded like a snort. The rest of the family ignored the sound, except Marla’s Uncle Jack.

Jack, a Merchant Marine cook, who had already had two or three J & B’s (straight up, no ice, Marjorie—thankya) was Mrs. Reeseman’s older brother. It is commonly known that the embarrassing, drunk brother is always invited to family holiday meals and no matter how obnoxious, he is never expelled. Mr. Reeseman would have the right (if he was stupid enough to exercise it before bed on the eve of a day off) to growl and bitch to his wife later, after Jack had passed out or stumbled to his car and “driven” home. Paul Reeseman, like most men, wanted to get laid and would keep his opinion of Jack to himself.

This was years before Mothers Against Drunk Drivers. At this point in American History, *Friends* didn’t screw with their *friends’* right to drive shit-faced if *friends* didn’t want to get the living puke beat out of them on the gravel of the parking lot—or driveway as

was the case out here in the suburbs. Cops normally just let drunk drivers sleep it off and let them go in the morning. Intervention was thought to be a violation of civil rights. Nobody talked about how many homicides were committed by belligerent morons like Uncle Jack.

This year at thanksgiving, Jack was Harry's champion though. He had noticed, even as inebriated as he was, the way Patricia and Marla treated the boy. Jack was intimately familiar with being the lame-ass nerd boy and he had the scars to prove it.

"Christ, Marge," He slurred. "Why not have Miss Prissy Panties invoke the blessing? And when the hell can we get to the wine? I'm thirsty!" He leered at Patricia through his thick lenses, a possible foreshadowing of abuses yet undiscovered. Harry would never know.

Mrs. Reeseman covered her anger like the champion she was. Her father, God rest his pickled soul, had drunk himself to death just in time to spare Marjorie's mother the expense of murdering him in his sleep. It would have been self defense, though, as the old man beat her mom most nights; only beating Marge occasionally as a diversion.

"Well then, Patty, would you?"

Patricia tipped her head piously and placed her hands together, fingertips pointing upward toward God. She spoke clearly in her girlish soprano, "Thank you, oh Lord, for these, thy gifts, which we are about to receive, and Lord, may this food nourish our souls as well as our bodies and make us truly grateful. Amen."

She crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue at Jack who regarded her from beneath sleepy eye lids like an over-fed tiger slouched across from her. "Amen," he grumbled.

"Make us grateful," Harry mumbled aloud to the gray room in a Nashville duplex years later. He momentarily came to consciousness. Out back, the crows had given way to two gray squirrels; one with a proud bush of a tail, the other possessing a woeful stump stuck full of mangy pin-feather-like hair. They

looked remarkably like two bantamweight boxers arguing over a black rubber super ball. Stubby was chattering and running around in circles; Bushy, holding the ball between his front hands, hopping like a fighter to continue facing his maniacal opponent. Harry could see a small chunk missing from the inky looking globe. Both of them were due to be sadly surprised when they tried to eat that nut. Harry hardly noticed; he was caught in a painful memory and was forced to play it out in his mind like a hellish tape loop. He drifted back.

The chaos that followed is well known to any member of a big family or anyone who has ever attended a wedding reception dinner. In short, the promise of a civilized meal turned into a pig fest. Several conversations sprang up at once with loud drunken punctuations injected by Uncle Jack. Mrs. Reeseman insisted that Harry sample every thing on the table. He was passed steaming plates of ham, turkey (white and dark meat), chestnut stuffing, mashed potatoes with gravy, candied yams, cream corn, green beans and Durkee Fried Onion curls, sautéed onions, pearl onions, pickled cucumbers with sour cream, boiled summer sausage with sauerkraut, and several plates and bowls containing unidentified sauces in colors ranging from bright red to slimy gray.

Harry politely tried to eat a little bit of everything. He didn't talk much. He was seated next to his "sweetheart" (as noted, everyone but Harry knew he had a crush on Marla) but he could hardly look at her. He glanced once at her bare knee. She had her hand resting in her lap on top of a white linen napkin. Her skirt was hiked up a few inches and Harry caught a glimpse of her cream-colored thigh. This set his heart racing and made him more nervous than he already was. He had tried the turkey and the stuffing. Though the consistency was less than welcome, the taste was pleasant enough—nutty and warm, the meat not gamy or dry.

About the time the pickled pigs feet came around, Harry's stomach began to grumble. He mistakenly thought it was hunger;

he had not eaten breakfast that day in nervous anticipation of the dinner. In response he ate all of the potatoes and gravy on his plate. Mrs. Reeseman, thinking he was loving her cooking, answered by filling the open space on his plate with a half pound more, splashing brown, gelatinous gravy over the whole runny mountain. The smell of the sauerkraut caused him a wave of unmistakable nausea. Right about then Harry had a gas pain. This, he would soon learn, would be his body's standard reaction to turkey. He only tried to eat it one other time in his life with similar, involuntary results.

He was feeling ill, but not so ill as to have to excuse himself. He had an unnatural fear of strange bathrooms anyway and did not relish the thought of being sick in one. He thought he only had to pass a bit of gas. His stomach lurched again. The noise in the room was deafening. Wine had been passed around to all the adults, and a considerable amount had been consumed. He could tell that Mrs. Reeseman, for one, was less inhibited. She was pouring gravy on her mother-in-law's plate with abandon. The brown goo had already created a lake on the lavender table cloth, and a river was beginning to flow toward Marla at Harry's end of the table. Harry could no longer hold back, he farted. Only what came out of him was not gas. At least, that is not all that came out of him.

The clatter and bustle of the table ceased. This was no pause, no lull. It was instant silence. Diners sat staring at Harry with forks and glasses suspended in mid air between their plates and mouths. Harry sat miserably in what he imagined to be a puddle of diarrhea very much like the river of gravy that was pooling around Gramma Reeseman's plate. His gut wrenched again. That was when the smell reached his nose.

It apparently reached Uncle Jack's nose as well. He bellowed, "Christ's balls, kid, what the fuck crawled up your ass and died?"

Harry hardly heard Jack. Everyone at the table was looking at him, aghast. His stomach lurched again and he looked helplessly at

Marla. He wanted to say he was sorry, but when he opened his mouth to speak he vomited his entire undigested turkey dinner into Marla's lap.

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INGRID KEIR

Your Next

Your next lover should
make your palms tingle and itch
when you think she is rounding the corner.

She should wear a slinky dress
that allows her nipples to peek through
the silk material
as you hungrily watch her walk.

Your next lover should have a penchant
for music and creativity in all its forms,
not just scribbling poems in a notebook.
She won't be rich, or a corporate worker bee, or conservative.

She should give herself to you
if she is tired, sick or feeling unattractive.
She will rub your thigh when other men stare at her cleavage,
a sign of her devotion.

Your next lover's haircut should not be short or messy.
Her hair should have a distinct sweet smell
that lingers on your pillow in the morning,
and makes you ache for her.

Your next lover won't fit
into the categories that society has imposed.
She's not an artist, or business woman. She is a lover.
With one kiss from her cherry lips
she can summon your desire like a siren.

Your next lover should be a muse,
penetrating your dreams and making violent love to you.
You'll wake startled if she isn't beside you.

Your next lover will leave behind
daily reminders of her love
appearing in poems, seashells and post-it notes
left around your apartment.
You will be spellbound
by her ivory, slender fingers
that look like delicate piano keys.

Please make sure your next lover appreciates
the letters in her mailbox,
the parade of flowers,
the homemade dinners
and the afternoon trysts.

She will feel torn apart when you venture off
to share yourself with another.
She will have cracked open your chest
and you think of her in the past tense,
but wonder if she was the one.

In the end,
you lock eyes with hers
one last time
while entering a crowded train
as she stands on the subway platform
her image dancing idly away.



Transition

(I am restless and futile) (colossal and miniscule) (bored and boring) (and I want to fuck shit up) (to gossip and cause trouble) (to holler and yawp) (to use bad grammar and foul words like fuck and suck and run amok and kiss in the summer rain) (to go home and make love to myself) (and then hop on a plane and go to Medellín) (speak some broken ass Spanish have some closure) (come back to a dumpy apartment) (sell off all my shit) (listen to Bjork and Fela Kuti) (vacuum up the cat hair) (pack books into cardboard boxes) (throw the rest of it away) (bid farewell to New York New York and her glassy stare) (goodbye Na Trang Vietnamese spring rolls) (goodbye summers crammed with sweaty salsa dancing) (goodbye late night Manhattan love sessions) (thundering Body and Soul house music 'til 5am) (arriving at work bleary eyed in last night's clothes) (goodbye Queensboro Bridge with fishnets hanging from your rusty spires) (goodbye to Coney Island's uneven boardwalk planks where mermaids parade) (goodbye to reading the New Yorker and actually being a New Yorker) (goodbye boom boom fourth of July fireworks) (time to board another plane and go straight to the sandy tip of the west) (and stand at the foot of a jagged cliff) (throw a rock into the heart of my mother Pacific) (connected to my home the foggy city of dreams...)

neurotic

i worry about things like how i relish in my moments of melancholic distance maybe there is something wrong with me since i like to be alone so much and am neurotic about groceries cat hair writing toothpaste globs in the sink and eating peeled pears

i wonder if you will run away when you figure this out

3 meals (and a lover)

breakfast:

i see you in everything
semi-neurosis takes over
look for your face amongst
the bananas in my cereal
thought you might be floating in my tea
just a momentary lapse
of sense of reasoning
losing myself in times past

lunch:

wind whips my face as i stroll between skyscrapers
humming lenny kravitz and eating frozen yogurt
“do you remember the times we used to play
we’d sing and we’d dance all damn day”
wind tunnels bring thoughts of you
the brightly colored one
trails of fire follow your footsteps
discussion of non-bicoastal romance permeates
along with thoughts of you and tilden park
(hike sun nature avocado sandwiches)
kidnapped to get out of the city
i listen
you say you two are at a turning
point in your relationship
(onward or release onward or release)
in the midst of listening
my ears turn your voice
to garbled bits of monosyllables
this fire lady lost her voice
vocal cords singed by your trailblaze

dinner:

an appetiteless meal of
wine cheese crackers
and philosophical meanderings
do fire signs squared = a positive?
or do they cancel one another?
meditating on the cards i pull
(harmony)
(politics)(slowing down) (letting go)
(the burden)
i absorb the diamond shaped formation
pricked by four points
(the cards speak the truth)
of three (meals and a lover)

Intangible

What is
that sound

a silent scream
what is
that sound

reckless abandon
a vivid dream
thundering hearts
lost memory
washing out with the tide
and weathered sea glass
time to start again
realizing how impermanent
another person can be

abruptly removed from daily
hellos and I love yous
and space between
the slow moving drum
behind the third eye
expansive hours
adrenaline phone calls
surges of hope
something intangible
keeps him from loving me
a continent between us
the bridge is burnt
to smoldering cinders
all that is left is
that sound

rising from my
belly chest throat mouth lips
it was real, though nothing is real

that sound
the syllables
from deep inside
a muffled and simple
“goodbye”

that sound
the silence
singing loudly in my bones
rattling my tired heart
she will recover
and challenge another
to be a man
she demands

he stands and says
"I'm a man"
"I know how to lead"
if you are
stand up
show me how to do this dance
I am tired of leading
I am tired

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IWAYU

Pedro Blas Gonzales

Arturo de Ferran is the kind of man whose true vocation is that of irreparable melancholic. By the age of twelve Arturo could be heard talking about the “long ago” days of his youth. By twenty-two he had come into full possession of what he called a “life plan”. Granted, this life plan was a sketch, only a blueprint of the universal axioms that he was intent in living out to fruition. For instance, he could not anticipate or augur those repetitive and often pesky particulars that make up daily life and that threaten to drag down the most sure-footed of man’s plans. But his plan was ample and ambitious enough to engulf most of life’s surprises, including one certain contingency that would validate his need for a having a life plan in the first place.

On Wednesday October 17th Dr. Bill Anderson, Professor of Anthropology at New York University and collector of Caribbean artifacts of religious interest, invited Arturo to his Greenwich Village home. As far as any of his colleagues could recall, Dr. Anderson had never invited any of them to his home.

Dr. Anderson’s wife Rosa greeted Arturo at the door. Several minutes later Dr. Anderson appeared wearing a pair of blue slacks, a plain white t-shirt and a pair of black sandals. Arturo was greeted

warmly even though, given his sense of discretion, he felt himself an intruder in the couple's living room.

"Welcome to our home, Dr. de Ferranti," Rosa said. "Can I get you something to drink? A little wine, perhaps?" she asked cordially.

"Some wine will be fine."

"My husband tells me that you were born in Camaguey," she asked while pouring some wine into a glass.

"Yes. In Ciego de Avila, to be exact. It is a shame that we have not met before. And you? Where are you from?"

"I am from Havana, but I visited your province many times in my youth. I understand that it is in Ciego where the best Castillian Spanish is spoken outside of Spain."

"Yes, we are very proud of that," Arturo responded.

"Arturo, the reason that I asked you here tonight is because I want to ask your opinion on several personal matters that are bothering me, and I can't think of anyone of greater integrity," Dr. Anderson said.

"I'm flattered by your kind words, Bill."

"On the contrary, it is I who am most grateful for your visit. But first let me show you around and share my collection with you."

As they walked around the living room in a counter clockwise fashion, Rosa brought Arturo a plate with some crackers and cheese and later politely excused herself.

"Here is a rendition of *Eleggua*, the Divine Jokester. This one is from the Dominican Republic. It was given to me as a gift by the mother of one of my graduate students. I understand that it was made in the 1920's. It's really a long story, but as you know, in the Yoruba religion the Divine Jokester plays the role of something much like catharsis for the ancient Greeks."

"This is a particularly sinister rendition. I don't remember seeing one that was enjoying himself so much. Yet he is not evil. Just a kind of cosmic leveler of sorts," Arturo said.

"That's just it. That is why he is so endearing to most people,"

Dr. Anderson interrupted.

The two men went on pacing through the shelves, stopping wherever they found something particularly interesting to Arturo. Dr. Anderson's collection was rather extensive.

"And here...take a look at *Esu*, the Divine Justice, arms outstretched and looking down on mortals. This statuette is from the turn of the century. I bought it from an antiques dealer in Miami some thirty years ago. We can trace it back to a Santero in the Jesus Maria neighborhood in Havana."

"This is a truly exquisite piece," Arturo said, getting closer. "Did the dealer know what he was selling?" he asked.

"No. He merely sold it as he would just any other figurine. But he had no concept of what it signifies. Arturo, would you like more wine?"

"Well, maybe just a little more. I have to say that this is a formidable collection that you have here, Bill. How long has it taken you to obtain these pieces?" he asked, as Dr. Anderson went to get the bottle of wine.

"All my adult life. But you can say that I had a head start. Some of these belong to my parents. Arturo, I want to ask your advice about some things."

"Please, by all means."

"You know that I have been awarded the Clydesdale Press Prize for the best book in our field, a work that owes a great deal to your advice."

"And a fine work it is, Bill," Arturo added.

"Well, that's just what I want to talk to you about. Come, let's sit," he said, motioning to a nearby couch. "Arturo, you know that I am a very private man. I am always most comfortable when I am at home in the company of my family. These familiar surroundings, these books, this space..." he said, looking about him, searching for the next word.

"These things center my life; they allow me to be myself and to enjoy a quiet life. That is all that I ask of life. But as you can well

imagine, some people do not care to understand this. This way of life is one that some interpret as a sign of aloofness or arrogance. But I assure you that neither of these things is the case. I simply enjoy the comfort of my home. Some people today must have everyone involved socially and politically in every kind of business that one can think of."

"Bill, you know that you do not have to justify your life to me," Arturo interrupted.

"Thank you for your kindness, Arturo. I have always truly cherished you as a loyal friend. You see, I have to confide in you that after winning the prize—actually from the time that I was nominated," he interrupted himself, "I have had some rather odd things happen to me," he went on to say. "Things that after a while can't be easily dismissed, but that I truly don't understand."

"Oh, is that so? What kind of things are we talking about?" Arturo was surprised at this last statement.

"Arturo, you know how much we have to go it alone in this business and in life itself. Every one of us is a physical shell to the other, you know that, but that is where the comparisons end. Some men's strength comes to be manifested in work that they can be proud of. But Arturo, resentment is a strong reality in all things human. I have known this since I was a child. Make no mistake about it; this is a major motivation of mankind. Not only due to winning the prize, but in other respects as well, I have had to fend off a great deal of animosity lately. Frankly, I'm at a loss trying to make sense of all this. This is what I want to consult with you about, Arturo."

"I know, Bill. I have witnessed what you are talking about," Arturo reassured him.

"For some very strange reason my paper, 'Tribal Lineages: A Comparative Study of the Dahomey and the Yoruba People' will no longer appear in the next issue of *African/Caribbean Anthropology Digest*. They just told me that after reconsidering the paper, they do not feel that it will be of much interest to their readers."

"That's highly unprofessional at best," Arturo replied.

"That's what I thought. And after waiting for God knows how long, *Caribbean Culture Review* has informed me that they never received the article that I sent them. I then re-sent it, and then was told that they were terrible sorry that it was destroyed accidentally. Well, the other day as I was walking in Central Park, right before I took the train home, I heard my name being called from behind me. I turned around and saw a black man with a pretty pronounced Spanish accent walking towards me. I waited for him, as he had a slight limp. I could see that he was carrying something in his left hand, but since it was already early evening and the sky was cloudy, I couldn't immediately make it out. He asked me if I had a minute, that he needed to talk to me about my health. Of course, all this took me by storm. It happened so fast I really didn't have time to react. He said his name was Raphael Santos, and shaking my hand he told me that he was from Puerto Rico. He then politely asked me if we could sit on a nearby bench."

"But weren't you shocked by this mention of your health?" Arturo asked.

"I was. I was. There was something about him that captured my attention. That's what drew me in to hear what this man had to say. When we sat down I realized that what he was carrying were really a couple of newspaper pages that were rapped around some object that was the size of a large grapefruit. He didn't waste time and proceeded to tell me that I had to address my health or that I would die within a year."

"That's pretty shocking, especially coming from a stranger," Arturo said.

"Very much so, but you know, for some reason, at no time did I think he was joking. Things got a little clearer when he told me that I had to go to the doctor and ask him to check my colon for a cancerous tumor."

"When was this?" Arturo asked.

"Over three weeks ago."

"Well, did you go?" Arturo asked tentatively.

"Sure. I was very scared by this kind of talk. Not only did I go but it was confirmed to be true," Dr. Anderson responded gently, nodding his head as he drank his wine. "I will be having an operation in ten days."

"Well, consider yourself lucky," Arturo added.

"That's just it, Arturo. My dilemma does not stop there. The man told me that my problem was one of belief. He said that in that respect I was not very different from most people today. My problem, he went on to say, was that I needed to become motivated by the guiding force of *Ashe*. As you know, *Ashe* is the *camino*, the road, the vehicle for a complete ascension. He said that I should communicate with *Ashe* to deliver me to my true destiny."

"Did he say why he thought this was the case? Usually the *Santero* will only say this to people who have either lost their way in life or who do not understand how to make sense of the frustrations of daily life. *Ashe* means ascension, a form of clarity that leaves all the mundane behind."

"I can tell you that publishing the book, as well as some of my other projects, have caused me a great deal of strife, as you well know. I can't imagine that some people can have so much bottled ire in them," Dr. Anderson said, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Don't be so surprised. Sounds like he was on to something. What else did he say?" asked Arturo.

"He went on to say that I was a good man, but that I was living in an illusory world. The real world, he told me, belongs to a specific awareness or consciousness. I was misled, he then added. But you know, Arturo, throughout our talk he kept apologizing. He kept telling me that it was all for the better. Actually he was very polite and kind. He gave me his home telephone number and asked me to call him when I got better physically and that he would help me with the spiritual aspect."

"The genuine ones are always very disinterested, you know," Arturo said, referring to *Santeros*.

“What do you suggest I should do? How much of all of this is true, I can’t say. But he sure got the disease part right.”

“Bill, I think that he is telling you to believe or at least to be open to believe.”

“But that’s just it. I’ve spent all of my life researching, teaching, and studying this,” Dr. Anderson responded.

“Precisely. You heard what the man said, Bill. It’s all about consciousness. Bill... maybe...maybe we study too much and don’t believe enough. These two things may not be the same thing...in fact—” Arturo interrupted himself. “I know that they are not the same thing at all. Bill, Ashe is vitality; it is the life force that is found in all things. Ashe is what all of the *Orishas* personify. These divinities show us the meaning of reality. Take *Eleggua*, the master *Orisha*, for instance; he disrupts our lives and creates chaos. He shows us how things do not always add up. But you see Bill...this is precisely how he can come to demonstrate that there is a higher order. This may sound paradoxical to us, but the believer knows this to be the case as soon as he leaves his home in the morning.”

“He did say that men live in different worlds, whether they know this to be the case or not.”

“Bill, you mentioned that he had a newspaper covering something. Did you ever find out what it was?”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you that part. He opened the newspaper and took out a palm-size rock, a kind of sleek-surfaced stone.”

Arturo interrupted. “He gave you a stone?”

“Yes, he gave it to me. I have it here,” he said, getting up to get it.

At that moment the telephone rang. A short time later Rosa came out to the living room to tell Bill that their son who was studying in Boston wanted to talk to him. Arturo was studying the stone when Rosa asked if he wanted something else to eat or drink.

“No, thank you.”

“I guess you know about Bill’s problem. Interesting isn’t it?” she asked. “He said that there was no one else he could talk to about

this other than you, Arturo. He has great admiration for you.”

“Thank you. Rosa, the universe is filled with realities that we can’t seem to put a finger on,” he said, embarrassed by the compliment. “We might in fact be too overly reliant on our science and technology to give us answers, but these answers are rarely vital in scope.”

“I think you’re right. Too many people live their lives in quiet desperation not realizing that they have greater control of their own lives than they think. We really live in artificial societies,” she added. “But tell me something, Arturo,” she asked. “What do you make of the two stones?”

“Two stones?” Arturo asked, somewhat surprised

“The two stones that he received. You’re holding one of them.”

“No. Bill only told me about one. This one I am holding.”

“I guess Bill was coming to that. I guess he meant to tell you about the other one. What do you make of this man in the park? How did he know Bill? You think it might all be some kind of joke?”

“If it was a joke, then we are still left with the question of Bill’s tumor. How can a practical joker know this? Not even Bill himself knew.”

Bill returned. “Sorry about that Arturo. That was our son, Michael. He is in medical school up in Boston. He’s been having all sorts of trouble with his exams. He was a little flustered just now when I talked to him.”

“Bill, Arturo does not know about the second stone,” Rosa said.

“Oh, the other one. I meant to tell you. When I returned here from walking in the park I noticed what looked to be a package that was placed at the foot of our front door.”

“A package?” asked Arturo. “Was it like the one that the man gave you in the park?”

“Yes. Exactly the same.”

“I guess it means that this man knows where you live.”

“It’s hard for me to imagine how he could know. He gave me no

indication of how he knew me.”

“I don’t think that there is any danger for you in all of this. Perhaps we are dealing with something other than mere luck or chance. The man that you met sounds like he is a dedicated believer.”

“What exactly is the significance of the stones, Arturo?” Rosa asked. “I know that they are sacred in many African religions, but why give them to Bill?”

“It’s hard to say, but you are right that they are sacred to *Santeros*. There is a stone placed in every Yoruba temple. You see, the stone contains a benevolent spirit that is summoned forth by the believer during prayer. One is supposed to talk to the stone; otherwise the spirit departs and only a stone remains. The stone acts as a center point where consciousness is focused. The stone is not *Esu* per se, but rather the accessible spirit of this deity that distributes universal justice.”

“Here is the other stone. It’s pretty much like the other one that I showed you,” said Dr. Anderson as he returned.

“What did the man in the park tell you about the stone he gave you?” asked Arturo.

“He just said that I should have it and that I should place all of my anxieties at its disposition.”

“Bill, this whole situation really comes down to a vital feeling for the ineffable or numinous aspects of human existence. The problem is not to be solved or even understood with more detached scholarly study of religion. To be sincere, all of this study upon study of religions, theology and scriptures has nothing to do with belief. This is where we go wrong. Why don’t we call the man? You said that he gave you his telephone number, didn’t he? Ask him what this is all about.”

“We can, if you think that it will help. After all, these things are not new to me.”

Dr. Anderson and Arturo wasted no time in calling the *Santero*. The man instructed them to meet him the following evening right

after sunset at the entrance to Central Park located on the corner of 59th Street and Fifth Avenue. He just said that he would recognize Dr. Anderson when he saw him.

The following night the sky was clear and the temperature was in the lower fifties. Dr. Anderson and Arturo sat on a bench as they watched people go by.

"Isn't it rather amazing, Arturo, how the world turns and turns regardless of the personal circumstances of any one of us? Look at all these people, each of them is in a world of their own, that much I have come to believe."

"You're right, and this is why belief is so personal. It helps with the very nature of the crevices in our lives. All the rest is illusion and fantasy."

As Dr. Anderson spoke, a black man wearing dark pants, a hat and a light coat came walking toward them. In his left hand he held a small light-colored duffle bag. The man came right up to them and immediately introduced himself as Raphael Santos.

"So how are you feeling, Dr. Anderson?" he asked.

"Well. Right now, very well," he answered, rather nervously. "Mr. Santos, this is my very good friend Arturo de Ferran."

"Yes. My pleasure to meet you, Arturo. You speak Spanish, don't you, Arturo?" he asked.

"Yes. Of course!"

"Good, because I may need your help. My English is not very good sometimes," he said, sitting down next to Dr. Anderson. "I want you both to know that what we need to do tonight in the park may look strange to outsiders, but I assure you that this is only out of not knowing. How do you say, Arturo...*de ignorancia*?" he asked

"Ignorance."

"Si, ignorance. I have to tell you also that what people like me do is a moral duty. We don't make a living out of this. I can't see people in need and ignore their suffering. This is a calling...*una vocacion*. Good souls must take care of other souls in need. And you, Dr. Anderson, are suffering, *mucho*. Also, Dr. Anderson, you

must not be afraid. I know that you know about these things yourself. But don't forget...*lo importante aqui es...*"

"What is important," Arturo interrupted.

"What is important here is that you learn to...how do you say, *creer?*"

"To believe."

"Did you go to the doctor?"

"Yes, I did. I will be needing an operation."

"Today, Dr. Anderson, man does not believe. He says he does and sometimes he thinks he does, but he does not. "*El mundo hoy...*" he went on to say in Spanish. "*Esta controlado por el mal.*"

"I understand," Dr. Anderson said. "My Spanish is not too bad. I agree with you, Mr. Santos, that today the world is ruled by evil."

"Dr. Anderson, you don't have to become a *Santero*, but you must learn to believe. The power for change in your life is within you. So, let's walk into the park and let us...begin our *limpieza*," he said, looking at Arturo for help.

"He means...the cleansing."

"Everyone in the world is affected by evil in different ways. You, Dr. Anderson, have too many people that affect you through their...*envidia*...a very powerful emotion, you know. *Los ojos malos*...can be a very powerful force. People must learn to cultivate their abilities. *Envidia* is a very strong kind of evil. For you, Dr. Anderson...tonight we must build a strong power around you that will not allow this evil to affect you any more. *Una resistencia*...is what I want to say. Tell him, Arturo."

"He wants to cleanse you of the evil that is affecting you and your family. He wants to build a kind of resistance...to fend off envy and the evil eye."

"Did you bring the first stone that I gave you in the park?" he asked.

"Yes. I have it here."

"Okay. Let us walk into the park. There is a very quiet and discreet area close by where we can go."

“Usually, Dr. Anderson, this process has to be done to the person alone,” he said, as they walked into the darkness of the park. “But your friend is a very honest and loyal man who wants to help you. You are very lucky to have a friend like him.”

To their left a man passed by riding a bicycle with a faint white light that was just enough to enable him to see several feet ahead. The weak, rear red light quickly disappeared into the darkness. The three men walked down a grassy decline. Mr. Santos motioned them to walk under a loose chain link fence that lead toward a rock formation that was imbedded in a thickly wooded area. Once there, Mr. Santos opened his bag. He took out and lit a tall, white candle that was about twelve inches tall. Then he motioned Arturo to sit behind them on one of the rocks. Mr. Santos did not speak anymore. He merely motioned and pointed. He took Dr. Anderson and stood him in front of the candle. Going back to his bag, he brought out a small branch with droopy, drying leaves. Next he brought out sixteen white roses and a beaded necklace, which he put on.

“Dr. Anderson, please give me your stone,” he started.

He began to rub the stone across Dr. Anderson’s head, forehead and the back of his neck. He repeated this procedure sixteen times, and as he did so he uttered the words, “*IWAYU: El ojo del carácter.*”

“*IWAYU...*”

“*IWAYU...*”

Then placing the stone down on one of the surrounding boulders, he continued,

“*IWAYU...ORI...OKAN...*”

“*IWAYU...ORI...OKAN...*”

“*IWAYU...ORI...OKAN...*”

Neither Arturo nor Dr. Anderson said a word. The cool breeze shook the candle flame gently. In the distance an ambulance siren could be heard.

Then he began to speak Spanish. “Arturo, please translate as I speak,” he asked. “Dr. Anderson, I place your soul in the presence

of *Babalawo*, father of all mysteries. *Babalawo*, please allow this gentle man to come to believe. He wants to believe. *Babalawo*, please allow him to believe. *Babalawo*, please make this gentle servant understand that he must feel a unity between what this man says and what he thinks. Like dark shadows walking in the night, man too walks lost upon Earth. Dr. Anderson, I commend your spirit to *Babaluaye*, powerful *Orisha* of the transformative power of disease. There is no greater evil than the evil that masks itself as good. There is no greater evil than the evil that masks itself as good..."

He repeated this three times, each time while passing the branch of *Ewe* leaves over his entire body. Dr. Anderson looked on in quiet anticipation. The breeze blew steadily.

"The power of evil is like a great jokester who deceives through pretense for all things good," he continued. Arturo translated "Let this *Ebori eleda* ritual of the cleansing of the head serve as a beginning for understanding and belief. Let the sixteen *Orishas*, the *Odu* that represent the sacred principles of the universe, rule over this gentle servant. Dr. Anderson you have been harmed by some people who do not even know of their power to harm others; such is the power of evil. Evil penetrates into the hearts of lesser souls and becomes part of them...such is the power of evil. Dr. Anderson, do you accept this ritual of the cleansing of the head as a transformation of your life?" Mr. Santos asked.

"Yes!" responded Dr. Anderson nervously.

"And do you accept this ritual of the cleansing of the soul from all of those evil terrestrial spirits that have done you wrong?"

"Yes!"

"*Iboru iboya ibochiche.*"

"*Iboru iboya ibochiche,*" he repeated three times, continuously passing the stone over his entire body. "Knowledge is not enough, Dr. Anderson. You must also believe.

"*Iboru iboya ibochiche*, may *Ifa* the *Orisha* of the oracle accept this ritual," he said, placing Dr. Anderson's hand over

the professor's own heart.

Throughout the ritual Dr. Anderson stood motionless, his arms by his side and his sight fixed on Mr. Santos.

"Dr. Anderson, you have placed too much attention on matters of the head and you have neglected those of the heart. What men say and what they do must be the same thing. Evil knows this and uses it to its advantage. Dr. Anderson, the world is too cerebral today...few know how to feel. Evil, Dr. Anderson, penetrates those spaces where feeling does not exist," he continued, while placing his hand on Dr. Anderson's chest.

"*Babaluaye*, please help this gentle servant to regain his health now that no evil can hinder his Earthly existence. Dr. Anderson, from now on no evil will continue to hurt you. From now on you must learn not to ignore the connection between the head and the heart. It is for this reason that the *Iwayu*, which is the eye of character, is addressed here tonight. For this reason you must come to understand the relationship between *IWAYU*, *ORI* and *OKAN*. The head, the heart and the back of the neck are all areas that are vital to your health. You can now see your path clearly ahead, Dr. Anderson. You have always had the ability to see, but you have not known how to consolidate this divine power. From now on you will know how to identify evil in the form of pretense. Evil in the form of pretense, Dr. Anderson, is always manifested as bad will. But do not look for outer signs of this evil, as they are not easily detected. You must begin to feel this presence more than you will be able to verify it physically. But it is there. It is always there," Mr. Santos said, seemingly lost in the ritual.

"Remember that not all souls are self-realized to the point that they can share in the joy of others. Remember too, that man in the flesh is no more than a partial soul that must search for its other half. Dr. Anderson, this search is the process that we call life. From this moment on you are protected from this bad will, but you must learn to believe. Belief and only belief is our protection and salvation. Dr. Anderson, the world is not what most men think it to

be. Human life, Dr. Anderson, is not a process that only witnesses a mechanical daily passage of time, but is instead a magical daily renewal. Tonight your life is renewed. There is no reason to continue to worry about your son, Dr. Anderson. Your concern for him is the staple love of a father, but you must not continue to worry as you have lately. His luck is no longer afflicted by the same evil that has offended you."

At that point Dr. Anderson reacted by bringing his hands together in a gesture as if to say something.

"Dr. Anderson, this ritual is now over," Mr. Santos said, motioning him to come forward. Arturo too came forth and embraced him. Mr. Santos began to place some of the items that he had brought with him back in the bag. He then handed Dr. Anderson a small plastic bag that contained some leaves.

"Take this home and boil these leaves into a tea and drink it. This *Osanyin* is a herbal preparation that will remove any evil that is persistent and capricious," he said, handing him the small bag. "...And the stone that I brought to your door...take that one and allow it to cleanse you from evil every day of your life."

The three men walked slowly through the park. The cool breeze was blowing from the northwest. Once they reached the entrance to the park they saw Mr. Santos off as he walked toward the nearest subway line.

"How do you feel about the whole thing?" Arturo asked tentatively.

"Fine. I have no doubt that we often become tormented by spurious and mundane things. The source of this torment is also what we receive from others."

"Good. Santos is right. I know from personal experience that belief is not that common today. Belief is a very difficult thing to uphold, Bill. The rigors of belief confuse and throw off those who merely seek convenience and expediency from belief of any kind. I must tell you that belief opens a path to sincerity and good will. I've witnessed this myself. It settles us and allows us to become

enraptured by life. But if you look around that is not exactly what we see," he said.

The two men crossed the street and sat on a concrete ledge across from the Plaza Suite and watched people going about their daily routine.

"Want to go and have a drink?" Arturo asked.

"We can. It's still early."

They went to a small restaurant several blocks away and sat at a corner table. The place was not crowded.

"Did you notice how self-assured Mr. Santos was? That is because his world is shielded from the grab-bag view of the world that most people have. This is more than just the power of suggestion. Bill, daily life can be magical. But to realize this takes imagination, and imagination is just what most men lack. He is a very contented man for a reason."

"Well, there is certainly something to be said about a life of joy."

"I often think of my father and the fresh look on life that he maintained right up to his death. In him, Bill, I can see this joy realized. From him I came to understand that our beliefs are only demonstrable by the way that we live our lives and not through idle talk. I've always imagined the value of life to be measured in wisdom. You see, Bill, the reason that I went into this field was because I was very intrigued by people's view of the world and their place in it. I wanted to know what constitutes the life of most men. Early on I found out that people in my country did not so much concern themselves with external achievements as they did with living their lives. I remember going to the countryside and talking to people who had nothing and yet who were terribly content, but above all who accepted their destiny. This cannot be taught. In fact, I have seen many examples of how it can be unlearned."

The cool evening breeze that came in through the open front of the restaurant blew out a candle on their table. A group of three or four giggling young women sat at an adjacent table.

“Arturo, have you had these beliefs all your life?”

“Since I was a child. As a child I made elaborate plans that would incorporate all of life’s inconsistencies into something resembling coherence. But throughout my late twenties I began to have a series of occurrences that really made me see through the veil of things. I became disillusioned and disenchanted as I think most people who keep the score, as they say, often do. Bill, belief is a vital form of knowledge that in many cases does not require justification. It wasn’t until my late thirties that I realized that the plans that I had made as a child were flexible enough to incorporate all kinds of surprises. Only then did I realize that I had actually been in control all along. Autonomy, Bill, is what man ought to be most concerned with. My plan was working wonderfully all along, and I didn’t know it. Except that a true autonomy comes with the understanding that there are things that are out of our control. Those things we must learn to respect.”

“I agree. What is the point of learning to live when there is very little living left to do? Perhaps this is the lesson of this episode of my life,” added Dr. Anderson.

“Bill, about eight years ago I was vacationing in Santo Domingo with my entire family. One night as I was walking along a deserted street, I passed a heavy-set woman. As she approached me I noticed that she would not take her eyes off of me. She truly intrigued me, so I took a few more steps and turned to my left with the pretense of looking into a grocery store window. First, I looked discreetly out of the corner of my eyes, and then I turned around completely, but she was nowhere to be seen. Then, as I began to turn back and continue walking, there she was standing to my right looking into the same store window. I found this very odd, but I assumed that I had missed her as she stepped into some store. But as I proceeded to walk by her I got the strangest sensation, that I could clearly hear her talking to me, but without words.”

“Was she speaking in Spanish?” asked Dr. Anderson.

“No. Not at all. I just heard her as I would my own thoughts.

She said to take her hand."

"What did you do then? This sounds very strange. Did you continue walking?" Dr. Anderson asked, finishing off his second drink.

"I just did what she said. It was a reaction that I couldn't control."

"What happened then?" Dr. Anderson pressed on.

"I found her hands to be very cold as she clasped my hand between hers. But I was not afraid. I did not fear her. She held my hands for what seemed like a few minutes, but I can't be sure."

"What occurred during all this time?"

"What happened then was that I began to see myself as a small child, staring at a small hole in the side of the roof of my parent's house in Cuba, where small bats made their home. I saw myself lying in bed looking into the darkness of the room and realizing the purpose of my life, just as I did then. Bill, my mind simply raced through a lot of the places where I had lived or visited. I saw the faces of many people who I have known and who are now departed. But the most intriguing thing of all is that I could see the passage of time, my life, the meaning of things, all compressed into some very intelligible form."

"Could you see the future, your own death, maybe?"

"Not my death...not exactly. I saw the world without me, if this makes any sense at all. But I...I saw you, Bill," Arturo said hesitantly.

"Me?"

"Yes, you. I really can't explain it," he said, slowly raising his drink to his lips.

"Are you sure?"

"It was you. There is no doubt in my mind."

"But Arturo, eight years ago we had not yet met. I was teaching somewhere else."

"I just couldn't bring myself to tell you. I didn't know how to. But I know that it was you, Bill. I saw you as a man who was ill. Of

course, this made no sense to me. I saw other things too that seemed equally irrelevant at the time.”

“What do you mean, at the time? Are you saying that you have confirmed some other things that you saw? You mean you knew of my cancer?”

“Yes, and several other things as well. I knew about your cancer, but I couldn’t confirm it until now. The important thing is that I knew what to do with these visions at the appropriate time. When you told me you had the man’s telephone number, I knew then that I was responsible for helping you follow through with this.”

“So what became of the woman?”

“Well, as I said, I saw my life and its course. She then began to walk away in the opposite direction where I followed her with my sight until she turned left at the next corner.”

“And you were never scared throughout all of this? Did you ever see her again?”

“No. I think that it was later that night, back in the hotel when I told my wife, that it all took hold of me. I never saw her again. But my memories of her are still very clear. I can easily see her in front of me whenever I think of her. Anyhow, should we go? It’s getting colder.”

The two men walked toward the subway line where each took trains traveling in opposite directions. The northwesterly wind had now picked up and the temperature was noticeably colder.

The following evening Dr. Anderson’s phone rang at 6:43pm., as he and Rosa were having dinner. Rosa answered. She returned a few minutes later.

“Bill, it’s for you. A woman named Emma wants to speak with you.”

“Emma? I don’t think I know anyone by that name,” he half mumbled, as he walked over to the telephone.

“Yes. Hello,” he said into the receiver.

“Sir, I am returning your call having to do with a phone message that you left last night for a Mr. Santos.”

"Oh, Mr. Santos, yes! Yes, yes. But I spoke with Mr. Santos himself last night. I didn't leave him a message. Is he there now? Can I speak to him?"

"No, sir. There is no Mr. Santos that lives here. I am Emma Jackson, Mr. and Mrs. Bellingham's housekeeper. You left a detailed message for a Mr. Santos on our recording machine. I just want to know if perhaps you are not mistaken."

"But ms., I spoke with Mr. Santos personally last night,"

"Sir, I just want to know if this pertains to the Bellinghams in any way. They are out of town. Again...I...there is no Mr. Santos here, sir."

"No? But are you sure that this is not Mr. Santos' number? Tell me, ms., what was the message?"

"You asked him about a meeting that you are going to have in a park and about your bad health. You mentioned that you will be bringing a friend along. With all due respect, this is a very strange message, sir. You are constantly answering your own questions."

"I don't know what to say...I..."

"Well, if this has nothing to do with the Bellinghams, then I won't bother them," she interrupted.

"No. Of course."

"Okay. Thank you, sir. I am sorry to have bothered you. Good night," she said as she hung up the telephone. Dr. Anderson placed the telephone down gently and went over to the shelf where he had placed the stone.

TOILET PAPER, GRASSY KNOLLS AND BROKEN GLASS

Yonatan Maisel

Carson City PD Investigations Room

Come right in," beckons the deep baritone voice of the bulky-though-flabby figure behind the nondescript metal desk, between bites of the Taco Bell Burrito he holds in his left hand, as the fingers of his right peck at the keyboard in front of him.

So I take a seat on one of those plastic simulated leather chairs. You know, the type which makes you sound like you've just farted as you first sit down. Had the Desk Sergeant opposite me been an attractive woman, I would no doubt feel compelled to engage in that time-honored ritual of shifting one's posterior back and forth several times in an effort to repeat the noise and make it clear that it was friction not gas. But considering he's not a woman, not particularly attractive, wears the remnants of his lunch, or perhaps his breakfast, on his uniform and mustache, and looks the type to engage in both farting and belching competitions with his porn-watching poker-buddies, I remain seated. No ass-shifting-to-prove-it-wasn't-a-fart deemed necessary. "I'd like to report a—"

"Stolen car?" He finishes the sentence with a wry smirk.

"B-but h-how?"

"You've got Stolen-Car Face."

"Stolen-Car *What?*" I ask, rather taken aback.

"Face. Take it from me, when you've been at this as long as I have, you tend to notice certain distinctive patterns."

"Patterns?"

"Yeah. Mannerisms. Voice inflections. And facial expressions. That's the biggie."

"What type of facial expressions?" I inquire.

"Well for starters you've got the look of someone who probably left the house this morning and found a pile of broken glass in your parking spot. Then walked around aimlessly in the rain for a while telling yourself, 'Maybe I'm confused, maybe I parked it somewhere else last night.' How'm I doin'?"

"Spot on, so far Inspector Clouseau."

"You're also wearin' Eau de Taxi."

"Eau-de..."

"Yeah. You smell like cheap cigar smoke and taxi-interior. Another of the dead giveaways."

"Okay. Sergeant...?"

"Wilkinson. Kip Wilkinson, at your service.

"Okay, Sergeant Wilkinson. Pretty impressive, I'll be the first to admit."

"Tell my commander just how impressive, maybe he'll let me outta this damn room."

"I'll be sure to. With your intuition and powers of observation, I'm left wondering whether if you'd been out in the field rather than behind this desk, The Route Nineteen Ripper's body count might have been significantly lower."

"Would that be an altogether good thing?"

"In what regard?"

"More prostitutes on the street?"

"I guess it depends who you ask. The johns and the hookers'

mothers might tend to say yes, law enforcement and Rush Limbaugh might... Anyway, can we get on with this?"

"So be it. Name?"

"Winslow, Robert Douglass Winslow."

"Address?"

"Nineteen thirty-seven Sir Francis Drake."

"Nice posh street of a nice posh neighborhood."

"Not bad," I admit.

"Make and model?"

"Ninety-four Olds Cutlass."

"Now tell me what a guy in a Brooks Brothers..."

"Macy's. Off the rack."

"Sorry. Anyway, what's a guy just reeking of C.P.A. from out there on Sir Francis Drake doin' driving a fifteen year-old Cutlass?"

"My ex-wife's sentiments exactly. Could be why she left me."

"Sorry."

"Lotta pink slips and pay cuts lately you know. I took a forty-percenter on the chin recently. Traded in a 2007 Caddy to step back to the nineties; hard times demand tough decisions, as they say. Anyway, aren't you getting a bit personal?"

"It would seem so to a novice, but actually to the trained eye of a veteran, financial hardship can lead one to...let's say make a car...disappear."

"If you're alluding to insurance fraud, you can shelve it. Couldn't afford theft insurance. It's going to be a total write-off."

"Shelved indeed. No insurance, no insurance fraud. Any suspects?"

"Suspects?"

"Yeah. You have any run-ins with anyone who might be trying to get back at you? Steal your wheels to piss you off? Jerk your chain by hiding your car maybe?"

"Listen. I'm a live-and-let-live type of guy. The kind who flies under everyone's radar. Sort of known for getting along with people by means of an invisibility cloak. Maybe it's the reason I

haven't been fired altogether."

"Anyone at all who might feel like they were done wrong by you?" He persists with the line of inquiry.

"Well, now that you mention it. I did get a pretty lousy grade once in Algebra which I felt I didn't deserve. The shit really hit the proverbial fan when I got home. I ended up wrapping toilet paper around all of the trees in the teacher, Mister Gantry's, front yard. Maybe he found out it was me and harbored a grudge. It's the only thing I can think of."

"A prospective lead then. When was that?"

"Let's see. Woulda been nineteen sixty-seven or eight."

"You serious?"

"About the toilet paper or it being a viable lead? *Come on.* Actually I just thought a bit of humor might lighten the mood."

"Actually it's a *prosecutable* offense."

"Come on, it was a juvenile prank."

"Juvenile or not, you're just lucky that the statute of limitations on littering woulda been up in the early seventies. Now, any *serious* leads?"

"No, Sergeant. Either leave it blank, or if you really want it filled in, just put 'the second man on the grassy knoll'. He'd have a rather hard time explaining his whereabouts as of late."

"Great, I got a certified comedian on my hands."

"Anyhow, before we waste any more time, is there any chance of finding the car or the person or persons who stole it?"

"You gotta better chance of seein' David Duke convert to Judaism."

"You serious?"

"No, just my turn at humor," he replies with a Cheshire Cat grin.

"Touche!"

"We'll give 'er a look, but I gotta tell ya the chances are pretty slim. It's probably been in a chop-shop for hours. Could be in a thousand pieces by now."

The sobering reply elicits a sulk. I look down glumly at my watch. Thirty minutes to get to work. Not enough for a cab, I'll be busing it.

* * *

Ten minutes later, my testimony complete, the report typed up by my own Joe Friday wannabe, I'm starting to think about where in the hell I'm gonna find public transportation around these parts...

That's when my nostrils detect a new scent entering the room. Another deep sniff. Yes! It's the smell of cheap...cigar smoke. And, yeah, you guessed it...taxi interior.

"Can I help you?" asks the desk sergeant to the figure who, unseen and unbeknownst to me, has entered the room and stands behind me.

"Yes, Officer," comes the response from just over my right shoulder, "I'd like to report a stolen—"

"Car?" I ask.

"B-but h-how?" comes the puzzled voice.

I turn, face the figure and examine the expression of the forty-something Hispanic man who stands there soaked through. The mannerisms and the look of despair stare back at me. The look of one who has seen the empty spot where he parked the night before filled only with shards of broken window glass. The morose, sardonic look of someone who stood in the same rain which now turns the glass window panes of the Investigation Room translucent, impatiently waiting to hail a rare, empty, middle-of-the-morning-rush-hour cab. A man who only minutes from now stands to become the prime suspect in the disappearance of his own car. One who might also have sought revenge for an undeserved D+ in Algebra."

"Stolen-Car Face." I reply.

"Stole-Car *What?*" he asks in astonishment.

And with that I'm left wondering if during the next round of pink slips, and one just happens to land on my desk, whether the Carson City Police Department has room for the almost-polished, though still novice, investigative skills of a fifty-two-year-old, forty-pounds-overweight, Certified Public Accountant who flies under everybody's radar.

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GROWING UP EXUBERANT

Brant Goble

“**Y**ou’ll eat when I damn well tell you to eat!” I said, waving the spoon menacingly over the head of my younger brother, Patrick.

A year prior I would have never imagined myself making such a pronouncement, much less being able to enforce it, but in the summer of ‘96, having just turned thirteen, I discovered something wonderful—the hand that stirs the kettle rules the house—and I was enjoying my newfound position of spoon- and cleaver-wielding power quite a bit (not that I had taken on the responsibility willingly).

The previous officeholder had, under doctor’s orders, vacated the position to attend a month-long drying out, detoxing, and *de-loonyfication* program in blues- and booze-filled Memphis, Tennessee, where a team of highly trained experts were hard at work trying to wring the alcohol, pill, and self-pity-induced neurosis out of her and restore her to her previous state of more nearly manageable misery. In reality the functions, if not the titles, of cook, housekeeper, and gardener had been badly neglected for so long that organization and order had all but been forgotten, and I was left at the helm of a 70s split-level with molding sheetrock

and ceilings low and soft enough to punch a fist through.

Despite my heavy-handedness, I was proving more reliable than my mother (and my baking considerably better than hers), and more a Ralph than a Jack Merridew, so my over-enthusiastic planning and discipline were well-tolerated by all. Thus:

“But just a little something to hold me off?” Patrick said, smiling. “I really won’t make a mess.”

“You know the drill, cornbread and mac’ at noon, no sooner, no later,” I said. “And keep those damn drums down or you’ll not get a bite.” Patrick, already a good twenty pounds heavier than me and more than large enough to take whatever he wanted, shrugged amicably before shuffling back down to his cavernous half of a converted garage festooned with Christmas lights, guitars, and cheery nature posters. He rarely left the room until years later, when he emerged as a full-blown, self-taught composer—something for which no one else could rightfully take credit (although they might try).

* * *

There is something purgative—both mentally and, somewhat less pleasantly, physically—about working in the summer heat, when all the Commonwealth becomes one great sauna, and simply walking in the midday humidity becomes an act of defiance against nature (and an amazingly effective way to steam the wrinkles out of a shirt), and all but the lightest outdoor work becomes an heroic struggle.

It was then, in the middle of summer, I decided to begin setting trees—a quixotic undertaking, and not only because our house was not so much in the woods as a part of them, complete with sociable resident blacksnakes (and dangerously overfamiliar copperheads) and giant puffballs that sprouted from the gray-green carpet after every spring flood.

Rather, at issue were the trees themselves. Trees, of course, can be planted any time, assuming someone cares to dig the holes, but

getting summer plantings to live is another matter entirely. They, like so many young men, prefer to keep their roots properly moist, but despite the asthma-inducing mugginess, the farm's clayey ridge soil was dry and rock hard, unyielding to any but the heaviest pickax blows. The only way to prevent this sadomasochistic exercise (sadistic to the trees; masochistic to the digger) from resulting in disaster was through a constant infusion of liquids to replenish both the digger and trees and prevent either from withering away to dessicated nothingness.

* * *

What exactly possessed me to undertake such self-flagellation, I'll never know, but it might well have been the same irrational exuberance that caused millions to hopefully descend upon the swelled, sweltering city of Atlanta and book un-air-conditioned rooms, their faith in the Olympic Committee's promises of fair weather and safety as unshakable as their trust in the ever-rising Dow. Were they lacking in such meteorologically uninformed certitude, could anything have convinced so many of them to spend small fortunes to travel across the globe to test their physical prowess through the ancient Greek tradition of eating, shopping, and watching pharmacologically enhanced athletes exert themselves in the summer sun in hopes of earning Wheaties endorsements?

* * *

Whereas I and my saplings had the benefits of nearly free water (which I did, however, have to haul to them, bucketful after bucketful), the sports-crazed found their options for rehydration effectively restricted to the expensive and none-too-healthy hornet attractants produced by Atlanta's very own Coca-Cola Company, which in a gesture guaranteed to impress upon the citizens of the world the benefits of unrestrained corporatism, had decided to establish a beverage-based martial law over the city

(with the understanding that anyone who dared to bring a Pepsico product to an Olympic venue would have a bottle cap launched into their posteriors).

For the manufacturer of a product that has been a (if not the) major contributor to obesity in the United States to sponsor a much-touted demonstration of human fitness seems counterintuitive (and nearly as ironic as a *Marlboro Man* Marathon), but such was the spirit of the times, when brains were boiled in a spend-happy fervor and logic held in lower esteem than the macarena.

* * *

While I was refining my skills in totalitarian housewifery, my father, brimming with his own flavor of sun-baked reasoning and with far too much free time on his hands (time previously spent listening to my mother's never-ending tales of woe), devised, quite without my knowledge, a plan to afford me a memorable summer. First, I (but not my younger brother or sister) would visit my just-recently soberized mother in Memphis during family counseling week with the intent of pleading for her health while stressing her value in the family and all the reasons she needed to stay on the wagon. Second, I would attend, for the first time, the torturous childhood rite of passage of 4-H camp, where I would presumably befriend (and be befriended by) the same Rebel Flag-waving, Skoal-dipping, faux-Southerners I had so politely avoided the better part of my life.

* * *

Memphis, unlike Atlanta, was spared the worst ravages of Sherman's march, '70s era child killers, and the improvements of unrestrained industry, and as such, retains a bit of the charm of the unreconstructed South—something quite absent from the wide-spots and Wal-Marts of home. To anyone as rustic as I was, any city would have seemed seemed fascinating, if not exotic, and

anywhere with more twenty thousand souls, a major metropolis.

Wherever humanity has seen fit to settle, metropolis, town, or yurt-filled camp, there is a certain number of unusually likable people, people adept at all the social niceties—conversation, humor, and an apparent friendliness that’s difficult for less socially adept members of society to muster—and a good percentage of them are alcoholics (not that there aren’t some pretty vicious ones as well), and among the most magnetic of them are the true Southern drunks. Such souls are just what I met, and was duly charmed by, in Memphis.

* * *

All of the apparent grace and certainty, which came so easily to these people in normal conversation, melted away in awkward confessional session after session. Around their parents they were surprisingly inept, squirming like scolded children; around their spouses, evasive. At first I assumed I was the problem, attributing their discomfort to being called to account in earshot of someone decades younger than they were, yet I sat impassively, and when a doctor glanced up at me and looking puzzled, said quietly, *I thought you left*, I assumed I had effectively blended into the wallpaper, not realizing how out of it the doctor still was.

Even in my naiveté, I began to see that addicts (even reasonably successful ones) and my peers had more in common than I initially thought: they could both project considerable, if not outright unbearable, confidence, making it easy to overestimate them, just as they could go from genuine concern for others to stunning, nearly all-consuming narcissism in an instant. The single greatest difference was that addicts had mastered manipulation; my peers, still learning.

Charismatic dentists who, so badly under the influence they could barely stand, had skillfully extracted (the wrong) teeth; former literature teachers who had stayed awake on meth for weeks before crashing into psychosis; and forcibly retired air traffic

controllers who had tried to swallow stress with alcohol and almost downed planes in the process—all seemingly intelligent, and all surprisingly adept at concealing their problems until they had reached catastrophic proportions—none of these people had been truly capable of running their own lives, much less anyone else's. Yet they managed to keep up the illusion of competence until one too many things went wrong, and their open secrets ceased to be secrets at all.

* * *

The more I heard of broken homes, lost jobs, failed businesses, and abandoned children, the more difficult I was finding the task of cheerleading for my mother's return. Lives and families had crumbled when so many of these people faltered, leaving a path of destruction and unhappiness in their wakes. But when my mother left, everything had gotten better. The house (all the way down to freshly washed baseboards) was cleaner, the meals hotter, the expenses better managed, and everyone (myself included) was happier. So much of the constant anxiety and headache—the ever-present sense of impending crisis—which I had taken to be an inevitable part of life was gone.

Leaving Memphis and a tearful, bumbling mother behind, I offered the best I could— Everything will be fine. And everything was until she returned.

* * *

I'm not quite sure what compelled my father to think camp was a good idea, just days after nerve-racking Memphis. Time off from us (his children) is the first thing that comes to mind, but given the fact that I had assumed most of his household chores (mowing, etc) in addition to those of my mother, such would have been doubtful logic. Rather, my father spoke of his own youth—camping, playing in a band, throwing cherry bombs under the cars of the elderly, and generally raising hell

and hanging out—with a gauzy sentimentality that made me suspect his memory had aged far worse than his forty-five years would suggest. I could only imagine how he thought my summer experiences would play out.

I cared little for the tedious pastimes of youth, and after years of playing amateur counselor and having just recently been given a crash course in household management and the DARE class from hell, I found birdhouses, bunks, and brats to be less pleasant than hearing earnest tales of foreclosed homes and confessions of surgeries gone awry. There was, it dawned upon me, no grand objective, no overriding logic in the program my father had devised for me, only the firmness of his belief that I somehow secretly wanted to follow in his slightly delinquent footsteps, for what he enjoyed I would enjoy, too.

* * *

There was no real plan in Atlanta either (at least to address late-night terrorism)—no bomb-sniffing dogs; no Guardsmen on patrol, rifles in hand; no omnipresent drones; no army of sensor-wielding technicians—only the security of a few ill-equipped guards. Yet less than a year after the bombing of the Murrah Building and only ten days after the unresolved mid-air explosion of Flight 800, thousands felt confident enough to attend a late night concert in vulnerable Centennial Olympic Park.

In retrospect the bombing seems almost inevitable.

The hero of the day, Richard Jewell, found himself vilified almost as soon as he was praised. Thus, scorn was the price of caution and forethought. Who else but a terrorist would be suspicious of unattended backpacks? How could any innocent man look at a milling crowd and see potential targets?

And caution be damned, we already knew he was guilty, as surely as we knew the sun would rise on our land of eternal prosperity and that the era of big government was over—speculations were evidence enough.

* * *

Nothing is quite as oblivious (or obnoxious) as fearless children, and nothing more dangerous (or useless) than oblivious children overgrown into adult form. At the best of times they are inattentive to reality, consumed by themselves and their constant indulgences. Denied these things, their impatience wells up in an instant. When crisis does come, and the first shot of adrenaline hits them, they, untempered, fly into a panic, and the great glassy-eyed herd sets to stampede, or they freeze, overwhelmed by alien feeling.

* * *

What happened in '96? There was no real backlash against the outsized advertisements, no quick reaction against the enthusiastic selling off of everything, and no reflexive panic or disillusionment—all that would come later, after greater acts of incompetence, when tawdry politics had grown tiresome and conspiracy theories could travel faster.

Was anyone the wiser for that summer, or did we just carry on, undeterred by catastrophe, syrup-fed and carefree, vision eluding us?

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CHRIS BAYS

Wittgenstein's Door

A chair is a ladder
and a ladder is heaven.

I sit in heaven
without a cushion.

Wittgenstein says
the door is a cushion.

I open it, walk through,
and fall to the floor.

Trappings

If thought of thoughts
melds with memory ...

If memory
dims the mind of thought ...

If the dimmed mind
perceives the present ...

If the present
reveals past trappings ...

If past trappings
lure the queen from king ...

If the lured queen
flees to distant squares ...

If distant squares
isolate the king ...

If the lone king
does not see the knight ...

**Qin Shi Huangdi:
China's Mad Emperor's Final Hour**

When eyes taste, my tongue sees;
when fingers hear, my ears feel.

Your eyes taste mercury
in me—my oceans, clouds, and rain.

My tongue sees silver waves
lifting clay soldiers to my sun.

Your fingers hear my earth moan
as I roll China into one.

My ears feel your lava dome
beneath my walled-in brain.

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THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

Raymond Landeros

Danny sat staring out the classroom window, oblivious to everything around him. He had been sitting like this since Sister Mary Damien had gone over the fourth, fifth and sixth commandments during the religion lesson. Danny knew that he should, and did, honor and respect his parents. He also knew that it was a sin to kill, although he wasn't sure if God would punish any of the soldiers that were fighting the war right at that moment in Europe and all over the Pacific.

When Sister Mary Damien came to the sixth commandment, Danny, and most of the other students in his third grade class, had no idea what adultery was, but they were equally sure it was a terrible sin or there wouldn't be a commandment forbidding it, whatever it was. Danny was glad when Amparo Villaseñor raised her hand and asked Sister Mary Damien what adultery was.

The young nun coughed nervously and folded her arms under the large, stiff white collar of her habit, and looked at her third grade students over her wire-rimmed glasses. Sister Damien was a tall, bespectacled, young nun who was intent upon succeeding in her first teaching assignment. But she was not sure how to explain adultery to her third grade students.

“Well,” she began, “you won’t have to worry about that for a long time, but it is a mortal sin.”

“But what *is* it Sister?” Amparo insisted.

“Okay,” said Sister, “I will tell you this much. When you are married, the priest asks you to promise to love your husband or wife until you die. And you must never love anyone else, except your family.”

“What if you do love somebody else? Will you go to hell?” asked Amparo, unwilling to let the subject drop. Sister Mary Damien sighed deeply, wondering why she had ever agreed to answer the question.

“Yes,” she said. “Adultery is a mortal sin and if you die with a mortal sin on your soul, you will go to hell when you die. Now open your arithmetic books to page 101.”

Danny just stared out the window. He felt a numbness that began at his feet and worked its way up to his head. He started to tremble, and he wanted to cry but he couldn’t let anyone see him cry, especially not the girls in his class. From a long way off he heard someone call his name.

“Daniel. Daniel. Daniel Marquez! Will you please answer me?” It was Sister Mary Damien. Danny snapped his head up, panic screwing up his face. “Daniel, will you please tell us how many times 3 goes into 21?” said Sister Damien impatiently.

Danny stood up but did not reply. Instead he bolted for the door of the classroom and ran into the schoolyard, out the driveway of Our Lady of Lourdes School to Rowan Avenue and crossed Fourth Street. He kept running until he reached his home on Eagle Street and flew into the kitchen where his mother stood ironing clothes.

“Mama, Mama,” he sobbed and threw his arms around her and held her as tightly as he could. “Mama, y-you and Manuel are going to hell when you die, Mama, please don’t die, please!”

Angelina Marquez looked down at her son in amazement and nearly knocked over the sprinkler bottle she was using to dampen the clothes she was ironing.

"Danny, what is the matter with you? Why are you home so early? It isn't even eleven o'clock yet."

"M-m-mom, you and Manuel, Mom, y-you and Manuel," sobbed Danny. "I th-thought you were just friends, b-b-but I know that you don't love Dad anymore and that's why you and Manuel are sinning, and that's why you and Manuel are going to hell when you die, and I don't want you to die, and I don't want you to go to hell."

Angie knelt down and hugged her son, smoothed his hair and patted his cheek in an effort to calm him down. She knew that her son was more mature than the average seven-year-old, and she also knew it was useless to deny that what he suspected was true, but how could she explain to Danny something that she herself didn't quite understand?

"Ya,ya," she said soothingly, "*calmate mi hijito*, you're going to make yourself sick, Danny. Go wash your face and lie down for awhile. After you've rested we'll talk."

"I left school without permission," said Danny softly, shifting his feet nervously. "I don't know what Sister Damien will say tomorrow."

Angie looked at her son with a sad smile on her face. "Don't worry about Sister Damien, Danny, I'll go talk to her later this afternoon. Go lie down on my bed now, *hijito*, we'll talk later."

While Danny was lying down, Angie sat in the living room of their small, modest home and reflected on the past eight years. She had tried to love Carlos and she thought that someday she really would. But the truth was that she had married him for selfish reasons. She wanted to leave her father's house and naively thought that by marrying Carlos she would be free of being depended on, of the drudgery of cooking, cleaning and raising her sister. She would lead a carefree life, doing as she pleased when she pleased. She would be able to visit her friends and they would come to visit her. They would go shopping and have lunch in restaurants, just like in the movies. She'd looked forward to the

changes that would make life bearable. Sadly, she realized that the only thing that had changed in her life was her address.

Angie was the fourth of five children, four girls and one boy. Her mother had died giving birth to her youngest sister, Isabel, in 1918 when Angie was only six years old. Her father was a kind, albeit strict man with very old-fashioned ideas of how to raise his son and daughters, old-fashioned even for the second decade of the twentieth century.

When Angie was fourteen years old, she graduated from Robert Louis Stevenson Junior High School in East Los Angeles. At fourteen she was expected to take over the household chores of cooking, washing and ironing for the rest of the family. She attended Garfield High School for the grand total of three weeks. She was not allowed to date unless her older brother, Michael, went along with her. Consequently, she didn't date. When she did go out, it was always with other girls of her age.

Her older sister, Josephine, was holding down a full-time job as a mattress seamstress in a downtown Los Angeles factory, and her sister Luz, the next oldest, was working at a Mexican restaurant on Rowan Avenue near First Street. Michael was a junior at Garfield High School, so it fell to Angie to stay home to do the housework and care for her eight year old sister, Isabel.

She sat contemplating how she would tell Danny about herself and Manuel and cried softly. She had been unhappy in her marriage to Carlos. She found that apart from the companionship she shared with her husband, her life had changed very little since she was fourteen. She was still expected to cook and clean and do all the other household chores she had come to despise as a girl in her father's house.

Life with Carlos hadn't been all drudgery and unhappiness, however. They'd had many good times with friends and family.

She smiled as she remembered the first Christmas they had shared. Carlos had brought a small tree into their home, and they had trimmed it with tinsel and six small ornaments. It was all they

had and Carlos had felt bad about not being able to afford a better, more luxurious tree. But they were living during the great depression, and he was fortunate to even have a job. Carlos had been good to her and, despite her loathing of housework, she was a very good housewife. *But there has to be more to life than cleaning, cooking and shopping,* she often thought.

Angie had been twenty-three years old when Danny was born. The only difference between her life at fourteen and her life at twenty-three was that the child she was now raising was her own, and the house she was keeping was her husband's and hers. She felt she had literally gone in circles. She wanted to escape, but how and to what? She loved her son, and yet she found his existence to be an impediment to any plan of escape that she might wish for.

Escape to what? Escape how? Is escape a fair word to use? Angie wanted to be an independent woman, free to make her own way in the world, to make her own decisions. She reflected upon the one decision that she had made, the decision that had led her to feel so trapped and so alone in her dilemma, admittedly a dilemma of her own making, but a dilemma none the less.

When Carlos had been drafted in late 1943, Angie felt relief instead of sorrow, unlike her best friend, Esther, who had gotten physically sick when her husband Jess had been drafted and sent overseas. *What kind of person am I to have this feeling of relief about something as terrible as a war? Young men all over the world are dying, and I feel a sort of gladness because Carlos has been drafted?* The guilt she felt at this thought was overwhelming. Of course she wouldn't want anything to happen to Carlos, but she felt a kind of liberation when he was drafted into the Army and left home.

She plucked nervously at the buttons of her blouse, twisted the handkerchief she was using to dry her tears, and let out a low, tearful whine from deep within. Absent-mindedly, she picked up a dust cloth and began to polish the coffee table.

What am I going to say to Danny? She hoped he would understand if she told him the truth. That she was lonely now that

Carlos had been drafted and was overseas, and that Manuel really meant nothing to her.

This is hopeless; Danny is only seven years old. How can I expect him to understand something I'm not sure I understand myself? she thought. She walked softly into her bedroom and gazed down at her son while he slept. She was standing in the same place that Danny had stood the previous Saturday afternoon. Angie had thought he wouldn't be home from the matinee at the neighborhood theater until much later. How could she have known that Danny would stuff himself with popcorn and get sick? Why didn't she hear the front door open, and why, oh why had she allowed Manuel to make love to her in that very same room? She still could see the bewildered look on Danny's face when he stood in the doorway of the small bedroom.

Danny woke, rubbed his eyes and went into the living room where his mother was sitting on the sofa. He sat beside her and she put her arm around him.

"Danny," she said, "I know you must think I'm a very bad person for what I've done. *Mi hijo*, I'm so sorry for what you saw last Saturday. Please try to forgive me," pleaded Angie. "Someday you'll..." she stopped herself. She was about to say, "someday you'll understand," but she remembered how much she hated hearing that phrase from her older sisters when she was younger.

"Someday you'll understand, Angie." It was said in a way that made Angie feel that her questions were unimportant and didn't merit an answer. She was made to feel as though she were incapable of having a thought in her head. Angie was determined not to make Danny feel that way. She took a deep breath and looked straight into Danny's face.

"I won't try to excuse myself Danny, what I did hurt you, and I wish I could take it all back. I wish it had never happened. But it did happen, Danny, and if I could I would make it all go away." She realized she was rambling now, but unable to stop herself.

"Things between your father and me hadn't been good for quite

awhile, even before he was drafted," said Angie, her words interrupted by short sobs. Danny had removed her arm from around his shoulder and sat up straight, listening to her. "We seemed to be arguing all the time for no good reason, and I began to wish I hadn't married him, Danny. I'm sorry to say this, but I regretted marrying him before you were born." The tears were falling freely down her cheeks now, but she stopped sobbing and continued to speak as though she were alone. "When you were born, I thought I would be happy with your father the way most married people are, and for a while I was." She stopped momentarily and dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. Danny was looking steadily at her.

"Why did you marry him?" asked Danny flatly. "If you didn't love him, why did you marry him?" His voice began to tremble, and Angie was afraid he would begin to cry again. But Danny controlled himself and continued to look at his mother.

Angie felt herself cringe at the directness of Danny's stare. She was determined not to lie or make excuses for her actions. "It's kind of hard to explain why, Danny, but I'll try my best to tell you all I can. You know that Grandpa had to work hard to support all of us, and that I had to take care of your aunt Izzy and look after the house and do all the housework while your other aunts were working, don't you?"

Angie stopped for breath before continuing. She didn't want Danny to interrupt with more questions until she had finished what she wanted to say. "I wanted to be able to live like other girls my age. I wanted to have fun, go to dances, and wear nice clothes. I wanted to have a job like my sisters and have my own money, but I couldn't do that while I lived at home."

Angie had stopped crying and got up from the sofa. She began to pace as she continued to tell Danny how she had felt as a young girl. "So when my friend, Viola, introduced me to your father I saw a chance to change my life. Oh Danny, I was such a stupid young girl, but I really thought I could have all the things I'd wished for.

Your dad was a great-looking man and he had a steady job. My father liked him and allowed me to go to a movie with him without my brother. I thought that at last I would be able to enjoy the things I'd only heard about from my friends, things like going to the movies or going to the park on Sundays on dates. Your dad even took me on a motorboat ride in Hollenbeck Park once. I was really enjoying life."

Angie's voice became softer now. She was reliving those days, and Danny could see that she was now talking more to herself than to him. "I was almost sixteen before I was allowed to go to see a movie without being chaperoned by my brother. And then I had to be home before four o'clock from a downtown movie, Danny. I didn't even have time to get anything to eat with my girl friends." She stopped, remembering how she had begged her father to allow her to go downtown to the Los Angeles Theater. She had wanted to see the movie *Wings* so badly. Clara Bow, the "It" girl was starring, and Angie, like most other teen-age girls of the time, worshipped the Hollywood star. But Angie would never have been allowed to go to a movie that starred someone who her father thought immoral, so she made up a story to tell her father about another movie that she would be seeing. She'd forgotten what movie she said she would be going to, but the story worked and her father gave in and let her go with Viola and a few other girls, with the understanding that she would be home by four that Sunday afternoon.

Danny squirmed on the couch and his movement brought Angie's attention back to the present. "I guess I'm not telling this story very good, am I?"

Danny shrugged and Angie went on. "I'm trying to tell you how things were with me, Danny, and why I felt that I had to get away from home and try to be myself. I didn't realize at the time that things weren't going to be any different than before. I was so young."

Danny again looked straight at his mother and in a flat voice

said, "Mom, why do you keep saying 'I was so young,' like that? You said you wouldn't make any excuses for what happened. Dad was young too, wasn't he? Don't you think he should have known how you felt? And what about me? Did you have me just because you were young and you wanted another change?" Danny was on the verge of crying again, but this time the tears were of rage. He couldn't put into words what he was feeling.

"No!" cried Angie angrily. "How can you think that of me?" Her denial sounded hollow even to her own ears and she wished she hadn't snapped at Danny like she did. Danny also regretted having spoken so sharply to his mother. The emotional stress of the past few hours had taken their toll on both him and his mother.

"I'm sorry Mom. I'm sorry. I just don't know what to do, Mom." They were both crying now.

"Yes, me too, Danny, I'm sorry, *mi hijo*." Angie sat down next to Danny and put her arm around his shoulder, pleased when he made no attempt to remove it. They sat quietly for a moment. After a while Angie got up and said, "I guess I'll go see Sister Damien now. She's probably wondering what made you leave in such a hurry."

Danny looked up and gave her a sheepish smile. "Yeah, I guess she is," he said.

The smile signaled to Angie that the immediate crisis was over and she sighed deeply. "I'll be back in a while. You'd better wash your face now."

"You too," Danny said. "Your eyes are all red and you have some black stuff on your cheeks."

Angie gave a relieved little laugh and wiped her eyes. "Danny, in a way I'm very glad we talked like this today. I don't think we'll ever have to talk about something like this again." She would have liked to ask him not to tell his father about her misadventure, but decided it would be best if she allowed him to make that decision for himself.

From that day Danny and Angie were very close, closer than they'd ever been. They would go downtown to movies and stop at the Grand Central Market to eat pastrami sandwiches and sometimes they went to Olvera Street, an attractive and historical part of Los Angeles. It was home to the original plaza of *La Ciudad de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles*. There were also many shops and small eateries that served traditional Mexican foods, such as tacos, tamales and other familiar dishes on Olvera Street, and the first Catholic Church ever built in Los Angeles was located across from the Plaza on Main Street. There were colorful shops that sold hand tooled leather goods and others that sold wooden toys. Danny's favorite part of a trip to Olvera Street was buying the hot piñones from a vendor, who sold hot buttered popcorn and peanuts from a gaily painted cart that boasted an open-flame, gas popcorn maker enclosed in a glass window. The kernels of corn would pop out of the popper and fall onto the bottom surface of the enclosure. The man would scoop the popcorn into paper bags and pour melted butter on top, making the sides of the bag dark and oily. In a compartment beneath the popcorn enclosure, there were bags of warm, salted pumpkin seeds and sunflower seeds, known more familiarly to Danny and his friends as "polly seeds." The *piñones* or pine nuts were Danny's favorite. Those times were to live in Danny's memory as the happiest of his life.

In March of 1944 Angie was offered a job in a print shop on Second Street in downtown Los Angeles. She talked to Danny about it and after a while he agreed with her that they could use the extra money to supplement the monthly allotment check they received from Carlos. Angie arranged to have Danny stay with her neighbor, Blanca Grijalva, from the time he left school until Angie arrived to take him home at 5:30 every evening. This was fine with Danny, since he and Tony, Blanca's youngest son, had been friends since they were both in diapers; and since they both went to Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School, it was convenient for Angie to leave him with the Grijalvas.

Angie's tasks at the print shop were varied. She learned to operate the paper cutter and to distinguish between the various grades of paper used. In time she learned to order inks, solvents, and the various paper products necessary for the small shop. She liked what she was doing because it gave her a sense of worth and importance. She was no longer just a housewife. She was a working woman.

Angie looked at herself in the mirror before she left the house. She smiled at her reflection. *Not bad at all for a thirty-one year old*, she thought as she buckled the wide plastic belt around her slim waist. She looked admiringly at the way her slacks hugged her hips and at the way her long black hair hung down her back in the knitted snood she wore. Her light skin contrasted nicely with her hair and her hazel eyes. She wore very little makeup, just a touch of lipstick and rouge on her cheeks. Her nails were carefully filed and kept short and were polished with the latest color from Tangee, the popular cosmetic company that advertised in all the movie magazines. She winked at herself and walked into the kitchen where Danny was eating his breakfast of Cream of Wheat and toast.

"I'm leaving now, *hijo*. Behave at Blanca's. I'll try to get home early."

"Okay Mom, see you tonight," said Danny, and went back to eating his breakfast.

Angie enjoyed walking to First Street every morning to catch the "P" car. As she walked north on Indiana Avenue, men in cars honked their horns appreciatively at her. She feigned annoyance but she liked the attention she attracted. At work she was aware of the admiring glances she got from the male customers at the front counter where Mr. Barnaby, her boss, took down orders. Sometimes she would give the customers a flirtatious smile while she loaded the paper cutter, then quickly look away again. Most of the men were well over forty, since all of the younger men, it seemed, had been inducted into the Armed Forces. Still, Angie was

flattered that she was being admired by the men no matter what their age.

Danny walked the three blocks to school with Tony every morning and back home every afternoon. After doing their homework they would play in Tony's backyard, or Danny would write a letter to his father, until Angie came home and started dinner. He wrote at least once every two weeks. He would tell his father all about the many Defense Saving Stamps he had bought and that he would soon be able to exchange them for War Bonds. He would never mention the incident he had witnessed between Angie and Manuel; in fact that episode in his young life had all but faded away. All in all it was a happy time for Danny. If it hadn't been wartime, his father would be home and Danny's life would have been perfect.

Once in a while Danny and Tony would walk up First Street to meet Angie as she got off the street car. Sometimes he would go alone and he and Angie would walk home together singing "Mairzy Doats" or some other popular song and laugh at each other's inability to carry a tune.

* * *

On a Monday afternoon when Mr. Barnaby had gone out for a haircut, a Mr. Nolan came into the shop to pick up the forms he had ordered the week before. He worked for a small insurance company in the Bradley Building on Broadway, just around the corner from the print shop. He was a tall, well-dressed, good-looking man of about forty. He had been in the shop on a few other occasions, and Angie had admired his rugged good looks and blond wavy hair.

Angie was opening the mail and looked up as he came into the shop.

"Excuse me Miss," he said, getting Angie's attention.

"Yes sir," she said brightly, "what can I do for you?"

"Could I pick up the forms I ordered last week? Paul called

earlier and said they were ready. Is Paul in?"

"He's out right now, but I can help you." Angie turned and went to the large shelves built into the rear wall. The completed orders were kept there until the customers came to claim them. Mr. Barnaby kept them wrapped in plain brown paper with the customer's name written in black wax pencil.

"What is the name, please?" asked Angie coyly. She knew it was Nolan but didn't want to seem forward.

"Nolan," he replied.

"Oh, yes, here it is." Angie had to stand on her toes to reach the packages on the top shelf. "Oof!" she exclaimed as she wrestled the two stacked packages from the shelf. They were heavier than she had thought and the top packet fell to the floor, bursting the cover paper. Mr. Nolan quickly lifted the wooden counter leaf and hurried to help her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I'm sorry about the package tearing open. I hope none of the forms have been torn." Angie was embarrassed and nervously began to run her fingers through her hair.

"No, nothing is torn." Mr. Nolan was smiling at her discomfort. "Please don't feel bad on my account."

Just then Mr. Barnaby walked into the shop and looked quizzically at the scene before him. Angie quickly explained what had happened, and Mr. Barnaby expressed concern about her well-being.

"You've got to be more careful Angie. Use the ladder when things are too high for you," said Mr. Barnaby.

"I'm afraid I caused the young lady to overreach herself getting my order from the shelf. I'm sorry," said Mr. Nolan. Again he smiled at Angie and apologized for having caused her any trouble. Angie didn't say anything and went back to what she was doing before Mr. Nolan had arrived. He and Mr. Barnaby finished their business and he left.

For the rest of the afternoon Angie couldn't get the memory of

his politeness and his gentle manner out of her thoughts. She had never been spoken to in such a way and it made a great impression on her. He was the first gringo she had ever met who didn't make her feel inferior. Even in junior high school she had had the feeling that all the gringo boys and girls regarded her and her friends as somewhat below them. Many times she'd heard them refer to her and her friends as *dumb greasers*, and most of the teachers seemed to take it for granted that she and the other Mexican-American students were unable or unwilling to learn any of the lessons. The one exception was Mr. Heslet, who took an interest in all of his students and encouraged Angie when she had shown an interest in literature and recommended a few books to her. Unfortunately that fervor had waned in later years, and most of Angie's reading now was limited to movie magazines.

That Friday Mr. Nolan came into the shop at noon and asked Angie if she would like to have lunch with him. Unsure, Angie took a sidelong glance at Mr. Barnaby for approval.

"It is your lunch hour," he said. "You don't need my permission."

Angie nodded her assent to Mr. Nolan and removed the blue smock she wore over her street clothes. She was wearing a loose-fitting, white rayon blouse and a pair of tight blue slacks.

They walked up Broadway to First Street and into the Redwood Restaurant on the corner. She had passed the well-known restaurant many times in her life but never dared to enter. She was sure the prices in such a grand restaurant were out of her reach, not to mention her social status. She was impressed with the white linen cloths on the tables and the attentive hostess who seemed to know her companion very well.

"What'll it be today, Phil?" asked the blonde waitress in a friendly tone when they were seated. She smiled curiously at Angie and asked if she knew what she wanted while Phil made up his mind.

"I'll have whatever he's having." Angie had never been in a

restaurant as nice as this and didn't want to embarrass herself ordering something too expensive. Her lunch usually consisted of a hot dog or hamburger at a small luncheonette on Second Street or a sandwich brought from home.

"Two roast beef sandwiches and iced tea. I hope that'll be all right with you, Angie."

"That suits me," she said.

When the waitress left to fill the order Angie looked across the table at Phil.

"Your name is Phillip Nolan?"

"Yes, Phillip Nolan," he replied.

"The Man Without a Country," observed Angie.

"What?" asked Phil. "What makes you say that?"

"The book, *The Man Without a Country*, the main character is named Phillip Nolan," said Angie.

"Really? I never heard of it," said Phil.

Angie smiled inwardly. *So, they're not all as smart as I thought*, she mused to herself. *Thank you, Mr. Heslet.*

The rest of the lunch hour passed in pleasant small talk. Angie felt at ease with Phil. He didn't seem at all like she thought he would be. He didn't display any of the superiority she assumed all gringos did. As they made their way back to the print shop, Phil asked if she were free that Saturday night to go to a party with him. His sister was celebrating her birthday, and Phil didn't want to go alone.

Angie shook her head no.

"It's nice of you to ask me, Phil, but we've just met. Besides," she shook her left hand playfully at him, "you must have noticed my marriage ring. My husband is in the Army overseas."

* * *

The 3900 block of East Fourth Street is a dead-end. The guard rail at the end of the pavement is painted with black and white stripes of luminous paint, and has reflectors dotting its face. On the

other side of that railing is a bluff. This area was known in the 1940s as “The Cliffs” by all the residents of that neighborhood. Some parents warned their children not to play on the cliffs because of the danger of falling and breaking an arm or a leg. Others warned of the danger of being taken away by *La Llorona*, the Mexican version of the bogey-man, never to be seen again. Of course, these warnings only served to make the area more attractive to the kids, who dared each other to venture onto the bluff.

“You’re chicken-shit if you don’t go play on the cliffs with us.”

“You don’t have a hair on your ass if you won’t go with us.”

They played soldier and cowboys and Indians on the bluff. Long grass grew in abundance, and after a rain the grass could be pulled out and the clumps of mud that clung to the roots could be molded round and thrown at imaginary enemies. The long blades of grass were like plumes of smoke as the mud bombs sailed through the air, accompanied by sounds made by the thrower. “Eeeee...Kaboom!”

Danny, Tony, and two or three other boys often played on the cliff. They built a fort from discarded orange crates and cardboard boxes they’d found lying in the alleys and streets of the neighborhood. The fort could represent anything from a tank to an enemy pillbox during their games of soldier.

Danny often imagined himself as his father during these games. He’d pretend he was sneaking up on a German machine gun nest and throw one of the grass grenades at the fort he and the others had built. In his mind he pictured his father doing the same thing in Europe with a real grenade and being awarded a medal for bravery.

The cliffs were a magical place where many battles and gunfights took place. It was a place where neighborhood boys went to throw stones at stray cats, lizards—and each other. The imaginations of the young boys turned the area into the Sahara or the beaches of Hawaii or Guadalcanal. A broomstick was a rifle one

minute and a white horse the next. A boy could be a Marine fighting in the Pacific on one day and a dashing Arabian Prince the next, riding his horse across desert dunes to rescue Maria Montez from an evil Sheik. These imaginative adventures depended greatly on what movie they'd seen the preceding Saturday afternoon at the Jewel Theater.

Danny, Tony, and Johnny Soto, another schoolmate, were walking home on a Tuesday afternoon after playing on the cliffs. They were tired and happy and splattered with mud from their foreheads to the soles of their shoes, and they wore that mud with pride. After all, they had successfully defended their fort from being destroyed by an enemy army made up of five other boys that were armed with many mud grenades. Using a tactic they had seen in a war movie, Danny and Tony left Johnny to man the fort. Johnny kept barking orders loudly as though the other two boys were still inside the makeshift structure while Tony and Danny, unseen, sneaked out of the fort and circled the opposing group of boys from behind. They pelted them mercilessly with a supply of mud grenades of their own. They celebrated their victory with whoops and shouts of "We won, we won."

As they walked down Eagle Street they saw Angie walking down the hill from Indiana Avenue. Danny ran to meet her, and they walked home together.

"What's the matter, Mom?" he asked. "You look kinda sad."

"Just tired," said Angie.

For the past few days Angie had felt a melancholy loneliness. The lunch hour she had spent with Phil had made her realize how starved she was for adult company. She'd enjoyed that hour more than she could say. It was the first time she had gone anywhere without Danny for a long while. It was nice to have someone to talk to that was close to her own age. She hadn't had any real contact with any adults other than Mr. Barnaby and Blanca Grijalva since the incident that had caused her to break off with Manuel a few months before, and she missed having someone to talk to, to

confide in, and even to use cuss words to once in a while. She could talk to her sisters, she supposed, but they hadn't been very friendly since they'd found out about Manuel. Angie suspected they were secretly jealous but couldn't prove it.

Angie hadn't thought about Manuel for a while. The affair with him had been a short one. They'd gone out a few times, and she had enjoyed his company, but he really hadn't meant much to her. She had known Manuel since childhood. They had both gone to Rowan Avenue Elementary School and on to Stevenson Junior High together.

Manuel had been born with a shrunken left leg that made him limp slightly. This defect had caused him to be classified as Four-F by the Draft Board and left him feeling less of a man because he was not in the war. Angie felt kind of sorry for him and agreed to go out with him, maybe out of pity or loneliness. They dated for about a month, telling Danny they were good friends. Danny suspected nothing. He even liked Manuel and sometimes went with them to the park or movies. All of that changed on that fateful Saturday afternoon when Danny had come home unexpectedly.

Angie sighed heavily as she scraped the dishes into the plastic triangular garbage tray and piled them into the sink. Danny took the tray out to the garbage pail in the back yard and emptied it. He wondered what could be wrong with his mother. She didn't seem to be herself lately.

Later that evening as they listened to the war news, Angie suddenly got up from the sofa and went outside. She rarely smoked and now, with cigarettes so hard to get, she smoked even less. But she wished she had one now. *Goddamn this goddamn war*, she thought. The war had made her realize things about herself that she wasn't proud of. She felt guilty about the sense of relief she had experienced when Carlos had been drafted. She felt guilty about Manuel and about hurting Danny so badly. The war had affected everyone in one way or another. So why was she feeling so sorry for herself? She walked slowly up the walk to the

gate of the picket fence.

“Damn!” she said aloud. “I hate this damn war and everything about it.”

Danny was at the screen door of the house watching his mother as she kicked at the walkway. He opened the door slowly and cautiously approached his mother at the gate. He knew she was upset but had no idea why. He wanted to comfort her the way she comforted him when he was troubled. Danny put his hand on Angie’s shoulder as she stood at the gate. She put her hand on his, and they both stood there, looking out at the street, saying nothing.

After a while Angie turned and put an arm around Danny and smoothed his hair.

“*No te preocupas, mi hijo*—don’t worry I’m okay, she said, and they went back inside to listen to Fibber McGee and Molly.

* * *

The following Saturday afternoon Angie took Danny to the shopping district on Brooklyn Avenue in Boyle Heights. They took the “P” car west to Soto Street and walked north two blocks to the popular shopping area. Angie had recently received the latest ration book and would now be able to buy shoes for Danny and herself.

As they neared the corner of Soto and Brooklyn, the air was heavy with the delicious aromas coming from Canter’s Delicatessen. They browsed through a few shops and looked in the window at Zellerman’s Mens Store where a sale on draped pants was being held. These were the trousers worn by many of the youths involved in the “Zoot Suit” riots in June of the previous year. The trousers were 28 inches at the knee and tapered down to twelve or thirteen inches at the ankle.

Angie pulled Danny away from the window when she saw that he was looking admiringly at the outlandish *Pachuco* costumes. She had enough to worry about without Danny wanting to be like the gangsters that wore the Zoot Suit and

hung around on street corners.

Miller's Shoe Store boasted an X-ray machine that was used to fit shoes correctly to the feet. Danny stood on a small platform and inserted his feet into the spaces provided for them. The clerk switched on the machine, and both he and Angie were able to see just how Danny's toes fit inside his shoes. Unfortunately for Danny, the store did not have his size in the pointed, two-tone brown and white oxfords he wanted, and he had to give in to his mother's wishes to get a more practical, less flashy pair.

After buying the shoes, Angie browsed around the National Dollar store and bought a few things for the house—a new oil cloth for the kitchen table, a set of salt and pepper shakers and some thumb tacks she used for putting up recipes on the wall.

It was a pleasant day, and they strolled west on Brooklyn, browsing through the many shops on that street. Danny was curious about the bearded men wearing the small caps that covered only the backs of their heads. It was a warm day, and yet these men wore long black coats. All Angie could offer by way of explanation was that they were Jewish and Saturday for them was like Sunday for Catholics. This meant nothing to Danny, but he didn't pursue it.

At a newspaper stand Danny observed loudly, "Look, Mom, that paper is in Chinese." Angie looked and blushed red as she saw the paper Danny had referred to. It was a Jewish language paper.

The man at the stand smiled understandingly at her and said, "Please don't be embarrassed. I guess that it would look like Chinese to him," and smiling once more, he gave Danny a piece of hard candy wrapped in cellophane. Angie thanked him and, still blushing, crossed the street and headed east.

"Save that candy until after we eat lunch," she said irritably.

They went into Canters Delicatessen and ordered corned beef sandwiches on rye bread, potato salad and dill pickle. Angie had coffee, and Danny, out of curiosity rather than thirst, ordered a cream soda. He had no idea what it might taste like, but the idea of cream in a soda fascinated him.

As they looked around for a place to sit, Angie heard someone call her name from a table in the rear of the restaurant. It was Esther Moya, her old friend whom she hadn't seen for a long while. She was sitting at a table near the rear wall.

"Come over and sit with me," said Esther. Angie and Danny took their trays over and joined her.

"It's been such a long time since I've seen you!" exclaimed Esther excitedly. "Don't tell me that's Danny! *Como has crecido Daniel,*" she said, showing surprise at Danny's stature. "The last time I saw you, you were just a baby, and now look at you."

Danny cringed at the grating sound of her voice. "Hi," was all that he could manage to say. Angie was very happy to see her old friend and they chatted away about old times and other old friends. Danny stayed silent, answering the few questions asked of him with a polite yes or no.

"Have you heard anything from Jess?" asked Angie.

"Not lately, you know how it is. You don't hear from them for a few weeks and then, when the mail catches up, you seem to get a letter every day."

"Yeah," agreed Angie. "I haven't heard from Carlos in a while either."

"Angie, we've got so much to talk about. It's too bad I promised my mother-in-law I'd be at her house at four today. Do you think we could get together soon? I'd really like to talk to you about a lot of things." She looked at Danny, who was concentrating mightily on his sandwich and trying not to be noticed by Esther.

"Oday ouya inkthay eway ouldcay alktay ithway outay idskay?"

"Yes," said Angie with an amused smile. "Why don't you come over next Saturday? We can have coffee and *pan dulce* and talk as much as we like."

"Well," said Esther, "I'll sure be there, I'm really looking forward to it. I'd better get going to Bertha's now. Bye, Danny, see you soon."

"Yeah, bye," said Danny, sullenly. He hated it when grown-ups

used that silly pig-latin if they didn't want kids to understand them. *They think they're so smart. As if I didn't understand what they were saying, he thought, but said nothing.*

Danny could see that after talking with Esther his mother was in a better mood than she had been in for a long time and didn't want to ruin her good humor. Angie was smiling and talking to him animatedly, saying how she had really enjoyed seeing her old friend and how they had been so close before Carlos and Jess had been drafted into the Army. Danny was glad and relieved that Angie was acting more like herself now, and the street-car ride home was a happy one.

The work week went well for Angie. She found herself humming while at work, and Mr. Barnaby was happy to see that whatever had been troubling her during the past week seemed to have disappeared.

Phil came into the shop on Tuesday and asked Angie if she would go to lunch with him again. She agreed, but only if he would allow her to pay for her own meal and that they would go to the restaurant in the basement of the Grand Central Market on Broadway.

"We'll go dutch, okay?"

"Okay," said Phil, amusedly. "I'll agree to anything for a beautiful young woman."

Angie was pleased he said woman. She cringed whenever a customer, male or female, came into the shop and used a cloyingly sweet voice, calling her sweetie, or dear or girlie, and referring to her as the girl when they spoke to Mr. Barnaby about her. She always wanted to scream at them, *"I'm a woman, damn you! I'm married and have a seven-year-old son. My husband is in Europe, and I'm trying my damndest to make ends meet. Are these the things a girl would do?"* But of course, she never did.

The lunch counter at the Grand Central was crowded with shoppers and noisy diners. The waitresses were fast, familiar, and

charmingly profane.

“C’mon honey, what’ll it be? I’m busier’n a one legged dancer in a conga line.”

Similar wise cracks were made by all the waitresses and were always accompanied by a warm, friendly smile.

Angie and Phil were in luck and found two seats at the counter. Phil removed his hat and hung it on the metal hook on the back of the leather seat.

“You know, I’ve worked across the street for nearly two years, and this is the first time I’ve ever been here,” said Phil. “It’s quite a place, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, my sisters and I used to come here to shop for vegetables and fruit when we were kids.”

After eating their lunch of grilled cheese sandwiches and lemonade, they strolled through the aisles of the large market, enjoying the aromas of the fresh fruits and vegetables before returning to work. Phil told Angie how much he enjoyed having lunch with her and again asked her if she would go out with him.

“Maybe we could just go to movie or something, I would really like to spend a little time with you.”

Angie turned away. “Look Phil, you know I’m married. And I have a son. I can’t go out with you. I like having lunch with you and talking with you, but can’t we just leave it like that? Let’s not start something that could end up hurting other people and ourselves.”

Phil gave her a shocked look. “A son? You have a son?”

“Yes, I have a seven year-old son. His name is Danny, and he’s making his First Holy Communion on Mother’s Day.”

Phil remained silent. He had only wanted to spend some time with Angie, and even though she was married he didn’t think it was out of the question. It was wartime, and nearly every man he knew was having an affair with married lonely women whose husbands were away. He could deal with the guilt feelings about her husband being away and fighting in Europe. He wasn’t about

to let himself get serious about Angie, no matter how beautiful she was. Phil knew perfectly well that the war wouldn't last forever and that her husband would be coming home. He wasn't looking for anything permanent. He really liked Angie and enjoyed her company, but the existence of a son complicated matters for Phil. A dalliance with a beautiful, young, married woman whose husband was away for an unspecified time was one thing, but becoming the cause of distress between a mother and son was quite another.

* * *

On Saturday afternoon Esther arrived at Angie's house. Angie greeted her warmly and asked her to sit down on the camel-back couch in the living room. Danny appeared in the doorway from the kitchen to say hello.

"Don't worry," he said, "I'm not going to stay. Me and Tony are going to the show right now." It was difficult for him to keep sarcasm out of his voice. He hadn't forgotten Esther's feeble attempt to exclude him from the adult conversation of the week before by using pig Latin.

"Danny," Angie said harshly, "*no seas malcriado*—there is no need to be rude."

Danny quickly apologized to Esther, although it was an insincere apology. Angie handed him a quarter and told him to be home as soon as the movie was over. Esther dug into her handbag and handed Danny another quarter.

"Have a good time," she said. "I hope we can be friends."

Danny looked at his mother before accepting the coin. Angie nodded her approval, and Danny took the quarter with a mumbled "Thank you," and went out the door.

"He's getting so big, and he looks so much like Carlos," said Esther.

"Yeah, and he's making his First Holy Communion on Mother's Day. That's only a week from tomorrow. There is so much to be done in just a week." Angie brought a plate piled with *pan dulce*,

the Mexican sweet bread she had purchased that morning. "It's kind of warm today, so I made lemonade instead of coffee. I hope its okay."

"Sure," Esther said, "I hope you didn't use too much sugar. I know how scarce it is, especially now with this rationing."

Angie complimented Esther on her stylish clothes. The beige dress with the padded shoulders was matched nicely with a large beige hat with a wide white band and was worn seductively low over Esther's left brow. Her high-heeled shoes were two-toned brown and white, and around her neck was a thin gold chain from which hung a small emerald pendant set in gold. She looked beautiful, and Angie admired her friend's appearance.

"It's too bad we can't get stockings anymore because of all the shortages, but I've gotten pretty good with these liquid stockings," Esther said brightly, sticking out one leg and turning it from side to side admiringly.

"Yes, you sure have. They look like real stockings except they don't have seams."

They talked for a while, remembering the dances, parties and picnics they had attended with their husbands and other young married couples, and they reminisced about Esther and Jess's wedding. Carlos had been the best man and Angie had been one of the bridesmaids. It was soon after the wedding that Jess had been drafted into the Army. Esther produced a package of Camel cigarettes, and they smoked, drank lemonade and nibbled at the pastry.

Angie turned the radio on and they listened to music while they talked of happier times. The small talk went on for another few minutes until Esther suddenly turned the conversation to Jess. She complained that she hadn't heard from him for a long time and she was very lonely.

"*Sabes bien como lo quiero*, Angie, I do love him but the nights are so long and lonely. The weekends especially." Esther played with the emerald she wore round her neck and looked away for a

moment. She lit another cigarette before saying anything more. "Angie, how do you handle the loneliness? I know that you have Danny and a family, but--you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean." She told Esther about Manuel and how Danny had seen them in bed together and about the long talk she'd had with her son. "Danny thinks I don't love Carlos anymore," she said slowly.

"Is it true?"

"It may have been then, but I'm not sure now. Ever since I talked to Danny and told him the reasons I had married Carlos, I've been thinking about how selfish I must look to my own son. Do you know what he said when I told him how I'd married because I wanted to leave home? That I made a mistake because I was young?"

Esther puffed on her cigarette and waited for Angie to continue.

"He said Carlos was young too, and wanted to know if I'd had a baby just because I was young. God, I felt so stupid. It took a seven-year-old boy to make me see how foolish and selfish I am."

Esther leaned over to crush out her cigarette in the ash tray on the coffee table.

"Maybe you are, and maybe you aren't. You know the stories we all hear about the guys overseas and the women they meet. How do we know what they're doing, huh?"

Angie was taken aback by Esther's sudden aggressive attitude. What had happened to make her friend seem so angry? "We don't know," said Angie, "and we never will know, and I really don't want to know. Listen, Esther, we are here at home and we're known by many people who also know our husbands. When Jess and Carlos come home do we really want any of these people to know things about us that could hurt our husbands, not to mention risk our marriages? I don't know if my sisters will say anything to Carlos, but the one I'm really worried about is Danny."

"You don't think Danny will say anything, do you?"

"That's not what I'm worried about," Angie said. "What really

worries me is Danny's suffering through this. I've really made him go through hell, and I don't want him to think he has to lie for me. Whatever happens, I'll just have to live with it."

Esther's eyes began to tear. She fumbled through her purse for a hankie. "Oh Angie, I wish I had half the guts you do."

"What're you talking about? What guts?"

"Oh hell, Angie!" exclaimed Esther. "I'm so ashamed. I've been going out with this guy at the war plant where I work. He treats me well, and he buys me things like this emerald. Angie, I feel like a damned whore. He's a supervisor at the plant, and he's married, too." She paused for a moment. "What am I going to do, Angie? I-I'm pregnant." With that Esther broke down and cried. Great sobs escaped from deep down inside her. "What am I going to do?" she wailed. "When I start showing, my mother-in-law is sure to write to Jess and tell him. I don't want to lose Jess, Angie. Help me, please help me."

Esther was sobbing uncontrollably, and Angie could do nothing but cradle her in her arms and rock her like a baby.

After a few minutes Esther calmed down. Smiling embarrassedly at Angie, she got up from the couch. "I'm sorry, Angie. I had to tell somebody. I do feel a lot better now."

"I wish there was something I could do to help you"

"You have helped, Angie, just by listening and not telling me I'm a bad woman. I don't know who else I could have come to. Thanks. Thanks a lot."

"Well, what are you going to do now?" asked Angie.

Esther heaved a big sigh. "Just like you said, whatever happens happens. I'll just have to live with it."

The excited voices of Danny and his friends playing in the front yard came into the living room. Angie looked out the screen door and chuckled at the boys running at each other with their arms extended outward, and making noises like machine guns. *They must have seen another war movie about airplanes*, she thought.

Esther came out of the bedroom where she had been repairing her

makeup. "Thanks again for everything, Angie. I think I'll be okay now."

"I'll walk you out to the street," Angie said. "I don't want you to get gunned down by one of those boys outside." They both laughed and went out.

"Gee, who's that?" said Willie Gomez, one of Danny's friends.

"Nobody. She's just a friend of my Mom."

"She's really pretty," Willie said.

"Yeah, I guess so. C'mon, are you playing or not?"

At the gate Esther touched Angie's arm affectionately and told her again how much help she had been.

"Next Sunday is Mother's Day," said Angie. "Why don't you come to Danny's Holy Communion? We are going to have dinner at my sister Izzy's to celebrate with the rest of the family after. I'm sure they would all like to see you."

Esther opened the gate and stepped out onto the sidewalk. "Quizás que si. We'll see."

Angie watched her walk up the hill toward Indiana Avenue. She looked so small and lonely, Angie felt a tug at her heart. She went back into the house where the radio was still playing and Dinah Shore was singing, "I'll Walk Alone". Angie sat on the couch and cried.

* * *

On Monday morning Phil waited until he knew Mr. Barnaby was at lunch and went into the print shop. Angie smiled when she saw him. "Hi," she said brightly.

"Hello, Angie," said Phil, unsmiling. "How is everything?" Angie sensed something was bothering him. "Is there something wrong?"

"Angie, I feel I owe you an apology. I know I've been pestering you to go out with me, and I know too that it's been unfair of me to do so. You see, I didn't know that you had a son. I realize I was out of line in asking you out, and I want you to know it won't happen

again.” He knew he was babbling but couldn’t stop himself. “I remember how I felt when my mother divorced my father and was going out with other men. I wouldn’t want to come between you and your son. But I hope we can still be friendly.”

Angie was astounded. Phil never ceased to amaze her. His words of apology were the kindest she’d ever heard. She didn’t know what to say. No one had ever spoken to her in such a way.

“Sure,” she said, and she knew how stupid and unfeeling she must have sounded. “And thank you for understanding my feelings,” she added hastily. Phil stuck out his hand and Angie took it. They shook hands amiably and Phil left.

With mixed emotions Angie watched him leave. Phil had been right about pressuring her into dating him. She didn’t want to start anything that could develop into problems for her, Carlos, and most of all Danny. Yet she couldn’t help fantasizing what might have been if she had met a man like Phil before marrying Carlos.

The rest of the week was spent in preparation for Danny’s First Holy Communion Ceremony. Angie took Danny to the May Company bargain basement for his suit, shirt and tie that he was to wear for the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Her sister Izzy lived on Lanfranco Street, three blocks from Angie, where the celebration dinner was to be held. Izzy and Angie busied themselves planning for the event. Angie’s other sisters, Luz and Josephine, and her brother Michael were also going to attend with their spouses and children.

It was shaping up to be a happy affair. Danny couldn’t contain his exuberance. He couldn’t wait for Sunday to arrive. It was worse than waiting for Christmas. On Tuesday afternoon, right after school, he and Tony went to the First Street Store where they bought their mothers gifts for their special day. Danny had been saving from his allowance for nearly a month, and with the quarter Esther had given him he had saved nearly a dollar and a half in the Prince Albert Tobacco can he kept under his bed.

Finally the long-awaited day arrived. The days of practicing the procession down the center aisle of the church toward the altar rail, girls to the right, boys to the left, were over. Sister Damien had said it would be the happiest day of their lives, and Danny was sure it would be. He walked solemnly down the aisle with the other children, his hands held together in prayer. The white satin bow on his left arm matched the white carnation he wore in the buttonhole of his lapel.

Danny passed the pew where his mother, aunts, and uncles sat. *How handsome he is, they thought. He looks so much like his father, and see how happy he looks.*

Angie beamed proudly as her son passed her and gave her a barely perceptive nod. She was very happy for him, but her happiness was clouded by the events of Thursday evening.

Angie had been making dinner when there was a knock on the door. When she opened it she saw Florence, Esther's cousin, standing on the porch. Her eyes were red and swollen. She had obviously been crying. Angie ushered her inside and had her sit down.

"A-Angie, it—it—it's Esther," Florence sobbed. "She-she's dead."

"What?" asked Angie in shocked disbelief. "She can't be. She was just here last Saturday. How can she be dead? What do you mean she's dead?" Angie nearly fainted, but sat down heavily on the easy chair next to the couch. Florence went into the kitchen and came back with a glass of water for her.

"What happened? How did she die? When did it happen?" Angie asked when she recovered some of her composure.

"Her mother found her yesterday afternoon. She was lying on her bed covered in blood, Angie. It looks as though she'd had an abortion and hemorrhaged. *!Ay Dios mio! Que barbaridad.* What a tragedy."

Angie was stunned and angry at herself for not having seen how depressed Esther had been. Maybe she could have stopped her

from having the abortion, and maybe not.

The Mass was over now, and Danny and the rest of the children that had made their First Communion filed out onto the front steps of Our Lady of Lourdes church. There were congratulatory hugs and kisses from parents and relatives. The photographer set up his camera and took the customary class picture with Father Bernard and the altar boys standing in the center of all the participants.

All the girls wore white dresses, white veils and white shoes. The boys all wore dark suits and the entire group looked positively angelic. Angie tried her best to look happy for Danny's sake. She smiled and laughed at the appropriate times, but her mind was with Esther.

This damned war doesn't kill just soldiers and sailors on the front lines, she thought. Esther and many other women thousands of miles from the fighting are casualties of war too. What happened to Esther could have happened to me. And who knows how many others it has happened to?

While standing on the church steps she silently prayed and made a vow to be the best mother to Danny that she could be, and, God willing, when Carlos returned she would be the best wife a man could hope for.

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MUSIC AND INTELLIGENCE

Ashutosh Ghildiyal

First Saturday

Music—everybody listens to music these days. Is there anything surprising in that? If we look backwards in time, we will see that it was not always so. Music then was music—not the good music-bad music, rock music-classical music, this music and that music. Music can only be music—neither good nor bad—whatever else there is, is non-music. Music in the past was not merely a form of entertainment but something more. Moreover, only the few used to listen to music, as was the case with all art. There were few pretences in this regard and it was not a means of achieving fame or success. It was life for some, means of worship for some, and for some it was a means of great expression, beyond words and images. The tones, the sounds employed, the instruments were all a very personal medium for the musician to reach into himself and go beyond it,” I said to my friend Virendra one day after listening to Bach.

It had been a year since I started taking music seriously and found great pleasure in doing so. Earlier, all I used to listen to was some Hindi film music and some of the latest, most popular English and

Hindi pop music. It was always a means of entertainment for me, a means of passing time, a means of having some activity in the background while doing something else so that I didn't get bored. I had never actually paid attention to it before.

Virenda said, "Like all other arts, music has declined in the last 30 or so years. Music has now become associated with images, ideas and for entertainment, partying and all the rest. Most so-called music these days is nothing but empty sounds, put together by a lot of people, using all kinds of artificial means to manipulate the sounds to achieve one end—popularity. That is what popular music is. Moreover, a division has been created, probably on the basis of outward form – between classical and popular music. But if one listens, actually listens, what one hears is only music. If one simply listens, without comparing what one hears to his or her idea of music, only then can one see what music is."

I was new to Mumbai and Virendra was my only friend here, so usually on weekends and whenever I had a day off, I went to his place to stay over. He was an old friend of mine, from the time when I was in Delhi. We used to stay together at a paying guest hostel. Our rooms were close by and we often used to spend time together.

I said, "In India, only classical forms of music have survived, probably because it has not been popular and most of its exponents have not succumbed to the motives of personal ambition or fame. In the West, the same is the case with classical music, though there the quality depends upon the interpretation of the performer or the conductor. In popular music, several good attempts were made, in rock, punk, and jazz, in the years before the 80s. Since then there has been a gradual decline in popular music. In India, Bollywood music, except in a few cases, has been melodramatic, sensational and mediocre. The decades of the 60s and 70s were especially

productive for music in many ways—there was a regeneration, a breaking from the traditional forms, but soon afterwards, it collapsed again.”

I had been finding myself becoming more and more intimate with music lately. I saw the beauty, the importance of music as a part of human existence. At first I used to resist anything new, since it was not already known to me. I used to remain content with what was familiar since it gave me a certain degree of comfort. Now I was realizing how small my world was and how vast were the unexplored territories. Music was what helped me realize this more than anything else. I started listening to it openly, afresh, with no expectations whatsoever, and found that by listening without an idea, I could listen better. Music was teaching me how to listen.

“One can’t define what music is—any attempt to define music physically does not suffice. One has to hear, with clear senses, untainted by expectation or comparison, to see the beauty of music,” he said, as if reading my thoughts. “Music is always out of time. If you are actually, attentively listening, there will be no sense of time. It is this quality of music that has made so many of the great composers exalt it as a divine virtue. Music has an effect on the body and the mind—not as two distinct effects but as one total effect. It affects the senses in various ways, and when one is in harmony with the music, then it ceases to be something separate, something outside of oneself—one becomes the music. Music is harmony and music is beauty. Music has the quality of expressing the inexpressible. One can’t approach music with one’s own peculiar likes or dislikes and tastes, which are all a part of one’s own conditioning. Music is something both extraordinarily complex and simple at the same time. We are not used to listening to anything except our own thoughts, therefore we can’t sense the beauty of music. Because we are always trying to do things

according to our own peculiar tastes and likes and dislikes that we have built up, we become deaf to all other sounds. But when we drop all that and simply listen, then sound becomes a most wonderful thing—the complexity of it, the depth, the clearness, the penetration, the opening of the many doors it leads towards, is inexpressible and beyond words.”

How well he could put it all into words! The things that I had faintly realized and which were not so clear to me became clear as light on hearing him.

Second Saturday

Next weekend, as usual, I went to Virendra’s place. We were listening to Bob Dylan. I told him about a recent discussion I had with some people in my office. He was, as always, ready and receptive to hear whatever I had to say. He would hear it out completely, then either comment or sit silently, as if the act of listening in itself was his comment. He never said anything just for the sake of saying something.

I told him that I had been discussing the relationship between music and intelligence and most people couldn’t believe what I said. He said it is quite obvious that music has a relationship with intelligence; and classical music, especially, can increase intelligence. I said that I told them that there has been scientific research in recent times to discover this relationship. Even though it seems fairly obvious that music has an effect on the brain cells themselves and that listening to some forms of music, especially Western and Indian classical, can increase intelligence, science, as always, has been trying to prove this. I told Virendra that science was something infallible and very authoritative for most people and he said that science is and always will be limited, since it is based on knowledge, which is also always limited. I said that most

people consider the limits of their understanding to be the limits of the human mind. Nevertheless, what I had to say about music and intelligence did have some interest and credibility for them because some scientists also thought so.

I had told my colleagues about the Mozart effect. I told them, “In the University of California, Irvine, 36 people took standardized intelligence tests after three 10-minute periods of Mozart. Those who listened to Mozart’s *Sonata for Two Pianos (K448)* scored an average 119—eight points higher than those who listened to a relaxation tape and nine points higher than those who listened to silence. Mozart’s music is quite complex and very patterned. This is what was reported in the findings in a journal.”

They were quite impressed but I could see they didn’t quite understand what I was talking about, so I went on. “One might recall how classical music appears to be tedious, boring or may also give one a headache. I have especially noticed how people just can’t stand listening to Bach—it just gets too much for them to take. Why does this happen? The first reason might be because one is not used to listening to it; therefore, there is no identification with it as such. Secondly, this might be because the mind needs to be very attentive and swift to follow music—the sounds, the notes, the complexity of the musical architecture—and when one is listening without paying attention there is bound to be a conflict, resistance of some kind. Thirdly, probably because one is accustomed to treating music as something separate, outside of oneself.”

This seemed to have offended them somehow, so I tried to quote some authorities, as that is always somewhat more convincing and accessible for most people. I said, “According to Steven Gillman, a brain researcher, listening to and participating in music creates new neural pathways in the brain that stimulate creativity. Studies have shown that music actually trains the brain for higher forms of

thinking. Music stimulates the mind, encourages creativity and helps to lay a foundation for learning that leads to higher intelligence and aptitude. Also, GJ Whitrow quoted Einstein: 'He often told me that one of the most important things in his life was music. Whenever he felt that he had come to the end of the road or into a difficult situation in his work he would take refuge in music and that would usually resolve all his difficulties.' Einstein is also thought to have said about his theory of relativity: 'It occurred to me by intuition, and music was the driving force behind that intuition. My discovery was the rest of musical perception.'"

Quoting authorities and well-known people certainly did have an effect. Seeing this, I continued with the figures and quotes. "According to Plato, '...music is a more potent instrument than any other for education...' Now scientists know why. Music, they believe, trains the brain for higher forms of thinking. After eight months of musical training, three-year-olds were expert puzzle masters, scoring 80% higher than their playmates did in spatial intelligence—the ability to visualize the world accurately. This skill later translates into mathematical/conceptual and engineering skills. Also, I've heard that the very best engineers and technical designers in the Silicon Valley industry are, nearly without exception, practicing musicians."

If I had said the same thing simply, I'm sure nobody would've paid attention to it. Now it seemed to me that at least they were interested and may have understood what I was trying to point out. Someone said, "That is very insightful and thought-provoking. Such 'serious' discussions are rare; intellectual ones, rarer. Yours is both." Another said, "That's a good theory. Sounds interesting." Theory! Well, it's not a theory. It's something pretty simple and straightforward. Scientists theorize, not ordinary laymen such as ourselves. We were discussing facts, not theories. I can become

pretty aggressive at times like these and I think I can consider this to be my flaw. I set about proving it.

I said, “Look, researchers believe that certain types of music actually create new neural pathways in the brain. That means that the brain can function in a different field than that of memory alone. After listening to classical music, adults can do certain spatial tasks more quickly, such as putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Why does this happen? The classical music pathways in our brain are similar to the pathways we use for spatial reasoning. When we listen to classical music, the spatial pathways are turned on and ready to be used. The music most people call classical—works by composers such as Bach, Beethoven, or Mozart—is different from other kinds of music as it has a more complex musical structure. Researchers think the complexity of classical music is what primes the brain to solve spatial problems more quickly. So listening to classical music may have different effects on the brain than listening to other types of music.”

I wanted to tell them about my favorite composer and also give an example which might seem a little accessible to them. So I told them about Bach. “One of the first and most highly reputed classical composers is Johann Sebastian Bach. Bach’s contributions to music, or, to borrow a term popularized by his student Lorenz Christoph Mizler, his ‘musical science’, are frequently bracketed with the contributions of William Shakespeare in English literature and Isaac Newton in physics. Someone suggested that Bach’s music is what the people of Earth should use to communicate with the universe. Bach is also the most represented artist on the Voyager Golden Record, a phonograph record included in two Voyager (Spaceship) missions. Bach’s compositions are three of the 27 recordings chosen. Also, several notable composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann and Mendelssohn began writing in a more contrapuntal style after being introduced to Bach’s music.”

I told them that Bach's music, revered for its intellectual and technical beauty, was not always appreciated during his own lifetime, and he was considered to be "old-fashioned" by his contemporaries. Nevertheless, Bach is now considered one of the most famous and influential composers of all time. Today the "Bach style" continues to influence musical composition, from hymns and religious works to pop and rock. Many of Bach's themes—particularly the theme from *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor*—have been used in rock songs repeatedly and have achieved notable popularity.

Someone commented, "If the theory is based on the complexity of music (I approach it from the mathematical perspective), then it is not limited to orchestral music. An extreme example would be Math Rock."

Theory again! I really dislike these words: theory, idea, opinion, point of view! I said, "Firstly, it's not a theory—it's an actuality, as anybody can observe for himself. Secondly, classical music is not limited to orchestral music. Also, though the musical structure might be complex, the actual music is really very simple. Because it is simple, it can operate in the most complex fields. Like Bach's music; when they map it, they see all the complex structures and all the intricate details, but when you listen to it, it's the simplest form of music ever written. It's like nature.

"The type of music labeled as rock was at its best in the 60s and the 70s. Some of the best music in categories such as rock, punk and jazz was created then. It was created by people who wanted to break from the tradition and structure of classical music, since tradition is always a limitation, and wanted to create something new. There were some great musicians in this period who have been highly influential. Examples would be Bob Dylan, The Velvet

Underground and John Coltrane. However, through time, even that became a tradition, a genre, which others followed, remaining within the same field, so it became repetitive.

“Math Rock, as I understand, is based on conscious and deliberate effort towards creating music within a particular frame, according to certain pre-formulations. Since it uses mathematics, it is based on measurement, which means comparison, which also means time. Since there is a framework defined already, it remains within the field of the known. Therefore, the spontaneity, the timeless factor, is missing. Since they try to manipulate, twist and syncopate to confuse, to delay, to create something that is a twist on rock, punk, or pop, it simply remains a modification of the existing structures.”

Nobody said anything after that. I guess they were either bored or had had too much of this. There was nothing more said and we left for our respective tasks.

“Anurag, you certainly did try to prove something there,” said Virendra. “I don’t know whether it was for yourself or for them. It’s not something you can propagate through words. It is enough that you understand. You don’t have to show it to others too, you don’t have to convince them.”

Third Saturday

On the following Saturday I went to Virendra’s place somewhat earlier than usual. I had gotten up early in the morning and reached his place by 9am. One of his friends had come to visit him from Bihar.

We hardly ever had breakfast. At his place there were only two meals a day, with no fixed time, as and when we felt hungry. The

first meal of the day typically happened around noon. We sat silently for about an hour and a half. Then I told him about another discussion related to music that we had in my office. He didn't react. I went on.

I said, "The other day the people in my office were discussing poetry. I mentioned Bob Dylan. I told them that his songwriting is really good and he has also been nominated several times for the Nobel Prize for literature. I mentioned that "Mr. Tambourine Man" is one of his best songs and is a good example of his songwriting. Though most of them agreed, some of them said that drug use is one of the major contributing factors to the quality of his music. This irked me a lot and I tried to explain why it isn't so. However, some of them defended it."

"One can defend anything," said Virendra. "Obviously drugs don't put a chip in one's head that means they will start creating good music. There have been many who've done this. If one is at all sane, one will see the truth of this."

"Yes, that's exactly what I said, but then the view of some was that to think differently or to create good music, one shouldn't think sane. I don't know what 'sane' means for most people."

He didn't say anything more but I went on to tell the whole story. I said, "When I had told them about this, most of the people agreed with what I had said. There were more than two people, so I'll call them A, B, C and D."

A said, "Truly a great artist. One of my favorite tracks!!

Take me on a trip upon your magic swirlin' ship....

"The song (in its complete version) is widely recognized as one of

Dylan's most evocative and poetic songs. There have been many theories about the meaning of the song. One interpretation is that the song allusively recounts Dylan's early experiences with LSD, and this is supported by the prominent use of the word 'trip' in the first line of the second verse."

B said, "Excellent. One of my favorite artists. Just like Every Grain of Sand, Visions of Johanna, Like a Rolling Stone, and many others, this is another great track."

I said, "Yes, he's the only man that stands out in what is called popular music. He's been consistently creating good music, in many different forms, always reinventing himself, never remaining in any fixed category, never labeling himself, throughout the last five decades. He has also been highly influential in all forms of music."

B said, "Certainly. His surrealistic style of writing, excellent musicianship, and usage of mind-expanding drugs can really create that kind of magic. Let me go on a bit more. This is something I really like:

*Businessmen, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth,
None of them along the line know what any of it is worth.*

"You have brought back my teenage memories. So on that note, let me dedicate his 'Desolation Row' entirely to you."

I said, "I don't agree with the drug part. I don't think there is any such thing as a mind-expanding drug. Any movement of mind away from its usual state is not expansion. It may temporarily stimulate or dull the brain and one might become aware of one's thinking process momentarily; but it affects the capacity to reason, to pursue a logical sequence of thought, sense of responsibility. It

destroys the brain. There have been many others who've taken drugs and created music but they have really been quite mediocre and have died at a very young age. Clearly, that's not the case with Bob Dylan. That quality of mind doesn't come from any drug – it comes from observation and awareness of one's environment."

B said, "Well, well, I don't mean to promote any sort of psychotropic substance here publicly. Nor do I mean to spread any negative message. I know psychotropic substances are bad; but I was only talking about the surrealistic movement. And the music of the 60s, the time when drugs were more freely sold, and commoner than today—I am only talking about that. What is mind-expanding to most drug users is technically known as hallucination.

"And the people who died young were actually inspired by Nietzsche's Nihilism. Examples are Morrison, Sid Vicious, etc.

"Much of the surrealism in music can be attributed to the usage of psychotropic substances. Speaking of psychotropic substances, Blake once said, 'If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern.'

"Huxley later explained the meaning of this in his short essay, 'The Doors of Perception', in which he took peyote (mescaline) and described his experience in writing.

"Of Huxley's book, Wikipedia says, 'Psychedelic drugs are thought to disable filters which block or suppress signals related to mundane functions from reaching the conscious mind. In The Doors of Perception, Huxley explores the idea that the human mind filters reality, partly because handling the details of all of the

impressions and images coming in would be unbearable, and partly because it has been taught to do so. He believes that psychotropic drugs can remove this filter (to an extent), or 'open these doors of perception.'"

"I say it again, I do not intend to promote any sort of psychotropic substances; I am only reiterating what a few great men have said based on what I've read and based on my knowledge of music.

"For abstract ideas to come, the mind should not think sanely, that's all I mean by it."

I said, "Sorry, I'm not trying to contradict what you have said or trying to protest against anything. What I'm trying to put forward are the facts. It's easy to escape through any drug and invent any form of so-called surrealistic experience, which is nothing but the projection of the content of one's own consciousness. It is very easy to deceive oneself through these experiences and at the same time have a marvelous escape. Even the many so-called spiritual people have such experiences, which each translates according to his own particular conditioning. It is simply another invention of thought. This is a fact. Experience, be it of any kind, is always limited. Therefore, knowledge born of that experience is also limited. That knowledge is stored in the brain as memory. From that memory, you think. So, all thought is based on knowledge, on what one has already known. You can't think of something that you don't know. It is impossible. Therefore, it is never new.

"I've read Huxley's book and I know about these musicians. As to any of them being influenced by Nietzsche, I doubt it. Quoting someone else doesn't mean anything. What someone else has said or thought is not real unless one critically examines it for oneself. Simply being able to understand a verbal statement or arrive at an intellectual conclusion about the same doesn't make that thing real.

I think we would agree on this.

“If by ‘sane’ you mean operating from memory alone, from knowledge, previous experiences, from conflict, from prejudices, beliefs, ideas and ideals, not being aware of one’s own sensory responses and thought process—which is the usual state of mind—then I would agree with it. But sane really means the opposite of this. It certainly does include logic and reasoning.

“Drugs don’t cleanse the doors of perception—attention and observation do; and ‘narrow chinks of cavern’ means your knowledge (not the technical knowledge, of course), your fixed ideas, beliefs, authorities which you set up in your mind, including your own authority.”

B said, “Ah, what to say now! I have neither the strength nor the energy to speak any further; nor can I disagree with any of what you have said, because all that you have said is absolutely correct.

“However, I can say this: almost every musician in the 60s took depressants such as marijuana, LSD, or other similar drugs, or at least experimented with some form of drug. Another thing is that some of the artists mentioned above have created very good music even after taking drugs. Not to forget, David Gilmour is from Pink Floyd, and all members of the band were notorious drug users. So were Jimi Hendrix (and it was after listening to Hendrix’s version of All Along the Watchtower that people actually started to like the song) and Keith Richards.

“Also from a philosophical standpoint, experimenting, without getting addicted, with psychotropic substances is good because it broadens one’s knowledge and experience; but it’s even better not to experiment at all, because once one falls into the dark, odorous

cesspool of drug abuse, safe return is always doubtful. And life is beautiful. Sometimes.

“If one is not an existentialist.”

I said, “Yes, what you have stated about these musicians is a fact and sure, some of them have created some good music too.

“But I think I haven’t made myself clear. What I am questioning is whether experimenting or using these things broadens one’s knowledge and experience. I doubt it. As I mentioned, knowledge and experience are limited because they can always be added to. And if there is a thing which one comes upon, even temporarily, by using these things, some so-called state that these things simulate, what is the nature of that? Does it only depend on artificial stimulants? Is it something separate, outside of oneself? I’m simply questioning it.

“Must one not be attentive to the workings of one’s own mind? What is actually meant by cleansing the doors of perception, not verbally or intellectually or as an idea, but actually? Because if the stimulant is not there, the thing is also not there. So, either that thing was projected by thought itself or it never existed in the first place. I don’t know if I’m making myself clear. Does using any of these things do anything more than bring about chemically a certain state of mind which is totally different from the understanding of oneself?

“And these terms, like existentialism, are just words, right? The word is not the actual and before you know it, totally conditions your mind. It’s just a label. It may mean something for one and another thing for someone else. Labels and terms are restrictive, limiting. If one is an existentialist, he will see things from his point of view, the scientist will see it from his, the philosopher and the

religious man will see it from their own. So, who is actually looking? Are so many different realities possible?

“I’m sure if anybody was to go and tell Dostoevsky or Nietzsche that he was an existentialist, they would be very embarrassed, might even feel offended. All these terms have been invented by people who got some kind of artificial stimulation by reading them and created these terms to glorify their mistaken idea that they have also reached the same level of understanding.”

B said, “Would love to answer this. Got work right now. Tomorrow morning probably. This talk has started to make sense now.”

I said, “You don’t have to answer this. It’s not some kind of a battle of wits or a form of intellectual amusement. If it is merely opposing one conclusion to another then it does not lead us very far. If you would like to discuss it further, please feel free to email me.”

B said, “I am sorry. I didn’t mean to cause any offense. Answering is the wrong word. I thought you were asking me a question. I apologize. I should have used the word ‘discuss’. Please pardon my wrong use of the word, kind sir. I wish to stop this right here.”

C said, “No, don’t stop. This is a fascinating debate and you’re both doing so well. And Anurag makes some excellent points there.”

D said, “Yes. I agree with C. What started out as a comment on a song has expanded into a debate providing insights into so much startlingly wonderful ground. Don’t stop now. We want more.”

B said, “Thanks C. Thanks D. I’ll continue with my part of the discussion with my dear friend tomorrow. Until now, I had been afraid that I would have to disclose my deepest secrets if I spoke too much, but something tells me to go ahead. I can only say this

for the time being: 'A good philosopher is one who never jumps to a conclusion, but suspects all possibilities.'"

I said, "Please, there is no question of offense or anything of that sort. I just wanted to point out that the intention here has not been to inform one about something theoretical, superstitious, imaginary, a fixation, as it were. For my part, this has not been a theoretical discussion; this is not just a lot of words."

B said, "I would myself like to conclude by saying this. I think the word experience had led to some confusion here. I have understood experience as knowledge accumulated by participating in an event. An example would be taking drugs for a short period, experiencing them first-hand, stopping using them, and getting rehabilitated again. When I say drugs broaden our experience, I'm talking about the rational knowledge that we acquire after this entire process is completed.

"Experience, to me, is only limited to what the observer has observed. A human can observe things in two ways: one, merely with the help of his sensory organs (observing gravity); second, by actually participating in the event (taking a drug). This observation is also called initial observation and this initial observation provides a base for gaining rational knowledge. We observe things, we collect information, and then we use our reason to process it. This leads to the logical conclusion, which we call knowledge.

"Observation acts as the initial raw material in the process of obtaining knowledge. Let me try to give an example. A guitarist named John Frusciante took drugs for many years. Because of it he fell into severe depression. He stopped playing music for a long time. His knowledge became disorganized. Eventually he stopped taking drugs and became successful in rehabilitating himself and getting all his knowledge back. Today, John doesn't do drugs, but

he certainly knows drugs better than a non-user. He says his experiences were all hallucinations, but he has learned something from them. He has seen a different side of life which is spiritual and beautiful. That's what I mean by experience.

"I agree, reason gives us proper knowledge, but how can we say that only proper knowledge is required for creating music? Or art? Reason can give us a logical view, but reason cannot always give us an artistic view. In my opinion, in art, while creating something, sometimes one must see things differently. One doesn't have to be right.

"Musicians, when doped, see things in a nondescriptive way. They feel things in a distorted way. And they try to bring those feelings, those images, into their music. If one was not bitten by a snake, one wouldn't know how it feels. If one has not taken a drug, one wouldn't know what it actually does to the brain; one would never have a first-hand experience. One would remain completely unaware of that part of life. One can only read about it which doesn't give the exact idea.

"Another belief I have is that humans are still in the process of evolution; they are not completely evolved. Their ancestors were apes, and who knows what they are going to become 100,000 years from now. Their bodies are limited, their sensory organs have limited abilities, and their knowledge is very limited and only reliable in their own world. Therefore, I keep a skeptical view about human knowledge too. I think it is imperfect. I don't say it is imperfect, but I like to think it is so.

"I still think life is a strange thing. Though Freud explained dreams, I'm not sure I know what dreams are. I have read both the Newtonian and the Kantian explanations of time, but still I am unsure I know what it is. I see myself aging every day, living in

time, and keep wondering why I grow old. Similarly, I don't know if the knowledge acquired with the help of our underdeveloped sensory organs is true. I'm not saying it's false, I'm only saying I keep myself open to know more—more than just what my reason and sensory organs can tell me. We all know a ball thrown up in the air will ultimately come down due to gravity. So we, as humans, can only say that we have seen it coming down thus far, but we cannot say for sure if it actually comes down. So one day if it doesn't come down, we'd all be less surprised. The universe is very big and unfathomable. And we are mere tiny points; tinier still is our so-called knowledge.

"I hold:

'If one does more things, one will know more.'

'Knowledge is reliable only to an extent.'

'One should suspect all possibilities.'"

I said, "I think I'd like to make myself clear once more. Please don't accept what I'm saying but see the truth of it. Try to listen without interpreting or translating it according to what you already know; then there is a possibility of sharing our understanding. What is true cannot be different for everyone. A thing can only be seen and rightly understood for itself and not by comparing it with something else. Also, let us put aside what others have said or discovered, be it anybody, however 'great'. We have to look at things simply and not come to them with various conclusions, most of which we have gathered from books and what others have said. Let us try to see the thing for ourselves rather than seeing it through someone else. Let us look at it directly and simply.

"What you mention is something I've been thinking about lately. This word—'experience'. I think it is usually used in two ways: the active present and the past. One is that you are experiencing something, which means to go through it. The other means to have

gone through. Please correct me if I'm wrong. Either way, your point that experience helps in increasing one's understanding does not seem to be correct. It may add to one's knowledge, which is a different thing since knowledge is always in the past and is always limited because it can always be added to. I think that in neither way does experience help in understanding—be it through taking a drug, or something spiritual or whatever—for the following reasons:

“Experience as the active present—‘experiencing’. When you are actually experiencing something—anger, sex, etc—at that moment there is no experience at all. Have you noticed this? Only a little later comes the experiencer, saying, ‘I have been angry.’

“Experience as the past. When one says, ‘I have experienced. I know’, one knows something which is already over. Right? When I say ‘I have had an experience’ I only know the image of that experience and that image is the past, dead, over, finished. Because to experience implies not only going through, but to experience something you must be able to recognize it. Otherwise you cannot experience. To recognize implies that you have already known. So, there is no such thing as a new experience.

“So, the point I'm trying to make is that experience doesn't help in understanding at all. Because what is called experience is nothing but a residue in memory and from that memory, that residue, which is the past, one looks at the present. So, there is always this conflict between the observer and the observed. When you go through something, it is over. And what you experience then is the past. So, there is nothing new in that at all. So, there is no learning, merely an accumulation of something which has already been known, in modified form. As I said, it's the content of consciousness that reaches out and simply experiences itself, because it wants to recognize itself in everything, every form.

There is no learning, nothing new in that. One can test this out for oneself.

“Taking drugs to experience something marvelous is an old trick which has existed from time immemorial: to bring about a temporary alteration in the brain cells, a greater sensitivity and heightened perception which give a semblance of reality. I think we have gathered so much knowledge that we just can’t look at anything simply any more.

“My point is simple: a conditioned mind has no basis for right understanding. No matter how much it seeks, searches, makes effort to understand, it will remain exactly where it was. Only an awake mind, a mind that is aware of itself—its own reactions, thought process—can have right understanding. Without self-knowledge, rather self-knowing, which is in the active present, there is no basis for right thought. Repetition, drugs, control, conforming to a pattern, various forms of entertainment—including intellectual and spiritual entertainment—dull the mind. And this dullness of mind one may call silence, abstract, seeing things differently, etc. Well that’s it, I guess. End of discussion.”

C said, “I disagree. ‘To experience’ does not necessarily imply recognition. A baby who knows nothing of the world experiences new things every day, regardless of whether or not he recognizes it. This is why it is a new experience. In this instance, you do not understand what you are thinking, seeing, feeling; you are simply ‘experiencing’. Once the experience is over, should he come across the same thing once more, he will draw upon past experience in order to interpret it and attempt to understand it in that light. Should he wish to describe this new experience to someone who has not had the same experience, he would only be able to draw a comparison with experiences that the other person recognizes. Therefore, unless you have experienced something first-hand, you

do not truly understand every nuance of it. While one does not need to drink poison to know that it's deadly, one would not understand exactly what kind of pain one goes through should one drink it.

“Are you able to know what pregnancy feels like to a woman? To have a life growing inside your body? Simply because you have witnessed it or know it exists does not mean that you understand the experience. You have to experience it yourself to truly understand. Listening to someone describe a beautiful landscape is vastly different from being there and seeing it for yourself.

“If there was no night, there would be no such thing as day. It would always be ‘day’ or it would always be ‘night’. One often recognizes things by comparing them against other things. You know that good exists because you recognize evil. You know that people love you when you compare them against those who don’t.

“We carry the influences of teachings from everyone around us...until we are exposed to conflicting influences and opinions (which do exist and yet both may be valid) which force us to re-examine our understanding of those things. And hence, we come up with our own version of ‘truth’, diverging (sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes by a wide margin) from what we originally held as truth.

“Case in point, since all that you have said is so well stated, by your logic, you would expect me to agree with it. Whereas it is obvious by now that isn’t the case. Simply because as an individual with my own mind, I can differentiate between fact and opinion and draw my own conclusions about them.

“While my comments are open for all to agree or disagree with, they are directed at you solely in pursuit of knowledge and

understanding and not with the intention of being offensive. Since you have very rightly said that we should not simply accept another's beliefs at face value, I hope you will take my disagreement with your opinions in the same spirit.

"I have no doubt that you will disagree with much of what I have said, which should not be a cause for concern since it is nothing more than a difference of opinion."

I said, "It's a good thing to think on your own. It's also a good thing that you do not accept anything I say. I am not disputing any of that. You are very much entitled to your opinions and there is no question of offense of any sort. But I am afraid that you have thoroughly misunderstood me. And that is all right."

I told Virendra, "That's where it ended. Quite an abrupt end, I must say. I wanted to say more, add more, clarify more, make them understand. I wanted to explain it in the best way possible, describing it, using words as close as possible to the actual thing to convey the meaning, so they can have a glimpse of it, so that it can at least trigger some kind of insight into the whole thing. It was so simple, so apparent. Why didn't they see? The whole thing moved like a boat sailing on a windy night, taking no fixed direction. I don't know where we reached. I don't think anybody moved at all. I think they remained exactly where they started from. It is always surprising to me how people don't want to move from their fixed bases."

I looked at Virendra. I was expecting a response. But he said nothing. Then it occurred to me. I had learned nothing since the last Saturday.

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SOUTHWORLD

E.G. Bartholomew

Mr. Baker rambled on about Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and its Spanish Civil War influences and its significance in today's world. Nick was hearing but not listening. He had other, more important things on his mind. He was plotting battle strategy in his Literature notebook, twitching impatiently as he counted down the minutes. As class came to a close, Mr. Baker wrote the homework assignment on the board.

"I want you to read chapters three through five tonight. There may be a short quiz tomorrow at the beginning of class."

As they placed their literature books back into their bags, Nick surveyed his classmates. Pigtails. Rock band T-shirts. Ripped jeans. He knew once they got home—down to each and every last one of them—they'd do one of three things: they would whip out Hemingway or other homework and study till night for the potential quiz; they'd rush through the reading assignment and hurry back to their vicarious world of pro athletes and internet porn; or they'd go out and party and smoke pot and get hammered with friends. Nothing big. Nothing you couldn't see on some MTV reality show. Their lives were restricted by reality.

The bell rang and Nick shot out the door. He didn't get on the

bus; running home took less time. He ran past the school grounds, the school buses, the Westtown general store, and turned onto Berkshire Road. People stared and snickered as he dashed past them, but he didn't care; they didn't have what he had, they didn't understand.

When he reached home, he ignored his mom's greetings and hurried up to his room. The console and controls were right where he'd left them. Good. Once his mother had moved them and he wanted to kill her for it.

He placed the headset on his head and turned the console on. The earmuffs muted outside sound while the visors blacked out vision.

He logged on. The automated female voice greeted him, "Good afternoon, CombatChief56. Would you like to resume play?"

He muttered yes into the microphone, and the image before him transformed, transporting him to Southworld.

He was in the city of Oakmead, the focal point of Emperor Dires's reign. The city was once a poster child for world peace, diplomacy, and military neutrality. But shortly after inheriting power, Emperor Dires stomped the city with his steel boot of blitzkrieg. After 4,500 years of decadence Oakmead had regressed into a realm of crime, drugs, and tyranny.

CombatChief56 was an Oakmead patrolman, hired by Emperor Dires and sworn to fulfill his duties and render absolute allegiance to the throne. It was just smokescreen, however. CombatChief56 and dozens of others were in fact sleeper cells hidden among his ranks, some rumored to be planted within the House of the Throne itself.

Tonight was the commencement of years of preparation. The coup would come to fruition. Tonight they would light up the sky. Dusk had settled. The moon was peeking through clouds against a backdrop of a few dim stars. Curfew laws mandated that the town's populace stay in their designated shelters till dawn, infractions punishable by death. The only men allowed outdoors at

these times were the patrolmen and the nobles, the latter of which were never seen—no noble in his right mind would want to live in such a municipality.

Hand ready at his sheathed sword, he carefully snaked through the labyrinthine landscape of Oakmead City to The Apostasy Cathedral, the site of The Brotherhood's headquarters. He was cautious not to let his excitement show or to take a route that could be easily traced. And CombatChief56 resisted the nagging temptation to look into the eyes of his fellow patrolmen for any signs of kinship. The Brotherhood was ten thousand strong, though members wore masks to the rare meetings and no one member knew the identity of another.

He traveled his planned path: he took unnecessary turns and traveled unnecessary lengths, but it ultimately led to Apostasy Cathedral.

Apostasy Cathedral lay on the fringes of Oakmead City, where surveillance was weak. It wasn't a cathedral, nor was it ever named Apostasy formally. Rather, it was an armory, abandoned by the king and used by the Brotherhood. Its spires jutted hundreds of feet in the air, piercing the sky. The Brotherhood themselves named it Apostasy, a word that means "abandonment of principles".

The plaza echoed with the footsteps of leather boots as CombatChief56 and a growing crowd walked towards the tall, gaping oak doors of the cathedral. No one bothered to wear their masks today. Tonight they would either be captured or perish as a martyr, anyway, unless their mission was a success.

The congregation worked their way inside the Main Hall of the cathedral. CombatChief56 elbowed his way through the crowd. With his developed, level 12 stature, he easily displaced the commoners. His level 9 agility enabled him to dart swiftly towards a large arms chest near the wall. He hopped atop it. It gave him a clear vantage point from which he could see the entire crowd, which was thousands, maybe tens of thousands strong and still

growing. The commoners were barbaric, stretching pitchforks in the air and chanting “Down with the Emperor!” As they should be, for Emperor Dires had ruled their lives with an iron fist, executing the extended families of men who didn’t meet production quotas.

He searched for one face in particular: the heart-faced, rosy complexion of Josephina770, the most beautiful woman in all of Southworld. She was his soulmate, he knew it. And though he’d once proposed marriage to her and she’d accepted, the nobles of the Emperor’s court had vetoed it. They said they would not allow CombatChief56’s noble blood to mix with that of a commoner. CombatChief56 didn’t care. He’d personally decapitate each member of the Emperor’s political circle if he had to, and when Dires himself was deposed, he and Josephina770 would reconcile.

The crowd’s chant grew to a roar, and continued until a squat, balding man appeared at the front of the cathedral. Then everyone went quiet. This weak, old man was their leader, but not just that. This man was the mayor of Neelaberg, one of the most powerful positions in all of Neelaberg.

“Down with the Emperor!” someone yelled, and the crowd erupted again in a chorus of applause. Men raised their weapons in ecstasy. They chanted the mayor’s name. Some men even hugged each other. Though trained to shut off emotion before combat, CombatChief56 himself felt a surge of hope swell within him.

“My friends, we have come a long way,” the mayor began. The conglomeration greeted these words with a loud Aye. “Five thousand years ago, these walls housed men of King Vaneera. They were noble soldiers. Valiant soldiers. And when Emperor Dires’s army swept through this very city, they held their ground. This very ground that we stand on today.

“I can’t guarantee you victory. I can’t guarantee the safety of your family. But I implore you—stand your ground the way Vaneera’s men stood their ground in the face of death 5,000 years ago.

“They know our location. We have—”

An explosion ripped through the ceiling of the building, shattering the steeple. Debris from the fallout rained on the congregation below. One man was hit squarely on the head with a rock the size of a basketball.

“Catapults!”

And so the battle began.

The mayor and Level 10’s and 11’s barked military orders, but they were inaudible over the cries of mixed fear and bloodlust of the commoners. The barrack doors opened, and a volley of arrows zipped through, striking men in the front lines. People backed off.

CombatChief56 leapt into action. Unsheathing his sword, he pushed his way towards the door. An arrow whizzed towards him as he exited the building, but he easily knocked it aside with his blade.

Outside, the enemy had formed a ring around the perimeter. Crossbowmen stood in the back, spearmen in the front. An assortment of dragons, giant spiders, gargoyles and other beasts flanked them.

Another series of arrows flew towards him; he somersaulted behind a column for cover. He held his ground there for a while, waiting for enough of his men to make it through the door to form an advance battalion.

The enemy picked off the first wave of men one by one. But reload time and limited ammo caught up with the crossbowmen, and the battalion overwhelmed them. CombatChief56’s men came out in force.

CombatChief56 seized the opportunity. Hoisting his blade in the air, he charged towards the enemy. The spearmen retreated a few feet, cowering in fear. But just as he closed in on them, he staggered, his face slamming against the pavement.

His leg had been hit with an arrow.

The screen went black, and that’s when the pain began.

Nick awoke to the sounds of an IV machine and the odor of a

sanitizing agent. He was in a hospital bed.

He traced the IV line to an array of buzzing hospital machinery to his right. To his left, his mom was sitting on the furniture. She smiled.

“Good afternoon, Nick. It’s nice to see you up.”

Afternoon? “How long have I been here?”

She approached him, her brow furrowed and her mouth lined with creases. It was a face she had shown him when he was younger, when he asked questions with answers she felt he wasn’t ready for.

Finally she said, “Two days. Tuesday night I found you in your room. You’d stabbed yourself with a pair of scissors. The doctors say you’re going to have to visit a shrink.”

Nick ignored the last part. “Two days! Good Lord!” In two days, who knew what could’ve happened in Southworld. The final battle had just begun; the allies needed him. The Brotherhood had already plotted for him to lead 5,000 men up the west bank for an ambush on Celiryan Port.

“We need to go home, now.”

She ruffled his hair, her brow furrowing once more. “Honey, they want you to spend some time in a psychiatric ward once your condition has improved. They say it seems you’ve lost touch with reality.”

Nick snatched his mother’s collar, pulling her face towards his. “Look at me! You see this ugly face? Do you see this shit build? Do you see this dumbass who can barely pass math with a C-minus? Now do you see why I don’t want to be a part of this reality? I wanna be with people who like me.” Tears welled at the corners of his eyes; he let go of her collar. “I just want to live in Southworld forever.”

He ripped the IV out of his wrists and hopped off the bed, landing on the knee he’d stabbed. A throbbing pain shot through it. He staggered to his feet.

Over his cries he could hear his mother calling for the nurses.

He tried dragging himself out of the room before they could get there, but they arrived in seconds. Three of them heaved him back on the bed, while a fourth shot him up with some sedative that would put him out for a good three or four hours.

Then reality would be back.

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KRISTINE ONG MUSLIM

Here Lies the Hitchhiker

The roadside waits long enough
to teach her eye of darker colors,
of dead lights and road signs.

All roads taper to a point on the horizon.
Artists call it perspective, that calculated
bending away from sight.

There's the illusion of a straight line,
the string of tiny white lights,
the closing of a car door.

How to Make an Elephant

Technical assumptions and all, the blueprint
for making an elephant is founded on faith,
on the strength of an unnamed god's promises.

Even in death, gravity has struggled long enough
to pin us to the ground. We must create an elephant
big and heavy enough to swing gravity to our side.

The tusk, like everything else we have in common,
must be made out of sifted dirt. The hide must be
gray enough to blind. Handmade, its trunk must

be washed clean of scars and wrinkled to perfection.
All these lakes which pour out of our unblinking eyes
are cascaded to serve as the newborn elephant's bath.

Somebody Wants In

Bits of the occult thrive on the wall
on my side of the bed. Fingers touch
the whorls, the tiny cumulative codes,
and it is like disturbing the flaps
on a box of myths. The inconspicuous
circles underneath the layer of paint
are nonentities with dilating eyes;
circles are present in anything straight.

After He Was Abandoned

He left a spare key under the doormat,
in case she would sneak in to get her
favorite vase. Switching channels, he
remembered how her eyes had darted
away whenever the doorbell rang. Two
nights a week, he continued his search for
the twigs and trail of crumbs he was sure
she had tossed on the road for him to find.

Transplant

Right angles are manufactured; there is
no reason for them to occur in nature.
An empty house is filled with angles.

The accumulated will of three mirrors
expands the space in the hallway.
An empty house is filled with mirrors.

You search for a scalpel to excise grief.
Two successive winters have unraveled it,
and only an empty house can absorb it.

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A BETTER PLACE

Craig Rondinone

“**S**top looking at him. Stop it. Stop.”

A little boy who couldn't have been more than four years old gazed at an overgrown stuffed frog that was sitting in a large display window of a toy store. He couldn't take his eyes off of it. The green animal was sitting on a plastic throne with a gold crown on its head while tinier stuffed frogs were scattered on the floor around him like they were his royal subjects. The king frog had a gregarious smile on his face that spotlighted his audacious red lips, thin pink tongue and bouncy brown eyes. The frog held a silver scepter in its right hand that was taller than the little boy himself.

“Stop looking at him!”

The authoritarian growl sent a shiver down Rebecca's spine as her left hand was grabbed and locked inside the right hand of her husband, Glen. He whisked her away from the little boy as fast as he could, but the sight of the youngster staring in awe at the frog remained imbedded in Rebecca's mind.

“He was so cute,” Rebecca said as they walked through the heart of the shopping mall.

“I know.”

“I want one so badly. I feel so incomplete sometimes. I think a

child would fill that void, that empty space.”

“You know that’s impossible.”

“Yeah, I know. I know. I was just thinking out loud.”

“How could we bring a child into a world like this?” Glen asked as they briskly walked through the lower level of the three-tiered mall without looking at any stores or any people. “Are we that selfish?”

“No, we’re not. I’m not. I was just feeling a little vulnerable.”

“That’s understandable. Today is a big day. There’s a lot of pressure. And as your husband, I’m here to try to fill that void.”

“And that’s why I love you,” Rebecca declared as she brought Glen’s hand up to her mouth so she could gently kiss it. She rubbed his rough knuckles on her rosy red cheek as they ambled forward.

The mall they were in was the largest shopping center within a 100-mile radius, catering to thousands of customers every day. The first floor was filled with stores that sold toys, music, furniture, bedding and books. Every store on the second floor sold clothing: for men, women, children, senior citizens, young adults, babies, upper class, middle class, lower class, even clothing for pets. And the third floor was devoted entirely to food. There was an international food court, a line of six dessert shops, two rival pretzel places and every fast food chain imaginable.

A neon green sign from a magic shop caught Rebecca’s eye. She had just tilted her head for a second to see what the store had inside when Glen noticed her interest.

“Stop it. Look straight ahead,” Glen ordered.

“Just for a second. It’s going to be our last time.”

“That’s why I don’t want you in there,” Glen reiterated clearly as he kept a solid grip on his wife’s hand and continued to walk. “I know you. You’ll say you just want a minute. Then it’ll turn into a half hour. Then you’ll want to visit another store. Before you know

it we'll be putting this off until Monday. This can't wait any longer."

"Just one souvenir?"

"This is not the time to get nostalgic."

"OK."

Glen knew Rebecca better than he knew himself. She was an emotional, spontaneous woman. She would change her mind in a split second if given the smallest chance. The tiniest thing could sway her. He didn't want her heart getting in the way of her head. Not today.

They strolled through the rest of the first level with their arms intertwined and their fingers interlocked. The exit to the building was 500 feet ahead. The short walk looked like a marathon to Rebecca. Her legs became heavier with each step, as if the soles of her shoes were sticking to the floor. She had tried to heed Glen's loving advice, but even without turning her head things were distracting her that she couldn't ignore. An elderly couple sharing an ice cream cone. A woman gossiping loudly with a fellow female busybody. A group of middle school kids hanging out on a bench trading baseball cards. A kitchen store with humongous white signs with black lettering announcing 50%-off sales on pots and pans.

"Before we go, I need to use the bathroom," Rebecca said in a hushed tone.

"Your stomach?" Glen asked under his breath.

"It's sending me a distress signal."

They veered off course and glided to the right where there were rest rooms located down a narrow corridor away from the stores. When they reached their destination, Rebecca swiftly barreled through the swinging door into the ladies room. After waiting for a second, Glen walked down to the end of the hallway and vanished, ducking into a crevice where a door had been left ajar.

When Rebecca came out of the lavatory, Glen was on his way

back, leisurely pacing with his hands in his pants pockets.

“You good now?” Glen asked as he reclaimed Rebecca’s left hand once again.

“I got my nerve back I think,” Rebecca replied with a weak smile. “What were you doing?”

“There’s an exit down at the very end. Got some fresh air. We could go out that way.”

“No. I’m walking out the front. I have nothing to hide,” Rebecca said proudly and defiantly. Glen smiled. There was a sparkle in her eyes again.

The couple made their way back up the corridor in such a relaxed way that they might have been walking down the aisle together after exchanging marriage vows. Rebecca focused on Glen’s face and her smile widened, her heart skipped a beat, and a butterfly fluttered in her soul. Glen kept facing forward, though he wore a contented grin on his round face.

“I left one more for the road. Just in case,” Glen said. He started to hum.

“It couldn’t hurt I guess,” Rebecca replied. As they re-entered the atmosphere of the mall, they stopped walking and just stared at their surroundings. Rebecca wanted this, and Glen knew this was a gift she would appreciate more than something material. Rebecca soaked in the surroundings. The lengthy line at the ATM. The elementary-age kids chowing down on cotton candy. But the last thing she saw was the worst thing she could have seen.

“Stop it.”

Rebecca tuned Glen out as a middle-aged mother pushed a dual baby stroller in front of her. The compartments were side by side and looked as if each were occupied by a twin boy. One baby began crying, which made the other cry. They had just entered the mall through the automatic glass doors Glen and Rebecca were about to exit through. As the babies rolled to within a few feet of the couple, Glen began massaging the back of his wife’s neck with

the warm palm of his free hand.

“Stop. Don’t torture yourself.”

“Let me tell them,” Rebecca begged, fighting back tears.

“No. I can’t let you do that.”

“Just them. No one else. Just those three.”

“Then it would be three more. Then it would be the guy at the pizza stand from two hours ago. Then it would be the girl who did your nails. Block them out of your mind, Becca. No one else exists today,” Glen said in a cold, emotionless manner. “Just us.”

The pair resolutely walked on, heading towards the exit. The clear glass doors had reflections from the sun dancing off them. People shuffled in and out, bags in hand, smiles on their faces, their laughter bouncing off the floors and walls. As Rebecca and Glen got to within five feet of the exit, Rebecca took a breath deep enough to burst the average lung.

As soon as she exhaled, Glen’s cell phone began to vibrate. He stopped their progress suddenly, took his black phone from his pocket and put it to his ear.

“Hello. Yes, we’re at the mall. We’re just leaving now. Of course I didn’t forget the wine. Other than an upset stomach she’s just peachy. You know how much she loves shopping. No, she’s in the bathroom. Yup. Yeah, it sure is a great day outside. Don’t waste it. I’ll see you tomorrow. Love you. Bye.”

Glen clicked the phone off and tucked it away as he took a deep breath of his own.

Rebecca stared a dagger through him. “You couldn’t even let me talk to your mom?” she asked.

“There you go, being selfish again,” Glen said, looking away from her toward the parking lot. Rebecca took her eyes off him and looked ahead herself. They were just a few short steps away.

“Not even an inkling?” Rebecca wondered.

Glen shook his head. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t think I’ve ever been more at peace,” he said. He squeezed Rebecca’s

hand so tightly she felt it going numb.

“At peace with God?” she asked as her eyes welled up.

“With my mom. And with us,” Glen quietly replied as he closed his eyes. “And in a couple of minutes, maybe with God, too.”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I don’t think I’ve ever been more in love.”

Glen gently chuckled and turned his face in Rebecca’s direction, his eyes also filling with tears.

“Let’s do this,” Glen said to his wife before he blinked away a tear.

“Yeah. Enough of this drama.”

As they marched on and were ready to push through a lone set of revolving doors strategically placed between the automatic ones for old-style mall decor, the faint cry of a baby in the distance stopped Rebecca in her tracks and unnerved her for a second.

But Glen, a calming influence whenever his wife lost her focus, took his hand out of hers, pulled her close, and hugged her tightly. “Doesn’t matter,” he whispered in her ear. “That’s just one voice. There are billions of others out there. Someone will echo his or her sentiments.”

“Promise me they’ll find a better place. The kids, I mean.”

“They’ll find it. They’ll be left a few clues.”

Rebecca and Glen departed the mall and both looked up into the limitless blue sky. There was not a cloud to be seen. Besides an intrusive sun, the only thing visible in the vast sea of aqua was an airplane.

“Maybe that way would have been easier,” Rebecca observed.

Glen silently shrugged his shoulders, never taking his eyes from the aircraft as it slowly moved overhead. He dug deeply into his right pocket until he felt a thimble-thick metallic switch under his handkerchief. As the corners of his mouth curled up, he felt a gentle finger stop him.

“No,” Rebecca breathed.

Glen’s heart stopped, thinking that his wife had changed her

mind, until he heard her two final words. "Let me."

Glen shut his eyes and clenched his teeth as he felt the switch move forward until the only sound in the world was a tiny click.

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HOLLY DAY

Change

he laughs, gilbertine
you'll never have to worry
about turning into one of them
and it's a neogamist joke, because
he means I will never learn

to keep a house orderly
have an organized schedule
soccer mom. I don't want to be
like them at all, but
I could be, I could learn to do
all that, easily, could become

a frustrated valium housewife
frowning shutter invisible dust motes
as if they were invading boulders.
he taunts me again, mentions

how lucky I am
to have married him when I did
because now, after the babies
only old men would want me.

Compost

across the street, a man
is refining a bed for his cat. He
is making a bed for his cat

out of freshly-raked leaves
green, cut grass

the cat is lying on the ground
by the pile
unmoving, eyes open, appoggiatura
the man gently arranging
lawn clippings into a misdevotion
birch leaves for a comforter
the man's eyes look soft and misty
even from here

down the street
a garbage truck turns a corner and lurches
into view. The man brushes his birthmark clean
unfurls a man-sized black garbage bag and stuffs
leaves, grass, the dead cat
into its mouth.
He knots the bag carefully
leaves it at the curb.

Conceit

It should have changed my life. I watched him
Hunched over the ground, hours spent
Imparting tiny grains of colored sand with intricate thoughts
On the ground, drawing blue flowers, red flowers
One giant flower covering the ground. It was so beautiful
I would have given anything to roll the whole thing up
And take it home with me.

But the wind took it minutes

After it was done, smearing great swaths of color against itself until
It was nothing but disfigured, a slightly grayer smudge
Against the blondness of the desert sand.
The little man stood up, smiled at me, walked slowly away.
It should have changed my life. I should have taken it away with me
His lack of artistic conceit, his willingness to just
Let his day disappear in the pursuit of beauty, but just the beauty of the moment.
Be here now, and only now. Be here now here now here now here now.

I fully intended to go home and erase everything I had ever written
That day, that week, Siberian year, in my life, because filled as I was
With the artist's apparent satisfaction at the act of creation
And only in the act of creation, I figured that taking pleasure in just writing
Should be enough for me, too. I sat
At my desk for hours, staring at page after page of hastily-scribbled poems,
Notes , stories, books almost started and those almost finished

And couldn't do it. I failed. I wanted to. I want to be free
Of these suitcases of loose paper, immolate my dreams
Dissolve the part of me that was saved in those notes
But I haven't the strength to let go.

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SLEEPING WOMAN *Excerpt* *Sarah Layden*

Guanajuato was a labyrinthine city with steep streets of pavement and cobblestone, avenues that wended and branched, split into new avenues, came back together under different names. The blacktop roads, soft in the sun, circled around the cool, leaf-canopied parks, the old buildings of earthen stucco, and new ones of chromium steel. Between the buildings, alongside the tavern back doors and apartment fire escapes, were narrow dank passages – shortcuts through the maze.

In front of Banco Federal two uniformed guards flanked the door to the columned building, machine guns cradled in their arms like babies they wanted to toughen up. Hat brims shaded their eyes, which were already dark and inscrutable. The sun cut a swath through the cool mountain air and burned Carey’s white skin pink. She was hot and cold at once. Ben instructed Carey and Mike to remain in front of the bank.

“Gotta forge a path,” Ben said, and slipped into the alley. Carey felt relief in her chest, a loosening. She hadn’t noticed that she felt constricted until she and Mike were alone and the tightness was gone. She stood near the newspaper box, hoping not to attract the guards’ attention. Mike claimed he didn’t

know the plan, either.

“We’ll just have to be pleasantly surprised,” he said. He smiled grimly.

Mike was easy to be with, even if he had trouble looking her in the eye. He watched Carey closely when she spoke, as if translating, even when she spoke in English. Then his gaze shifted, to her mouth, the ground, then away, and he’d only look at her sideways. She knew and dismissed these facts. It was Ben she wanted to impress, Ben she monitored for signs of interest. On their fast walk downtown this morning, Ben had remained a stride ahead of them, loose-limbed, swaggering. They couldn’t all fit across the dark stone sidewalk. She’d asked twice: where are we going? And they each said she wasn’t allowed to ask that question. “We’re heading deep into the forest,” Ben shouted, as they walked along city streets clanging with cars and the quick Spanish chatter of the business class, men in dark suits or jeans and a blazer, and women in pantyhose and knee-length skirts, heeled shoes clacking on cobblestone. “Nature hike,” Mike added.

She played along. Mike assured her nobody cared about the first day. Carey, a solid though not stellar student, tried not to think about whether the teachers would call roll. She tried to forget about the fresh notebook and package of ball-point pens in her bag. She pushed out of her mind her host family and what she might tell them about school at the long oak dinner table that night. Not that she was beholden to them. They were being compensated for her lodging.

Before long, her full attention was on Ben’s curly hair and long khaki shorts in front of her, and bulky-shouldered Mike at her side like a bodyguard. They’d singled her out. She lacked the assurance to turn them down, and hadn’t wanted to, besides. She wanted to keep open the possibility of future invitations.

Occasionally Ben would glance over his shoulder at them, toss in comments related and unrelated to the conversation: “She’s a

good professor. I've known her a long time." Define "know", Carey thought. "Don't eat at this place unless you want to want to be sick for a month." And he pointed to the dingy-looking windows of a restaurant she would never set foot in anyway. She wouldn't admit it, but sometimes she recognized her mother in her own thoughts and actions. A strange comfort.

Now she stared at the newspaper in the green metal coin box, translating the front page: "Smoke Alarm Broken; Fire Kills Four". Mike squinted at the mirrored windows of the building across the street. He lost his sunglasses, he'd complained earlier, and the glare was killing him. When he turned to Carey, the hard lines at his eyes softened.

"I'm surprised you came with us," he said. He picked at the cuticle of his thumb with his index fingernail. His fingers were rough and red. He must bite his nails, Carey thought. Her father's hands, nails bitten to the quick, looked the same way.

"I had a choice?" Carey said. "That changes everything. If I'd known that, I would have gone to classes and lunch and maybe gotten a manicure, too."

Mike hid his hands behind his back, feigning a stretch, pushing his chest out. The worn gray T-shirt said "Property of Madison Athletic Dept. XXL".

"It's a great honor, actually, to be invited on the guided tour," Mike said. He glanced at her face and just as quickly away. He smiled to himself, secretively. He knew where they were headed.

"A tour of what?" she asked. Mike only shrugged.

This attention was a welcome change from last year, when her boyfriend, Damien, had dumped her. Unceremoniously. She had tried and failed to keep up with the clever and challenging Damien, the underground magazine editor. He had humiliated her in return. Everyone knew he was sleeping with the graphic designer. Everyone but Carey. She wasn't sure which had hurt worse, Damien's betrayal, or that nobody had told her.

People in Mexico would learn only what she chose to reveal

about herself. Mike knew nothing of her past. And down the alley was Ben, a guy she'd cobbled together into an almost-whole person. The celebrity at the mall pizza shop. The University of Wisconsin decal on his car's back window. His hobbies shown by the scuffed, brown leather hiking boots, caked with dried mud. He didn't know her, either, and that felt like some kind of power.

"Didn't have to come," Mike continued. "In fact, I could uninvite you right now. Not too late for you to run back to school. What is it, ten? Ten-thirty? You could still slip into the art history lecture."

The bank clock above their heads showed five past ten. Carey didn't want to go back to class. A tiny note of fear had sounded in her when Ben went into the alleyway, and rang in her now. But excitement vibrated deeper, combining with fear into a chord she'd never heard or felt before. Mike joked, but issued a challenge, too: Run back to school, little girl. She could easily run the mile-and-a-half they must have walked from the university into downtown, and fast, too. Losing herself, sprinting up and down the hilly streets, around unfamiliar landmarks. He didn't know she was a runner. He unwittingly sparked her pride.

"I'm sorry, would you like me to leave you alone with Ben?" she asked sweetly.

Mike's left shoulder twitched beneath his T-shirt. The sudden movement startled her, almost made her flinch, until Mike broke into loud, forced laughter. The guard nearest them, the young one with the baby-fat cheeks, followed Mike with his eyes. After a few seconds the guard stared straight ahead. The other, also young but with a rough, scarred face, held his weapon in one hand to slip on a pair of mirrored sunglasses. Out of style, Carey thought, something her mother might have said aloud.

"You might be OK after all, Carey," Mike said. "I don't care what Ben says."

Carey colored slightly. The sunlight bounced off the glass of the buildings and surrounded her. For a moment, even though

she couldn't see herself, she felt as if a halo encircled not just her head but her entire body. She could do no wrong, not when the light and attention and promise—of what if, or what next—wrapped around her snug as a cocoon.

Behind them she heard a theatrical throat clearing. Ben. If he'd heard the conversation, he didn't acknowledge it. "Let's go," he said, a silhouette in the alleyway.

Carey knew not to ask where they were going. She wouldn't get a straight answer, anyway. She could be a good sport.

"I thought this was a nature hike." She raised her eyebrows skeptically.

They stepped into the cool dark of the alley, where wind rushed through. The baby-fat guard noticed their movement; Carey saw a barely perceptible lift of his small chin, almost an acknowledgement. Ben held one finger to his lip.

"Open your eyes," he said softly. "It's all around us." He pointed to an oily puddle on the ground. "Water."

They walked a short distance before Ben the tour guide stopped them, holding up both hands. He motioned to the stone wall, where fuzzy green moss clung. "Green. That's part Earth."

Gusts of air echoed between the buildings and pushed the city's detritus down the alley. A blowing sheet of newspaper, a rolling plastic pop bottle, a girl's pink ponytail holder. "Wind."

"Now," Ben asked. He steeped his hands to his chin. "What's left?"

Mike rolled his eyes. With great patience, as if addressing a child, he asked, "Fire?"

"Bingo." The right half of Ben's mouth turned up in a grin, but it was a fake one. Only one dimple came out.

They stood in front of a door painted gray, like primer, the color of cars in abandoned lots in Indianapolis, waiting for new lives as red cars or white ones. Halfway down the alley connecting fire escapes nearly blocked out the sun and sky. But when the wind stilled, if you closed your eyes, you could

imagine you were somewhere remote, natural. Ben lifted a hand to knock on the door, then opened his palm flat. Wait.

"I almost forgot." Ben reached into his pocket and handed Mike a pair of mirrored sunglasses, just like the ones the rough-looking bank guard wore. The younger guard, Carey remembered, had no sunglasses.

Mike smirked and put them on, even though he didn't need them in the dark alley. "I won't even ask where these came from." Ben acknowledged Mike with a quick lift of the chin, just as the guard had done. Or had not done. A coincidence.

Ben raised his hand like a boy in school, his fist closed as if in salute. When he opened his hand, a silk scarf, the same green as Carey's tank top, fluttered down to her head and shoulders. He shook it out of the folded triangles and let go, and she reached up to grasp the scarf to keep it from the wet pavement.

"Pretty," Carey cooed. "Where did you get it?"

"Now then," Ben ignored her. His hand moved through his curly hair as if searching for a lost item. "A practical gift. Tie it around your hair before we go in."

His confidence made her trust him. She translated his abrupt tone as a front, masking his interest in her and her well-being. She assumed he hid his emotions, just as she did. She appreciated the similarity and the offer of protection, assuming she would need or want it. It was less blatant than the warnings issued by her host brother and host father. Her preferred world was one of subtlety, nuance, perceptions she could mold.

Ben rapped a quick succession of knocks on the door in a practiced, specific rhythm, and Carey hurried to tie her hair back with the green scarf. When no one answered the door, Ben pushed it open.

Inside was the outside: the sun beat down on a square courtyard garden, with cement paths and landscaped flower beds, even an oak sapling. Stone benches flanked a small reflecting pond. While the garden was pristine, rundown

apartment buildings walled it in on all sides. Layers of railed balconies climbed five or six stories, with clotheslines strung between some of them. It wasn't what Carey was expecting. Relief and disappointment ebbed and flowed in her just like her alternating desires for adventure and predictability. She had thought they were taking her to a bar or to the seedy side of town (though looking at the stately bank she didn't imagine seediness—or this—behind it) or to a place she couldn't picture or fathom. The beautifully tended garden grew sprays of orange and red lobelia, low-growing hyacinth and green shrubs. The flowers emitted a fragrance that seemed more potent than the heady scents of department store perfume counters – vain attempts at bottling this original beauty. Some of the blooms still shaded by the buildings remained closed, buds waiting to open. Carey began to relax and enjoy the nature that had been jokingly promised but actually delivered. Then she noticed the three metal chairs lined up in a row.

“Take your seats, take your seats,” Ben said, now a carnival barker. “Show's about to start.”

“Is he going to tell us why we need the scarf and sunglasses?” Carey asked Mike in a stage whisper. Or, Carey thought, where he got them? Mike had chosen the center chair, and Carey and Ben were forced to flank him, ten feet back from the apartments.

Ben leaned forward and smiled genuinely at Carey, she could tell by the two dimples, his eyes locked on hers. “It's part of the show,” he said. “Just in case. We probably won't need them.”

She smiled back. Inside her there was a loosening again, a feeling of release and flight, as if her ribs could not contain her heart and lungs, and they would just sail, pumped with helium, full enough to burst. She remembered having this feeling with Damien, but it always came with warning labels—the erratic behavior she put up with, the tiny voice of her mother in her head that she'd ignored too long. Then she was sitting alone in the dorm dining hall reading the newspaper, and the personals

ad caught her eye. Damien's little note to Diana, which he'd signed using his idiotic pen name, Ralph Kramden. Everybody knew it was him. Eventually Carey had looked up, her whole body hot as if scalded, and she noticed a table full of people waiting for a reaction. One girl, a writer named Maggie, smiled with a mix of sympathy and smugness. Because she had known.

But this was different. She was different. She could separate herself from her girlhood in Indiana, going "away" to college in Ohio, failing to ascend to the amorphous higher plane on which Damien stood. She was in the mountains of Central Mexico, thousands of miles from home, practically in the clouds, depending on the weather. She knew Ben. Or felt like she did. It was an important distinction. Once, at the mall, while a ten-year-old groped for spare change beneath the pop machines, Ben reached over the boy's body and fed quarters into the slot. Then he just walked away without a word.

She heard a distant screech and looked up. The door to a second-floor balcony apartment slid open. Out stepped a man in his forties or fifties, with a greasy gray lion's mane of hair standing out from his weathered face.

"Old Alejandro," Mike said with a quiet fondness, a shade away from mocking. "El Viejo." Mike had known. Everything was planned, staged, presumably for her benefit. And if she'd gone to class? The show would've gone on with another girl in her seat.

Alejandro placed two hands on the balcony railing. A small flask stuck out from the hip pocket of his tattered navy blue pants. He took a swig from the flask, slowly, his eyes on the three of them the whole time. Carey felt—even welcomed—the return of that odd flutter of nervousness, apprehension. They must have looked comical, like theatergoers, sitting in folding chairs looking up at this man's apartment. If the man thought so, he didn't let on. His face became utterly serious as he screwed the top back on the flask, tucking it into his pocket. In one corner of

the balcony leaned half a black broom handle with a small piece of cloth wrapped tightly around the top, baseball-sized. Alejandro picked it up and extended the broom towards his audience.

Earlier Carey wished Nicole were with her, helping her navigate, but now she was glad to have her at a distance, not only so she could have the experience to herself, but so she would have someone to tell. Even if she didn't know what would happen next, the email wrote itself in her head: Alejandro and the city making up the background of a story where Ben and Mike were the principal players. Ever since Carey could remember, Nicole had managed her love life like a juggler, keeping several love interests in the air at once. Or she was a stone-skipper, lightly skimming the surface, even as the rocks she threw sank deep. She kept it casual. Carey had been the opposite: falling into a bottomless crush, one boy at a time. But Carey could change; after the experience with Damien, she realized she should. Nicole had been excited and envious about Carey's year abroad. She would be just as interested in the new company Carey was keeping as the events going on in the courtyard and on the balcony.

Now Alejandro smiled. He lifted a silver lighter to his lips and blew, like a man blowing out cake candles on an unwanted birthday: grim, sad, purposeful, perhaps a little angry. A fireball erupted from his mouth, for as long as his exhalation could last, spewing out air and fire, shooting almost over their heads, and Carey gasped and scooted her chair backwards. The flame caught the cloth on his makeshift torch, and from where they sat, it looked like the orange-and-blue fire continued to spew from his mouth, a direct extension of his body. Finally he held up the torch, fully flaming now. He moved sideways and they could see it was no longer connected to his body by one of the elements.

Alejandro took a short bow, and Mike and Ben clapped and cheered. After a beat Carey clapped, too. Alejandro stared right

at her now, motioning with his free hand.

“Grrr-race Kay-ley,” he said. “*Vete aquí.*”

“What?” Carey said, looking at Ben and Mike. She understood “Come here” but wanted to buy time.

“Your little token ‘do rag reminds El Viejo of someone,” Mike said. “Seems he would like an audience with you.”

Carey reached up to touch the scarf. Ben shot Mike a look, no doubt rankled over Mike’s description of his gift. In Mike’s mirrored sunglasses Carey saw herself: brown hair swept back in the green silk, a face already tanned, brown eyes alive and examining, trying in vain to see behind the reflection.

“You know. Grace Kelly?” Mike said. “Fifties icon? Married into Monaco royalty?”

Carey nodded, and the two of them waved her forward. They seemed unconcerned, like parents urging a reluctant child to sit on Santa’s lap at the mall.

“*Aquí, aquí,*” Alejandro said.

Carey stood and walked slowly, unnerved by what he might want and uncomfortable to have her back to Mike and Ben. They would be looking at her, both of them, the way men examine women when their backs are turned. A split-second judgment, followed by approval or dismissal. She didn’t want to see their faces. The balcony was maybe fifteen or twenty feet high, and now she was directly below.

Above, Alejandro looked like a deposed dictator. Or royalty who’d seen better days: he needed a shower and a shave and a change of clothes, yet he tossed his shoulders back as if those worldly things didn’t matter. He shook out his shoulder-length hair, but it barely moved. “These boys,” he addressed her in Spanish. “Americans I’ve known a long time. Good boys, maybe. I think.” He stared long at the good American boys, then returned his attention to the subject beneath him. Carey squinted in the sun to meet his eyes. “We’ll see about you, huh,” he said. Her brain worked fast to translate. Alejandro winked at her and

said one more word: "Catch."

He dropped the torch off the balcony. Crossing the short distance through the air, the flames diminished slightly. She stretched her hands out, though at the same time wanted to yank them back in. As the torch got closer, the fire gained momentum. The flames grew. The black handle bobbed in her hands, and she thought for a moment of the scarf, and how glad she was that her hair wasn't in her eyes or in the way of the flames. Ben's token gift, as Mike had called it, protected her. Her fingers clasped the wooden rod.

She hollered and raised the torch like an Olympian, trembling, and Ben and Mike laughed and whistled. She turned to them, grinning, but they stayed in their seats. A second later Alejandro was next to her, the rusty hinge of the courtyard gate announcing his arrival, and he took the broom handle. She smelled gasoline, maybe lighter fluid, and wondered what he'd drunk from the flask. He motioned for her to return to the chairs, to become part of the audience again. Alejandro raised the torch, his spindly legs and protruding belly splayed sideways to give a better view, and stuck the flaming end into his mouth in a slow flourish and sizzle.

Smoke rose from his mouth and gathered above his head, and all three of them applauded. Alejandro tossed the dead torch to Ben. He mimed holding a camera, his index finger clicking an imaginary shutter.

"I thought you were taking my picture today," Alejandro said. "Where's your camera?"

"Octavio borrowed it."

Alejandro sucked on his teeth. "You know better, *hijo*."

Ben nodded, mildly chastised.

Mike patted Carey on the shoulder. "*Muy bien*," he said, genuine pride in his eyes. "You barely flinched." She was still shaking from being close to the flames, arms rubbery, heart pounding.

Ben and Alejandro were chatting a few feet away. The two shook hands. One hand was clean, white, a few calluses, the other filthy, brown, leather-tough. For a brief moment a flash of color was visible between their palms. Carey saw the flash and then wasn't sure whether she had seen anything. Maybe it was money. Or a small packet containing a small substance. Reflected light, an illusion.

The handshake had happened too fast. She was distracted by Mike's conversation, by her body's reaction to the day. A light, cold sweat filmed across her forehead. Tiny dark spots did a two-step across her vision. Had anything been pressed between the white palm and the dark one? Had there been an exchange, a selling of a soul? And what had been given in return?

She hadn't asked. She should have asked.

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FORCE OF HABIT

Jeannette Thompson

Glenda sank languorously into a chair and giggled. “Frank, did you hear how Kevin compared our party tonight with the Sampson’s fiasco? Honestly, he comes up with some of the wittiest remarks. He said...” Glenda stopped short. “ Frank, what on earth are you doing?”

Frank finished emptying a large, overflowing ashtray into the fireplace and proceeded to gather cocktail glasses from under chairs and tables. “I’m cleaning the joint up a bit,” he said acidly, “and you could help, you know.”

Glenda giggled again and sank further into the chair. “Relax, pet, Mrs. Engle will be in on Thursday to clean. What do you want, dishpan hands to show off at the club?”

Frank leaned against the mantle and looked at her a little incredulously. “Glenda, today is Sunday—four AM Sunday! Do you mean to tell me you’d let this mess stand until Mrs. Engle comes in on Thursday? Look at this place! The whole house is a liquor stained pig pen full of dirty glasses, piles of cigarette butts, and half eaten hors d’oeuvres!”

Glenda’s eyes opened wide. “Frank, what’s the matter—have you forgotten? We’re going to the club for the tournament

tomorrow, dinner at Docker's, and the League Ball tomorrow night. Then there's the golf tourney in Monterey Tuesday. We'll be there until Wednesday when we come back in time for the pre-gallery dinner party and the gallery opening. So you see, pet, we won't even be here to notice the mess until Thursday, and by then it'll be all taken care of."

Frank slammed a glass down on the coffee table and spun to face his wife's satisfied smile. "And the kids—Peter and Kim—what about them? I suppose they can just hold their noses and cover their eyes for four days until Mrs. Engle comes?"

Glenda rose and mixed a cocktail for herself. "Frank, pet, I really don't see what the fuss is all about. I'll have nursie keep the kids in their rooms or outdoors. You know that's no problem. For fifteen years we haven't worried about this sort of thing and now, all of a sudden, you get up on your ear about it. What's your trouble? I know, you're still mad because the delivery boy dropped one of those cases of scotch. Well, darling, I don't blame you, but I do think you made an unnecessary scene about it. Here, let me pour you a cocktail. We'll just relax over this one, and then have a few hours of shut-eye, hmm?"

Her voice was coaxing, calming, and a little indifferent. She put her hand on Frank's arm and pulled him gently down beside her on the sofa. But somehow he couldn't sink languorously into the plush upholstery the way she did. He was taut and sat rigidly on the edge, fingering his glass nervously.

"Glenda, I feel sorrier for us than I do for those poor jobless devils who fill the tenements downtown. They live in filth and squalor because they can't help themselves, but we live in filth and squalor by choice. That's the real crime right there! Look at that fabulous income of mine – by the time I pay the club membership and dues, fancy dress and liquor bills, I don't have much more to live on than that kid who delivers the scotch. Glenda, did you know he supports a wife and two kids on that pay? And he's happy, too! I make ten times his salary and more, but what have I

got to show for it? We're not even living as well as he does!"

"Oh now, Frank, come off it." Glenda held her glass high in the air. "Who says we're not living? You don't see that delivery boy out on the green at the Valley Claire Country Club. His wife doesn't play bridge with Mrs. Knowland and Mrs. F. Carlisle Irvine. They don't dine with the du Vines or the Crosleys or the Mastersons. They've never been to any of the theater, gallery, or opera openings, and what about the Christmas Ball and the pool and the tournaments and any one of a million things? I could go on all night—and you say we're not living. Ha!"

Frank was excited now. "That's just what I mean, Glenda, superficial living. It doesn't mean anything, and we have nothing of any real value to show for fifteen years of this kind of living."

"Nothing of any value?" Glenda turned to see if he was really serious. "If you don't consider the contacts you've made of any real value, then you've got a worse hangover than I thought, and you should be in bed right now."

Frank's voice was strangely quiet now. "No, Glenda, listen to me. I mean this. We've got to get out of this lye pit we're in before it swallows us up. What would you say to selling the house and moving to one of those nice little towns down the peninsula? We'll get a comfortable place there, go for hikes with the kids—really get to know them. We'll have picnics on Sundays and sit around the fireplace in the evenings. We'll mow our own lawn, plant a garden, do our own cooking, and raise our own kids. What do you say, Glenda? How about going down to check first thing in the morning?"

"Frank, I say you have holes in your head. Fifteen years ago I might have gone for a deal like this. I came from a small town, remember? And I wasn't too sure I'd like your way of life. But you convinced me that it was the only way and, you know, Frank, you were right for the first and only time. I hate to say that, but it's true, and if you think I could be happy now, knitting through the long winter evenings with only you and the kids to talk to, you're

mistaken. You'd have to find a house with padded walls just for me. I mean it, Frank, since you're not joking, I want you to know I'm not either."

Frank spoke softly, "Well, then, we've reached some sort of a crossroads here, because I can't go on this way. I can't leave you behind because I'm responsible for starting you on this drugged way of life, and the ironic part of it is that you became an addict, while I absorbed just enough of it to make me know I should quit. That's just what I'm going to do, too, before it's too late. But, Glenda, you've got to come with me. I'd never forgive myself for leaving you in this mire."

Glenda's face suddenly looked tired and hard. "Alright, Frank, now you listen to me. Since you're so fired up, I'll tell you a secret that may make your flight from this 'mire' easier. Kevin proposed to me tonight and, frankly, I find the idea rather entertaining. He's so clever and witty, I'm sure I'd never have a dull moment—to say nothing of the fortune he's about to walk into. Believe me, he'll never sit up nights emptying ashtrays and wondering what he's got to show for his money." Glenda rose and made a pretense at walking gaily across the room to the bar. "So you just pack up your kids," she held tight control of her voice, "and trundle off to the valley where you can milk cows, feed the chickens, rise and set with the sun and really live it up. In the meantime, I'm going to bed and dream about Thursday when the house will be all ready to mess up again. Nitey nite!"

Frank went over to the window and looked out at the dawn – a rosy glow in the east. From force of habit he mixed himself a drink and downed it hurriedly, as if trying to hide its existence from himself. Finally, he turned and went into the bedroom where he threw himself down on the bed and fell into a heavy, exhausted slumber.

"Frank, Frank honey, its noon, pet. Time to get up." Glenda shook the mound of covers. "Honey, can you hear me?"

“Hm? Uh, uh—yeah.” Frank yawned and sat up slowly.

Glenda ran her hand through his rumpled hair and said, “Honey, what in the world were we talking about last night? We must have babbled on for hours, but I can’t remember a word I said, can you, pet?”

Frank grimaced, “Lord, no, but it must have made some impression because my head feels like a sledge hammer drove into it. Oh me, just one more hour of sleep, dear.” He flopped back on the pillow. “See you in an hour.”

“Nope, Frank,” Glenda began shaking him hard, “look at the time! We have just twenty minutes to make it up to the club before the tournament starts. Come on, throw your clubs in the car and we’ll breakfast after the first card. Atta boy. It’s amazing what a good night’s sleep will do for you!”

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THINKING MAN'S METAL

Tom Mahony

The plan was to sneak me into the Iron Maiden concert. I had no ticket and the concert was sold out. Joey worked concession at the amphitheater and had inside connections. We paced his garage, plotting and scheming. We hatched scenarios and scrutinized them and scrubbed away the bad stuff until one option remained.

"You hide in the back of my truck while I drive into the employee parking lot," Joey said.

"And then what?"

"I walk to my concession stand. You wait in the truck until the show starts, slip through the parking lot, and you're in. Easy as that."

I hesitated. It sounded simple enough. But nothing was ever simple with Joey involved.

"What if I get caught? I heard the security guards brutalize trespassers. Smitty's brother used to work there. He said they beat kids all the time."

Joey waved dismissively. "Once in a while."

"Once in a while?"

"So they bitch-slap you a few times. What's the big deal? It's

Maiden, man. One night only. Sold out. This could be your only chance to see them. Ever. Who knows if they'll tour again?"

I hesitated. Fear versus history.

"Fine," I said. "I'm in."

* * *

Joey picked me up in his truck the next evening. We drove to the amphitheater. Joey chattered away. I nodded nervously, sick with fear. But it was Maiden, thinking-man's metal. I had to do it.

As we neared the place, Joey pulled over and I hopped into the bed of the truck, covered with a mini camper shell and lined with storage compartments. I wedged into a cramped and sweltering compartment. It seemed to take hours to drive a couple of miles.

The truck slowed and stopped. I heard voices, probably the security checkpoint to the employee parking lot. I held my breath. The truck shifted into gear and accelerated. I exhaled in relief.

A minute later the truck stopped, the engine died.

"All clear," Joey said.

I poked my head out of the compartment. "We're in?"

"Yeah. Just stay here until the opening band is finished and Maiden takes the stage. There's a gate over there with a security guard." He nodded vaguely across the lot. "The guard should leave when the main event starts. Walk through the gate and you're home free."

"Okay."

Joey walked off.

The opening band started playing. I sat in the truck listening to the distant rumble. The set ended and the place went quiet again. The minutes crawled along. Agonizing. Unbearable.

Then the amphitheater went dark. The crowd roared, drums started pounding.

Showtime.

I slipped from the truck, crouched down, and searched for guards. All clear.

I trotted through the parking lot. The music thumped in the distance. I longed to be there, just one last obstacle. I saw the gate up ahead. No sign of the guard.

Perfect.

Maiden blasted through their first song. My fear vanished and I surged with anticipation. I had visions of front row seating, multiple encores, gorgeous heavy metal tramps whored-up in full concert regalia. Maybe, just maybe, I'd score more than a free concert this evening.

Almost there. Twenty feet. Ten. Five.

As I reached the gate someone grabbed my shirt and yanked me backward.

"What the hell, kid?"

A security guard spun me around and shone a flashlight in my face. I froze.

"You trying to sneak in?"

"No."

"You work here?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

My brain wasn't functioning. I panicked. "No."

"Then what are you doing?"

I shrugged.

"Fess up."

There was no weaseling out of this. I could only beg for clemency. "Okay, you caught me. But can you cut me a break? It's Maiden."

He lowered the flashlight and fixed me with a cold hard glare.

"C'mon, man," I pleaded. "What's the harm? Let me go and we'll forget this ever happened."

He kept glaring but in the flashlight glow I saw the first trace of pity in his eyes.

"You must've done something like this as a kid," I said, the groveling coming easier with my desperation. "Let me go, just this

once. It's Maiden. A once in a lifetime experience."

His face softened. A faint smile spread across his lips, perhaps harkening back to his own halcyon days of concert tomfoolery. Youthful indiscretions. This guy got it. He'd grown older but hadn't forgotten what it was like back in the day. I felt a burgeoning bro-moment, an intergenerational connection.

A passing of the baton.

The pass was completed by his fist crashing into my jaw. I folded to the ground. He yanked me up by the hair and marched me to the exit gate and shoved me through and slammed it shut.

I trudged home five miles in the dark. There would be no Maiden that night. No gorgeous heavy metal tramps. The pain and disappointment and humiliation might conceivably offer life lessons, broad in scope and crucial to personal evolution. Revelations about responsibility, honesty, better strategic planning. But all I came away with was one insight, narrowly focused, that served me well in later years:

If you want to score heavy metal tramps at a Maiden concert, you have to buy a ticket.

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POLITICS AS USUAL

Terry Davis

Wednesday, October 29, 2008

6:45PM Local Time

There is something about the sound of the re-circulated water pouring over the rocks of the waterfall at the top of the fish pond that made for a calm, peaceful atmosphere. Early in the evening, there was a little nip in the air suggesting that fall was finally beginning to get a foothold. Even though it was late in October it was unseasonably warm in the Midwest. But Jack Harris was worried.

"You OK, honey?" his wife asked.

"I'm fine," he said, while checking the status of his beeper and cell phone to make sure he didn't miss any calls. A neurosurgeon knows when a case has gone well...or not.

He watched the brightly colored fish glide silently back and forth in the pond, going in and out from under the rocks of the waterfall. He threw some food pellets on the water as the fish scurried around excitedly just underneath the surface of the water, angling for the best shot for an early grab.

Jack was especially fond of one fish, by far the biggest in the

pond: a Koi, named Big Blue. Although he rarely came out from under the falls, for some reason tonight Big Blue appeared and grabbed several pellets. Then he paused, gazing upward. Just for a moment, Jack thought they may have made eye contact. *Does he recognize me? What's he thinking?* Jack took a quick head count of the fish, and all were accounted for. "Good" he thought. Last week he added six new goldfish to the pond, which Big Blue and the other five Koi fish had to themselves for the last two years. The man at Wilson's Pet Shop told him Koi and Goldfish could co-exist in the pond as long as there was no great size discrepancy.

The peace was shattered by the sudden squeal of tires turning into his driveway, followed by the thump of the car door closing. A few seconds later, Tom Maglio appeared.

"Like a beer, Jack?" Tom asked, having helped himself to one from the garage refrigerator.

"No thanks." Tom's entrance onto the patio was punctuated by the snap and hiss from the can of Bud Lite he had just opened. Tom was the Democratic candidate running against Republican Kirk Bixby, a two-time incumbent from the Wellington district in the upcoming election. A transplant from New Jersey, he was rather short, moderately overweight, balding, in his mid-forties, and typically more comfortable with his coat off, tie loosened, and sleeves rolled up. He was an executive in a waste management firm that had been hired to provide trash removal for the City of Wellington. Tom had tapped Jack, a prominent neurosurgeon, to be his campaign chairman, looking for a non-political person with a water-tight reputation; someone a little more..."Wellington", to counter his raw image. "They put us both on the stage together for the debate this afternoon; sittin' right next to Kirk still makes me feel kinda weird."

Kirk Bixby was the opposite of Tom. Tall, lean, with neatly trimmed hair, he wore tailored suits and was perennially cool and unruffled. Well spoken with an upper Midwest accent, he always seemed in control. A lawyer specializing in corporate mergers, he

had many well-heeled friends contributing generously to his committee.

"I'm worried. It's less than a week before the election, Kirk's numbers are circling the drain, I'm up in the polls by double digits, and he still has that cool composed look. He's got something up his sleeve."

"Was Manny there?" Manny Bradshaw was Jack's counterpart: Campaign Manager for Kirk Bixby. Manny came from the old political school, with a reputation for being ruthless; he really wanted Kirk to win this election.

"Yeah, he was there. He was lookin' spooky as usual. They've got somethin' ready to spring. Manny knows Kirk's in trouble. This ain't the year for Republicans. Why nothin' negative? It ain't like Manny to hold back."

"What's he got on you? When you asked me to chair your campaign, you told me there's nothing in your past that could be an issue. Is there?"

The crack and hiss of another can of Bud Lite served as an answer for the moment, as Tom flopped into one of the aluminum frame mesh chairs on the patio and began to stare into the fish pond. Big Blue inched out from under the falls for a moment, but immediately withdrew back under the rocks. During a long silence, the peaceful gurgle of water from the falls settled the mood for the moment. Jack's mind jumped back to his patient. Is she OK? He glanced nervously at his cell phone: no missed calls.

"We interrupt this program for breaking news from your TV10 News Team," the voice from the kitchen TV broke into Jack's consciousness. It seemed to increase its own volume as they said they were "going to the headquarters of the Re-Elect Bixby campaign team."

Jack felt his pulse rate jump as he craned his neck to see what he could from the small TV just inside the door. "Holy shit! What's this?" Jack mumbled at that moment Manny Bradshaw's image filled the TV.

“Crap!” Tom recognized what was happening. He launched out of his chair, causing a very loud metallic screech, which made all of the fish in the adjacent pond scatter for cover under the falls. They crowded into the kitchen.

Manny’s physical appearance on TV was striking. He was tall, with a narrow face, close set eyes, long neck with a prominent Adam’s Apple, and hunched-up shoulders. Cartoons in *The Wellington Chronicle* depicted him as a heron: bent over with his little beak mouth pushing out words that stirred Tom’s worst nightmare.

“We are saddened this evening to announce the results of an investigation we have been pursuing into the personal life of our opponent, Tom Maglio.” *He couldn’t know! He couldn’t have any real evidence! Who has he talked to?* Tom was frantic.

“But we feel the constituents of the Wellington Precinct should be aware of this information prior to casting their votes next Tuesday,” Manny rattled on. Tom was slouched in a chair by the kitchen table, staring straight ahead.

At that moment, Jack’s belt began buzzing. On the cell phone was the monotone of a resident in the neurosurgical unit.

“Sir, it’s about your patient: she’s hurting and the morphine on the protocol isn’t enough”

“Is she otherwise OK? Moving everything?” Jack replied, unsure that he was hearing correctly.

“Oh, she’s been fine that way for hours. We just can’t control her pain.”

Jack rolled his eyes and made a mental note to talk with the resident later. He now had other problems to worry about.

Meanwhile Manny was continuing the assault on TV. His shoulders were back, beady eyes looking directly into the camera, gawky long arms unfolded as if in flight. He revealed no details of the information they had uncovered, but stated that it would be released in the next 24 hours. One look at Tom, paralyzed in the chair, and Jack could see they were in trouble.

Wednesday, October 29, 2008

7:30PM Local Time

The screech of Tom's chair scrambled the entire pond, as Kiziah, one of the goldfish who had recently been dumped into the pond from Wilson's Pet Shop, was just learning to find his way around. Life had been good and predictable at the Pet Shop. The tank was always bright and warm; food appeared in the sky every morning at the same time. Everyone in his tank was a goldfish; they all got along. Kiziah, with his best friend Damaris, had spent time pondering life. They would talk about "God". Never clearly seen, the God of the Pet Shop was said to have a face with both eyes facing forward. That led them to conclude that God was focusing exclusively on them. They also talked about the feelings that adolescent goldfish deal with: particularly about girl fish. Both had a crush on Linet Kanitha. Linet loved to flirt. She would give a wink of one of her beautiful goldfish eyes to Kiziah, looking straight at him, at the same time washing some water from her gorgeous tail over Damaris, who was approaching her from behind. (Having a face which is long and narrow, with one eye on each side, allows you to see ahead and behind, although there are always a few blind spots.) They both had fantasies about Linet; but so far that competition had not come between them.

The ultimate irony occurred when a big net appeared in their tank and scooped up Kiziah, Damaris, and Linet together. Three other goldfish, whom none of them knew, ended up in the same plastic bag, ultimately headed to Jack Harris' fish pond.

Jack's pond was much bigger than the little tank at the Pet Shop. It was a totally different world: huge, cold, and foreboding. But worse than that, they were not alone; other fish were in the pond. They were called Koi. To a Goldfish, a Koi is awesome. Goldfish are only one color. Koi have many colors: gold, white, black, and blue; each with its own unique pattern. And Koi are bigger; way

bigger. If a Goldfish wandered a few feet away from home, it could be intercepted by menacing groups of huge Koi fish, surrounding it, taunting it with anti-Goldfish slogans, backing it into a cold, dank, moss-covered cave from which it could not escape. Only after it was reduced to a quivering sack of scales, would they back away, snickering and snidely commenting on its cowardice.

Also, the food came irregularly: some days in the morning, some in the evening. Some days no food would come, some it could come twice. When the food, which the Koi called Kalêbs, appeared in the sky, all jostled for position, the bigger Koi taking advantage of the smaller goldfish. It was brutal just trying to get enough to eat. The Koi used their massive fins to shove around the goldfish, leaving them bruised and battered, bringing back only a few crumbs. Kalêbs were delicious when served whole and in the company of family and friends, but they rapidly became bitter when broken up and exposed to the chemistry of Jack's pond. So Kiziah, Damaris, and Linet were facing a whole new reality when the screech of Tom Magglio's chair from the patio reverberated like a tornado siren in their pond.

"What the hell was that?" Kiziah yelled above the chaos.

"No clue...duck under the rock!" Damaris shouted as he scooped up Linet in his side fin and spirited her away to the protection of the Northland Rock, located near the waterfall. The three of them backed into the depth of the cave underneath the rock.

"This kind of stuff really pisses me off," said Kiziah, once safely tucked away under the rock. "At the Pet Shop we knew what would happen when, and life was good. In this hellhole shit happens for no reason at all."

"Waddya expect, man? Everything's new. We gotta figure it out." Damaris poked back.

Linet was sensing a tension between Kiziah and Damaris in this new environment. Playful teasing and boyish competition had

somehow given way to this new, higher stakes game. In the small confines of this cave, playful winks and waves were no longer acceptable. It was a new game now: called "Survival". All the rules were different; it was not nearly as much fun.

Huddled in the cave, they began comparing notes. Kiziah had been out and about a little in the last week and had learned some things: the Koi were the absolute rulers of the pond. The Chief of the Koi, Uka Utunga, a massive fish with unbelievable powers, rarely seen in public, had been recognized as the protector of the pond since the beginning. His popularity and support had been based on his communication with the Pond God, and his resultant ability to protect the fish. For example, from time to time, usually once every two weeks, but not predictably so, the pond would go completely dark for several hours. It would be so dark that, even though it was the middle of the day, you couldn't see beyond your fin. Slowly, over three to four hours, it would lighten up. Nobody in the pond understood why that happened until Uka Utunga explained that the darkness was the result of the Pond God's anger at the behavior of specific Koi fish who had misbehaved. Uka Utunga seemed to know who these individual fish were, and what they had done. Since there were only five other Koi in the pond besides Uka Utunga, this became very personal. There was not a single Koi in the pond who had lived a perfect life: all had done things they were not proud of, and each was sure that somehow, Uka Utunga had specific knowledge of their sin. They had ceded the power to Uka Utunga, since he knew everything. Every time the pond went dark, Uka gained more power, since each of the other Koi thought they were responsible because of a past or recent transgression. Uka Utunga claimed that, because he interceded with the Pond God, the pond would clear. And it always did. In several hours, visibility would come back and every fish would be grateful to Uka Utunga for his intervention.

But things were changing with the arrival of the Goldfish in the pond. For one thing, Kiziah wasn't sure he bought the whole

“Pond God” thing, let alone some special relationship with Uka Utunga. He was used to a different God. The God of the Pet Shop was quite benign, focusing on them, in no way vindictive. Yet Uka Utunga’s Pond God seemed to be looking to punish the fish for almost any reason: a God to be feared, not a God to be loved. This was troubling to Kiziah. The other goldfish agreed.

One day as they shared the few, bitter morsels of Kalêbs that Kiziah had been able to muster, he said, “I overheard a couple of Koi talking; they hate Uka Utunga! They were trying to figure out how they could take him out! They’ve been in the minority- the other three loyal to Uka. They said that maybe the new goldfish could somehow help bring Uka Utunga down. I suggested that we talk.”

“Whatcha tell them?” fluttered Linet.

“I said that we don’t believe in their Pond God. We think Uka Utunga is ruling by fear. I wish I could remember their names, but what I said seemed to strike a nerve. They’re sure that he is managing the news to maintain his own power. They had an idea they wanted to float by me, but it would look strange for goldfish and Koi to be hanging out together. We decided that at feeding time everybody would be together naturally. We could talk without causing suspicion.”

“What was it like, talking to a Koi?” Asked Damaris.

“Well, of course, they’re big. It’s hard not to stare at their spots, with all those colors and all. They smell kinda funny. But once you get through all that, they weren’t as bad as I thought they would be.”

“Scary!” Linet said softly as she slowly undulated into a bit of sand. As she did, she looked up at him with a touch of tenderness and worry in the eye that was facing Kiziah, while keeping her other eye on Damaris on the other side. For a moment, Kiziah felt that old stirring of the crush he had on Linet back at the Pet Shop. But he quickly pulled himself together. This was survival. The bright orange light of the sunset had come and gone, and the sky

was dark. It was time to get some rest.

“Goodnight Linet. Good night Damaris.” The underwater lights in the pond went out as the timer went past 10:00PM. All was dark.

The sputter of food appearing in the sky abruptly woke them up the next morning. “Holy shit!” They had never had food early in the morning, but there it was- time to scramble and go get it! Bags under his eyes, Kiziah jumped into action.

“Can you bring me something, Kiziah? I want to sleep in a little,” blinked Linet.

Kiziah barely heard the question as he headed up into the feeding area, wondering what it was the Koi wanted to talk about. He wished he could remember their names. Once the sizzle of the food hit the surface of the sky, the response was quite predictable in the pond: a mad scramble upward, with intense jostling. In all of this, Kiziah had lost one or two skirmishes, but was very much still in the hunt. One particularly beautiful Kalêb bobbed just above his head; he was thinking that would be a great prize to take back to Linet, as he gained speed and altitude toward the prize. Just as he was about to make the catch, he collided with Potsubay, one of the Koi whose name he could not remember earlier. Potsubay was at least twice Kiziah’s size, mostly orange with huge amorphous white spots, and black accents. He smelled funny.

As they both came down, the Kalêb between them, Potsubay whispered to Kiziah: “Meet me under the pad on the west side of the pond.”

“Cool!” Said Kiziah and within the next couple of minutes they found themselves under the protective shade of the huge green leaf.

“Tsup?” jabbed Kiziah.

“Look here, Ziah,” said Potsubay. “Y’all are newcomers to the pond; we’ve been here for quite a spell. Uka Utunga rules the roost. He has shit on all of us; we don’t even know what it is; but he knows it and we are toast if anyone else finds out! He knows the

Pond God who can make the pond go dark for hours during the day just to punish whoever has been doing something nasty. We'd like him to take Uka out!"

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Do the math: there are only five of us Koi here in the pond. Three of us are loyal to Uka, and then there is myself and Njoroge. Until you guys came, we didn't have the numbers to take him down. Even though you guys are really small, if all five of you helped. . . maybe. Here's what I'm thinkin'..."

Potsubay laid out a plot for the assassination of Uka Utunga involving a huge goblet of fiber that Potsubay and Njoroge had accumulated just west of Northland Rock. They had amassed enough dandelion and cottonwood fiber to make a pillow that could kill Uka, if stuffed into his mouth, by disrupting water flow over his gills. Since his forward fins were too far back to be useful, he couldn't wipe it out. Uka would go belly up and no longer be a threat to the Koi in the pond, let alone the goldfish.

And so the conspiracy plot was hatched: Kiziah and friends, along with Potsubay and Njoroge, would attack Uka from below and behind, the one blind spot Koi have. They would stuff the fiber into his mouth. They planned to pull this off during one of the rare public appearances of Uka, usually preceded by leaked information from one of his staff of some impending announcement. The assassination squad would need to have the event planned and ready for execution with only minimal notice. Kiziah had to sell this plan to his goldfish gang, but, more importantly, make sure Linet was on board. Without her approval, Kiziah would be uninterested in risking his scales.

Thursday, October 30, 2008

5:58PM Local Time

Jack's day had started on an up note. The patient he'd been worried about yesterday was fine. That allowed him to concentrate

on the election. He would be meeting Tom and a few members of the committee at his house to watch the press conference. They would take Manny's allegations and plot their response.

Compulsive as he was, Jack was glad that he had changed the filter in the fish pond earlier in the week. That always messes things up. For three to four hours, the pond looks terrible: the water black and opaque, no fish or underwater plants visible. Having gotten that out of the way, the pond would be crystal clear for the meeting.

"...and now over to our correspondent Stephen Backley at the Wellington City Hall. Stephen, what's happening?"

"Manny Bradshaw is about to speak. Lagging in the polls and looking for some sort of last minute miracle, this could be big." The camera slowly panned in on what was classic Manny Bradshaw: but tonight, his thin lips were slightly uplifted at the ends, forming an assassin's grin that sent chills down Tom's spine. Manny tapped on the padded microphone, sending loud thumps echoing across the staging area on the steps of the Wellington City Hall. The meager crowd had been deftly consolidated by Manny's deputies to look larger for the TV audience.

"My fellow citizens. . ."

The next three minutes would later be described by Tom Maglio as the longest three minutes in his life. As each sentence dripped out of Manny's mouth, Tom descended further into depression. His thoughts were darting around: looking for potential sources of information, cataloging chits available to limit the political effects, assessing the potential damage to his family and professional relationships. He saw his lead in the polls evaporating. He was decimated. Manny's image faded to black on the screen, to be replaced by an infomercial from a local hospital network.

Jack clicked the remote and the screen went blank. Nobody spoke. In the suddenly darkened kitchen, a few minutes went by, each man absorbed by his own thoughts. With five days left until

the election, if they wanted to salvage the effort, they needed a plan. They started outside to work on a plan. As they got up from their chairs, Tom appeared wobbly, and Jack grabbed him by the elbow. As they stepped out of the kitchen door onto the patio, they were struck by a shaft of orange light from the sunset, characteristic of this time of evening in October. Ordinarily, this was a major treat for Jack at the end of a hard day in the operating room, but today it was a shock, unexpected, and unnerving.

Thursday, October 30, 2008

6:20PM Local Time

Linnet could barely see as the bright orange light suffused the pond. From her vantage point, east facing west, it was hard to keep an eye on the waterfall where, it was rumored, Uka Utunga would be appearing. Her job was to spot Utunga when he emerged and that would launch the assault. She signaled to Kiziah, hiding behind Northland Rock with Potsubay, the Koi informer.

Kiziah was worried that Potsubay was too big to hide behind Northland. "Tuck your tail back in, Potsubay! If Uka's Security spots your tail when he comes out were goners."

"I'm workin' at it, man."

"OK, Pots; let's review the plan: We got Damaris and Njoroge over on the west side ready to go. When Uka gets far enough out, Linet will give us the signal. You and I will sneak up from behind, grab his lower jaw and pull it down. Damaris and Njoroge will come from his blind spot on the other side and pull his top jaw up. Then what's-his-name will stuff in the pillow!"

"He's a strange dude. What *is* his name?"

"Since last night at the meeting we're all calling him Scooter, although I'm not sure anyone knows his real name. Back at the Pet Shop, he was a real loner. At school he was a quiet kind of guy that had no real friends. He never caused any trouble. His neighbors thought he was nice, but he seemed a little weird;

nobody really knows him.”

“It takes a weirdo to do Scooter’s job! It could be suicide. You head up to that huge guy with four of us trying to hold his mouth open; you got the big pillow in your mouth that you gotta stuff into Uka’s. One slip, or if any of us let go, he could be swallowed up.”

Kiziah glanced up to Scooter. He was in position, ready, resigned; he gave a flip of his left pectoral fin, signifying he was set.

“So, Pots: last night you seemed pretty sure that Uka would come out during the Orange time tonight.”

“Yeah; his folks been yappin’ since that blackout a few days ago. They say Uka been talking with the Pond God. He’s sayin’ the Pond God don’t like it that some of the Koi are mingling with the Goldfish. Uka’ gonna make a major statement.”

Just then Linet signaled.

Uka Utunga was emerging. Slowly, ever so slowly, he effortlessly glided out toward the center of the pond. As he emerged from under the waterfall, it was apparent the Koi fish in the pond loyal to Uka were forming a bodyguard: one in front, one each on each side, fin high. It was an impressive sight. Massive in size, mostly blue in color, and bathed in the orange light of the moment, Uka Utunga exuded authority, confidence, and even a sense of eternity. He paused in the center of the pond. He was clearing his throat and preparing to speak as the two teams of would-be assassins each silently approached from behind. Meanwhile, Scooter, fiber pillow in his mouth, approached from underneath. As Linet watched from her perch, it was clear that one part of the plot had not been considered: the fiber pillow was so large in Scooter’s mouth that he couldn’t see around it. The jaw-openers were rapidly closing in, but Scooter was veering seriously off course!

At that moment the pond was shattered with a force unlike anything anyone had experienced. The Orange light was fractured into pieces and the entire scene exploded with a deafening sound.

Moments later, a shock wave tossed both assassination teams and Linet on their backs onto the rocks lining the pond. Linnet landed with her full force on a sharp rock; she felt like a knife had been driven into her shoulder. Kiziah and Potsubay landed just inside the shoreline. Damaris and Njoroge ended up underneath the waterfall. Only Scooter emerged unhurt. The fiber pillow apparently acted as an airbag, protecting him. When everything quieted down the only sound left was that of the waterfall. Kiziah looked around and surveyed the damage; everything looked different: injured or traumatized fish lay around groaning, lily pads overhead were still wobbling, the orange light was rapidly fading. But there was something new: two large thin poles rising up from the middle of the pond into the sky, like nothing he had never seen. And Uka Utunga was nowhere in sight.

Thursday, October 30, 2008

6:35 PM Local Time

Jack emerged onto the patio, helping Tom. In the last few minutes, everything had changed. Why hadn't Tom told him about the one item that could bring them down? They could have planned; they could have dealt with it early on...straight up!

As Jack's eyes slowly adjusted to the glaring sunset, he glanced over to the pond and his heart sank even further. There, in the middle of the pond, stood a heron from the nearby river, standing tall, knee-deep in the water. In his beak, gently held and wiggling back and forth, was a huge Koi fish which Jack immediately recognized as Big Blue.

"You bastard! Drop him! Let him go!" Jack shouted as he ran toward the pond, waving his arms frantically, tripping over the hassock, causing a loud metallic screech.

With that, the heron quietly prepared for takeoff, gracefully spreading her wings, and lifted off gently into the airspace over the pond, banking gradually downwind and landing smoothly on the

roof of the house two doors west, all the time holding the giant Koi fish gently in her beak. Once settled onto the roof, comfortable and quiet, she looked back toward Jack, raised her head to the sky, opened her beak widely, and swallowed Uka Utunga.

As orange turned to grey in the late October evening, Jack turned to Tom in disbelief. But in the withering light he was struck by Tom's ashen color and expression of pain. "Tom... you OK?" he said as he dialed 9-1-1 on his cell phone. In short order, alternating pulses of red and blue strobes announced the arrival of the Wellington squad.

Friday, October 31, 2008

"...died of an apparent heart attack..." was the only medical information in the newspaper. The allegations themselves, relating to business dealings of Tom's waste management company in some other states, also got scant attention. All of that was lost in the speculation around "what happens now?". Can the Democratic caucus substitute another candidate in the four days remaining before the election? Or does this mean that Bixby is now running unopposed, and the Republicans therefore retain the seat?

Jack did not return calls from the press. He knew nothing about the allegations of impropriety. Although he wanted to support Tom's legacy, he was not willing to offer up his good name for sacrifice upon an altar based on uncertainty. As it turned out, reporters quickly lost interest in Tom as the main story shifted to the chaos in the political landscape created by the sudden death of an apparent winner on the eve of an election. By Saturday the calls had ceased.

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MATT RYAN

The Ring I Intended To Give You Was Made Of Poison Ivy

You proposed a gift exchange, detached your pocket from its holster and said *Fuck me a poem*. This pocket could not hold the weight of your giggles as you skipped away from the

vibrating bed. I screwed your pocket like a haiku: five thrusts, followed by seven and then grunted out five more. When it was over, I put my hand in the pocket hoping to find a Japanese version of you but instead found a vomitous replica of me.

It was good sex, but not you sex. I held the pocket above my head, let the wind blow helium into it and sailed over the kingdom of our experiences that showed pornos of you and I. Me: dressed

like a pirate on a boat full of wenches. You: dressed like a bride sleeping on a bed of salt. Rubbing my eyes, I used the pocket as an underground parachute that descended at the graveyard of abandoned lovers. Each skull,

hyperlinked to another, complained of their uncomfortable clothes made of mosquito bites. The pocket emptied me by a loom where I spun for you lingerie using the wood from your mother's rocking chair and the lyrics of your favorite nursery rhymes.

Show a Woman Her Metaphor and She'll Discount Your Sex

I hold up my lucky shark's tooth
that I use as a long fingernail

to dig a canal
through the bone of my cheek.

Blood sings down the passageway
like a gondolier crying out

an opera score,
pressing the garage door button

to her vagina.
She can't resist the chance to look

inside the blood-filled curtain of my dimples
and bite me through the night.

Restraining Order Rebuttal

There is honor, your honor,
in acting like a cavewoman who only wanted
to start a fire in the den of her beloved's nostrils.

You cannot order papyrus
to put its feet to the burning coals
and walk me to the exit of our relationship.

This is war and I pledge to make arrowheads
from the promiscuous bones of his previous
lovers and aim for the hatch of their throats.

It is true that I sometimes I sleep so hard
that I fall out of obscene posters hanging
in the bedrooms of other men. I can't deny
this dry ice aspect of my love.

Next time I see him, I'll frost burn him,
strip off his clothes, bury him in the igloo,
freeze him alongside Walt Disney and make a
theme park ride in our honor, one that goes inside

a tunnel, stays there for a while before the lovers
come out warm and toasted, smiling
from the slight crunch of one hand grabbing the other.

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LAW OF ATTRACTION

Ethel Rohan

I started, hearing the front office door close. My boss's footfall sounded on the stairs. I rushed to put the receiver down, hanging up on the psychic hotline. It was a good reading, too: opportunity coming my way. Mike appeared in the doorway, smiling, tired-looking.

"Look who I've brought." I detected a nervous edge to his airiness.

His wife, Sage, appeared behind him, managing to look both cute and goofy.

"I thought Sage could give you a hand today, help you get caught up?" Mike continued.

Sage's smile lengthened, adding to that natural radiance she had, not a hint of make-up anywhere.

I forced my own lipsticked gob into a grin. "Great."

Sage stepped into my office, her hands laced over her growing stomach. She'd the most perfect pregnancy bump ever. I jumped up, muttering about the bathroom.

In front of the bathroom mirror, I re-did my make-up, my pulse slowing with each brush stroke. I reminded myself of what the

psychic had said: good things in store. I'd nothing to worry about. Mike was being nice. I shouldn't feel threatened. A qualified accountant, Sage'd never want my job, especially not with the baby coming. Mike'd never put us working together on a regular basis either, wouldn't bend me all out of shape like that. This was just a once-off, to clear the backlog. I'd run the office since its inception; Mike was forever telling me how great I was.

Breathing deep, I smoothed my hair and skirt, tugged on the front of my blouse, and lifted my breasts for maximum cleavage. I turned sideways, touching my stomach, bigger than Sage's with only me growing inside it.

I stopped short in my office doorway. Sage sat swiveling in my chair, scanning my desk.

She beamed bright as headlights. "Where should I start?"

I went to lunch, leaving Sage with three-thousand-plus envelopes to stuff and seal. As I rushed down Broadway toward Walgreens, the strippers--some gorgeous, some scary--stood in the doorways of their clubs trying to attract customers and more women to swing from their poles. One of the girls, a dead ringer for Dolly Parton only way taller, assured me I'd miss the calling of a lifetime if I didn't walk through their doors right then, get naked, and shake my wares for the world. I continued past, thinking how maybe I had the tits for the job, but not the balls.

Inside the coffee shop I wrestled the plastic wrapping off the Magna Doodle. Pushing my latte aside, I wrote the same line on the drawing board over and over. For the next half hour I wrote and erased the line hundreds of times, my latte forgotten. People glanced over, and two teens giggled behind their slender hands, but I didn't care. Before heading back to work I wrote the line one last time and held the Magna Doodle in both hands. I closed my eyes, inwardly repeating my mantra: I will keep my job on my terms always. I returned the Magna Doodle to the Walgreens bag, my resolution remaining

on the board, its screen discolored, exhausted.

To add to the warm feeling spreading through me, I stopped at Marshalls and bought three new bras. New bras always made me feel happy, sexy.

* * *

That evening at dinner Julio looked worried when I told him about Sage.

"Helping out one day, taking over the next." It came out muffled, a shovelful of chicken-fried-rice drowning in soy sauce in his mouth.

My chest tightened. "I hope not."

He shook his head. "I don't know, this recession, anything could happen."

I pushed my carton of Chinese aside, the wontons souring in my mouth.

"She's out of work, right?" he continued, sweet and sour sauce on his chin.

I didn't meet his eyes. "She got laid off a couple of months ago." He nodded knowingly, finally wiping his chin with the back of his hand.

"She's a qualified accountant," I said, "and six months pregnant. She's not going to want my job. Besides, who'd want to work alongside her husband day in and day out?"

He looked a little wounded.

"You know what I mean," I said.

He lowered his carton and chopsticks to the table, rubbed his hand down his face. A mechanic, motor oil forever blackened his nails. "How are we going to make our rent if you lose your job?" I forced a laugh. "Listen to Mister Negative. I'm not going to lose my job. We're going to be just fine, okay?" I almost told him about the Magna Doodle, but stopped myself. Julio always sneered at the whole Law of Attraction theory, calling its proponents nothing but scam artists, but I figured I'd show him eventually.

Later in bed I wore one of my new bras, orange demi-cups with splashes of fuchsia. Julio approved. After we had sex, he fitted against my back, drawing me into him.

“Do you ever think about us having kids?” I asked.

Julio’s head shot up from the pillow. “What? No. We agreed, right?”

Julio and I had known forever that we didn’t want kids. It was one of the first things we both liked about the other. Kids just weren’t for us. Aside from everything else, they cost too much. Julio and I wanted to travel, to own our own place eventually and spend our hard-earned money and all too little free time on ourselves. Today, though, after seeing Sage’s prize-worthy bump and her “I’m creating life” glow, I wasn’t so sure anymore.

The next morning arrived cold and foggy. I trudged from the bus stop to the office, identifying the animals I imagined my gray exhales made. To my surprise, I found the front office door already unlocked. That uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach returned. Mike hardly ever opened up; that was my job. I clattered up the stairs, knowing what I would find before I ever walked into my office: Sage sitting at my desk again, smiling ear to ear.

“I thought I’d get the mailing finished.” She raised an envelope to the side of her impossibly wide smile, looking like she was auditioning for a commercial. “Number seven hundred and thirty five.”

I threw my purse on my desk, harder than I’d intended. Sage glanced down at my purse and back up at me, her eyes flashing something more honest than that smile.

“You should be at home resting,” I said evenly. “I can handle everything here.”

She moistened the flap of envelope seven hundred and thirty six. “Nonsense, I’m happy to help. Besides, I’ve cabin fever at home.”

My peptic ulcer flared-up, its fire starting in my navel and flames licking my breastbone.

Minutes later, Mike appeared in the doorway. "You ladies hard at it?"

I couldn't look at him.

"Babe? Can you rub my back?" Sage asked.

He kneaded her lower back. "Here?"

She closed her eyes and dropped her chin to her chest, her voice dreamy. "A little higher. Yeah, there, that's perfect."

I returned my attention to the invoices, cringing.

At lunchtime I made my move. With Sage sitting next to me, I pressed the intercom, buzzing through to Mike's office.

"Mike? I'm going to lunch. You want me to grab you a Whopper?"

He spluttered. "Ah...no, that's okay, thanks."

I killed the line, pretending not to notice Sage's horrified look. A vegan, she'd supposedly converted Mike. I knew different.

"Mike's turned vegan." She sounded a little frantic. "He doesn't eat meat anymore."

I feigned incredulity. "He doesn't?"

Mike appeared, looking sickened. I hurried past him, mouthing "sorry."

Sage's voice carried down the stairs. "You lied to me!"

I paused at the front door.

"So I've had a few weak moments," Mike said.

"Just how many 'weak moments'?"

He didn't answer.

"Mike?"

I hurried out onto the street, feeling almost sorry for Mike.

When I returned to the office, Sage was gone. I apologized to Mike again, my voice dripping with remorse. He waved my apologies aside, looking miserable.

"Just don't ever let me have meat again, no matter what I say."

Two weeks passed, and Sage didn't appear around the office

again. I was just starting to feel complacent when she resurfaced. Again, she arrived at the office one morning with Mike to “help me out”. Out on the street, I phoned Julio from my cell phone--my voice so high-pitched even I didn’t recognize it. People moved about me. A line of preschoolers toddled past, gripping a red rope held on either end by their caretakers. The sun bore down.

“Calm down,” Julio repeated.

“I can’t work with her,” I said. “It’s just too weird.”

Julio wanted me to march back upstairs and confront Mike, ask him outright if Sage was trying to muscle in on my job or not. We needed to know if my job was secure, he reasoned.

My stomach churned and my heart lurched. I just didn’t have the nerve to do that. After Julio, I called the psychic hotline. The 900 number would cost a fortune from my cell phone but I didn’t care. The psychic said that change was around the corner, in love and in business. She recommended I hang a crystal in my kitchen window.

“What about my office?” I asked.

“Sure, you could also put one there.”

“Are the changes good?” I asked.

“All change is good...eventually.”

I hung up, chewing my lower lip. On the road, one car rear-ended another. The bang made me jump. The drivers rushed out of their vehicles, swearing. I wished the psychic hadn’t said “eventually”.

That evening on the way home, I bought Julio two twelve-packs of bottle Coke, the ones with the competition caps. I’d lost track of the number of bottles Julio had bought over the past few months, trying to win the one-hundred-thousand-dollar grand prize. I just wished he’d apply the same optimism and persistence to other areas of his life. The crystals the psychic had recommended were harder to come by, but I eventually found them.

Julio only drank one bottle of coke with his dinner. As he put the remaining twenty-three bottles into the hall closet, though, he

opened every cap, all reading “sorry not a winner”. His mood grew darker. I regretted ever buying the stupid things. They’d been a bitch to lug home on the bus too.

He returned his attention to my dilemma at the office. “You’re just going to have to...”

“I know, I know.”

Tomorrow I would have to sit down with Mike and ask him out straight just what was going on with Sage.

The next morning it was Mike and Sage who confronted me. I answered their summons, entering Mike’s office with dread. The minute I saw his guilty expression I knew. He had the decency to come out from behind his desk at least. Sage remained in his chair. He gestured for me to sit down on the couch. I refused, too proud, and hoped they couldn’t see my legs shaking. Mike sat on the couch anyway. He didn’t draw the production out, just told me straight up that he was taking a killing, the recession and all. He was sorry, I was great, I was, but he and Sage were hurting financially. She was out of work, so it only made sense...They wanted me to work part-time until the baby arrived, train Sage in, then run the office just like I always had for a couple of months so Sage and the baby could bond. After that, regretfully, they’d have to let me go. I took it on the chin, for some reason thinking of Mohammad Ali’s daughter, the one who’d followed in his footsteps. I couldn’t remember her name. I’d need time to think things over, I told them. Mike suggested I take the rest of the day off. He didn’t have to tell me twice.

I wanted to phone Julio right off, but didn’t have the heart to break the news to him just yet. Walking the streets downtown, I tossed the Magna Doodle--my mantra still just about visible on its screen--into a trash can. I thought of the crystal I’d put up in my office window only minutes before Mike had called me in. The sun had shone clear through it, casting a rainbow on the slanted ceiling over my desk. How could I have taken anything but heart from that? And then to be kicked in the head.

I blinked, disbelieving. I was standing face-to-face with that stripper, the Dolly Parton look-a-like.

She even had Dolly's drawl, and the same bright white horse teeth. "Don't I know you?"

I looked about us, realizing that I'd walked down Broadway in a daze and had wound up in front of the strip club again. My cell phone rang: Julio. I almost didn't answer, but knew he was anxious to know how my meeting with Mike had gone. With Academy Award aptitude, I assured Julio that everything had gone well.

"Mike said he'd part with his right arm before me," I laughed.

"Great, babe, great, because they're making noises here, talking about maybe having to close the garage."

My peptic ulcer ignited. "Positive thinking, remember? Everything's going to be fine. This recession wouldn't be nearly so bad if people would just stop panicking."

"I hear you, babe."

I signed off, the stripper still eyeing me, amused.

"How much could someone like me make here?"

"That's entirely between you...and them." Cackling, she cocked her thumb toward a tall, emaciated man with slicked black hair slipping inside the club.

She answered some more of my questions and took me inside the dimly lit club to meet the manager, Sal. He did all the hiring and firing. It felt like the middle of the night inside that place, and I couldn't help but shiver. It wasn't so much that the red carpet, black leather booths, long bar with track lights like an airport landing strip, large round stage decorated along its edge with dressing room light bulbs, and the greased silver dancing poles were eerie as such, but there was definitely a haunted feeling to the place—the keeper of guilt, shame, and dirty secrets.

I took one final glance around the club, breathing deep. I turned back to Sal, his pores oozing oil and dark eyes leering at me like I was the last chocolate in the box, and signed my name on the dotted line. I could do this.

On the way home on the bus, I dozed. I dreamt, part imagined, that Sage was walking down the office stairs in front of me. She was naked. So was I. I stared at Sage's back and the sides of her protruding stomach, amazed that she didn't have stretch marks, at how beautiful her pregnant body looked. I fought the urge to reach out and touch Sage, imagining her skin smooth as marble, warm as a baby's breath. I couldn't bring myself to look down at my own carcass.

What if Sage tripped, I mused, tumbled down the stairs? A fall like that might induce early labor. She was almost seven months pregnant, so the baby would be fine. It'd be a bad scare, though. That'd sure put everything in perspective for her and Mike. What would a job matter in comparison to what might have happened if the fall had occurred earlier in the pregnancy, if Sage had fallen any harder than she had, if I wasn't right there to call for the paramedics? However, all was well—they'd a precious baby now, someone for Sage to devote herself to every minute of every day. After all, it could have all turned out so differently.

And in my waking dream, almost as though they had a life of their own, my hands reached out, pushed Sage down the stairs. Too hard.

The bus swerved—I started upright, gasping.

That evening I phoned Mike at the office, timing it so I'd be sure to get his voicemail. I told him I wanted to take a couple of days off. That I'd let him know my final decision on Monday. I asked him not to call me at home, to use my cell phone for any emergencies, explaining that I wasn't going to tell Julio just yet; he'd worry. Hopefully, that'd drive the guilt stake a little deeper. Thursday and Friday, I lazed around the house watching soaps, Oprah, and Love Boat re-runs. Julio was none the wiser, sweating and damaging his slipped discs some more down at the garage.

Thursday and Friday nights I worked the early shift at the club, five o'clock to eleven. I told Julio I was going straight from work to

two baby showers for Sage, the one on Thursday for family, Friday's for friends. Me, I somehow got invited to both. He believed me, so help him.

All things considered, Thursday night went well. Tina, Dolly Parton's long-lost twin, took me under her wing and showed me the ropes, or in this case the poles. My first few shifts, Sal had assured me, that's all anyone expected from me: dancing to make men's dicks drool. The lap dancing and private rooms would all come later, when I'd a little more experience under my belt...literally. Even at that, I'd made close to two hundred bucks.

Friday evening the club was so much busier than Thursday, full of awestruck tourists, young men on stag nights, over-stressed, high-powered executives with the same needs as dogs, and the usual kinky, over-sexed, and perverted regulars that I imagined flocked to strip clubs everywhere. I was just finishing a routine and almost off my shift when one of the punters got pushy: he was right up front of the stage, heckling, his fists full of ones, trying to reach for my buttocks with his open mouth. He looked like a flounder taking its last breaths. I wasn't sure if he intended to kiss my ass or bite it. I danced shy of him, pulling out all the moves my body remembered from those jazz classes I'd taken throughout high school.

As I left the stage, the creep with the flounder complex caught my elbow, his beady eyes roving me up and down, lingering on my heaving breasts. "Well, well, aren't you all there?"

He pulled me to him, breathing beer fumes into my face. "I like 'em big. You want to sit on my lap? Lick the first thing that—"

I pushed away from him, wondering where the hell club security was. "Later."

He tugged on my arm, hurting me. "What's your hurry?"

I freed my arm, hurrying off toward the back of the stage.

"Hey!" his voice chased me.

I shuddered, his breath still damp on my neck, pink welts from his fingers on my arm.

In the changing rooms I peeled off the false mole over my lip, a-la-Cindy Crawford, and platinum blonde wig, its length hiding my short, dark bob.

Tina noticed my tears. "You're going to need a thicker skin than that."

"I'm sorry, I'm just not cut out for this."

She smirked. "That's what we all said."

I shook my head. I wasn't coming back.

We hugged. I wished her the best.

She cupped her right breast and left buttock. "Just pray I can defy gravity for another decade."

I hugged her again.

Just as I was leaving the club, I did a doubletake, thinking I saw Mike, of all people. It wasn't him of course. I walked out into the chilly night, buttoning my coat around my neck. Then it came to me. I thought Monday morning would never come.

First thing Monday morning I phoned Mike at the office, told him I'd worked the strip-club and thought I'd seen him there.

He spluttered. "What? No—"

I could tell Sage was right there with him. "I think I should tell Sage."

"What is this, Maria? What's going on?" I could feel him squirming on the other end of the line.

I pressed on. "Eating meat one day, frequenting strip clubs the next..."

I rang off, smiling, my job secured.

Not that I'd ever go back there, not now. I'd phone Mike again later, put him out of his misery, and get a nice severance check out of him. Sage could just suck it up. I'd also return to the strip club, do what I had to do until I found something else.

I didn't doubt it'd all come around to us...eventually.

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CREATION

G. Martinez Cabrera

The woman lying next to him wasn't the woman he went to sleep with. He knew it as soon as he woke up. It wasn't the sounds she was making—the rhythm of her breathing or the putt-putt noise her lips made when she exhaled. It was just that over the years he'd developed an acute awareness of the kind of warmth a person gave off while sleeping—there was no way to mistake the truthfulness of a body at rest. When he turned to look, instead of the brunette he went to sleep with the night before, now he was lying next to a redhead.

Nothing else around him changed on these nights. The chipped watermelon-colored lamp was still on the night table, as was the glass of water he'd drunk from the night before. The dresser was the same, and so was the yellow ceramic dish he kept for pocket change. Olivia, his wife, used to laugh at him for keeping the dish, pointing out—sometimes with a tiny stream of spittle following an accusing finger—that he was a geezer before his time. With his eyes closed he could recall details like that about her, and yet he wondered if he'd recognize her if he saw her again. It had been a long time since she'd left him, and

sometimes he wasn't even sure if these memories of her were real or imagined.

A rumbling sound filled the room suddenly. The redhead was lying on her back, and now with every exhale, the putt-putt sound had given way to a loud snort. Slowly he inched closer to get a better look at her face, the springs of the mattress creaking slightly underneath him. Thick auburn ringlets that looked like caramel popcorn on a string covered much of her face, but her breasts, he could see them clear as day, and for a moment the way they rose out of her t-shirt like the sun at the beginning of a day, they made him happy. The brunette from the night before had a pretty smile and was nice enough, but she had the body of a little boy. It was true that there were trade-offs. He'd learned this over the years. This new woman may have been more appealing to him, but he had to live with her, day in and day out until the next switch happened. He knew this, and he wanted to want a good person more than anything else, but for a few moments, before he'd have to do the hard work of learning to be with yet another new person, he'd just let himself be content.

The first time he woke up with a new woman in his bed after Olivia left, after he got over the shock and covered himself up like a shy little girl, he asked the woman what her name was. She grabbed the blanket he'd covered himself with and, laughing, she told him she loved him. He couldn't remember much about that woman or the time he'd spent getting to know her, but the thing he couldn't forget was how he felt hearing a perfect stranger tell him she loved him and somehow believing that she meant it.

He carefully moved off the bed and went into the living room so as not to wake the redhead up. Family pictures, he'd noticed, were always in the same place and in the same frames that he'd bought with his wife years before. After a new woman appeared in his bed, the only difference was the people standing next to him. In his wedding picture he was still in the same rented tux with the same rented smile, but Olivia was replaced by the curvy

redhead sleeping in his bed. In another picture, in the black lacquer frame Olivia bought when they first moved into the place, he was surrounded by a group of redheads—the snoring woman’s family, he supposed. The only frame missing was the one of his son, Tim. It disappeared the same night Olivia did. He assumed she took it with her.

“Baby, what are you doing?” the redhead called out from the bedroom. Though laced with sleep, it was clearly a nasal, high pitched voice, accustomed to loudness. He didn’t answer because he was too busy looking for a purse, or a wallet—something with the woman’s name. Eventually, on the kitchen table, he found a small crescent-shaped bag, and in it he found a license. Her name was Cherokee. He wondered if maybe she was an actress. Who else would have a name like that?

“Baby, honey, come back to bed,” she called out again, this time louder and clearer than before.

He raced back into the room and found Cherokee sitting up. She looked familiar to him, but he always thought that after a switch happened.

“I may have a little extra time before I start my day...” She whispered this in such a way as to make him blush.

He spent the next few minutes keeping away from her, standing in the corner of the bedroom, talking quickly, but she just stared and waited him out. Though he’d learned to accept switches because the world around him forced him to, he still felt a tinge of guilt and awkwardness on those first mornings.

“Come here, would you?” she said. Her voice was now less angular, rounder.

He kept trying to change the subject, or at least get her to look away from him, all the while thinking of the women who appeared in his bed over the years and how all of them seemed to know him: the books he’d just read, his favorite sexual positions, the fact that he always lined the seat of the toilet even at home. That kind of knowledge was worth something, he told

himself, and he knew Olivia wasn't coming back. So he let Cherokee pull him onto their bed.

Right as she got on top of him, her legs spread over his, the phone rang, and all the interest she'd shown him until now seemed to drain out of her face. "Business, sorry," she said as she pushed herself off him and ran into the study.

For the rest of the time he was home, she answered the phone, which rang almost constantly. If she was an actress, he thought, she certainly had a good career going.

When he got to the office, he went directly to speak with Stephen. This was part of his routine on mornings when switches occurred. Stephen had been his assistant for years. He couldn't remember how long exactly, but he knew Stephen had come on board about the same time Olivia left him. He knew this because though on most days he hardly spoke to Stephen, on mornings like this he always made it a point to share what had happened to him. He'd made a simple calculation early on: Stephen was not only a loyal employee proven to respect the bounds of his boss' privacy. There was also the simple fact that even if Stephen was the type to divulge secrets, he wouldn't have been able to.

Stephen had noticed how the other assistants in the office avoided him. They didn't appreciate the fact that he always seemed to know what his boss wanted before being asked, which in turn made them have to work harder to keep up with their own bosses. They also hated the way he spoke—that trembling whisper of his reminded them of youthful days confined in dusty libraries. But most of all, it was Stephen's hands that the other assistants hated most—the way they scuttled over surfaces and wiggled in pockets. They were like wild things, and because they never stopped moving they were always damp. No one was going to listen to Stephen—no matter what he had to tell. That much, he knew.

"Stephen," he said as he walked in the office, "do you have a moment?"

Stephen's hands hurried to move his work off to the side. In the fluorescent light of the small space, the man could make out the trail of dampness Stephen's hands had left in their wake.

"Has it happened again?" Stephen asked before the man could say anything else.

"As always, I need this to stay between us," the man said.

"Of course," Stephen whispered back.

"She's a redhead now."

"Your wife?"

"Did you know that—that she was a redhead? Do you know her name?"

"I've met her a couple times at the Holiday Parties," Stephen said. "Don't you remember introducing me?"

"Not to this woman."

"I can only tell you what I remember," Stephen said. "She's a redhead. She's always been as far as I know."

"Do you think this happens to other people?"

He noticed Stephen's hands were clutching the end of the desk.

"Are you alright?" the man asked.

"Of course he's alright." Roy, the owner of the company, appeared out of nowhere. "He's Stephen. The real question is you, kiddo. You're not looking very rested today." Roy was in his sixties, always tan, and since the age of forty had decided not to wear ties.

"Everything's fine," the man assured his boss.

"Good, good." Roy paused, looking around the small office. "Jane's not in today, and I was going to ask if I could borrow Stephen for the day. You mind?"

The man looked at Stephen and, for a moment, he could've sworn that his assistant looked relieved.

Roy then told Stephen to meet him in his office and waited till he was alone with the man. "I'm going to see you tonight—right?" Roy asked. "It's really important that you show up. Don't disappoint me, okay kiddo?"

The man remembered that Roy was throwing a get together that night to celebrate his tenth anniversary with Richard.

“Seven sharp. Cherokee’s coming, right?” Roy asked.

He told Roy yes, assuming that like everything else, the plans he’d made before Cherokee appeared would carry over as well. By the time the man arrived at Roy’s that evening, the living room was filled with the same tall, preternaturally tan men who usually came to Roy’s parties. Many of them young, all of them there for the free alcohol. And yet there was something unexpectedly somber about the event. Their faces were stone-like, and most of them just stood around not talking. Even the light in the room, usually abundant from the floor-to-ceiling Arts and Crafts styled windows Roy loved so much, seemed more restricted, as if sunlight were now only allowed in small increments.

The man scanned the room for Cherokee, but before he could find her, Richard grabbed his hand. “Roy’s been looking for you.”

He followed Richard down the hall, past the overly serious tall men, and into the study Roy had added on for Richard. A long rectangular painting of a woman seated at a desk hung on the far wall, and off to the side Roy sat looking out at his swimming pool, which was completely empty. Usually on such a warm evening there would’ve been a number of guests enjoying themselves, playing Marco Polo or positioning themselves to catch the last few minutes of sunlight, but the pool was as quiet as the living room.

“Who painted that?” the man asked, looking at the portrait. “Is it Richard’s?”

“There’s no time for that now,” Roy said. The skin on his face, so accustomed to the creases and folds of his smile, seemed as if it were being stretched tight by a sad concentration that the man had never seen before. Roy looked into the cloud of smoke he’d just exhaled. “I wanted to give you a heads-up before she gets

things started.” He looked over at the man. “You don’t know what I mean, do you? Of course you don’t.”

“Roy, I’m here because we’re celebrating you and Richard—remember?”

“In a way. Listen, this is completely out of character for me, and I don’t like it. I’ve told her that. It’s throwing everyone. Look at this place—it’s a fucking morgue.”

“You told who? What are you talking about?” the man asked.

Roy lit another cigarette. “You want a drink? I could use one. What do you want? I got everything.”

“What’s wrong with you?” the man asked. “And why are you smoking? I thought you gave it up.”

“Nothing’s as it seems, kiddo. Haven’t you noticed that?”

The man didn’t answer.

“Look, you ever wonder why it happens?”

“Why what happens?” the man asked.

“The women,” Roy whispered. “The switches.”

“You know? How do you know?” The man raised his voice. “Did Stephen say something?”

Roy moved closer. He’d already been drinking, and with the cigarettes smelled like an old bar. “She thought it’d be better coming from me,” Roy said. “She thinks because I’m gay, I’m more sensitive, and I’ll be more gentle, or something. Why do hetero women always think that, by the way? I’m as insensitive as the next guy.”

“Why are you whispering? And who is she?” the man asked.

Richard walked back into the room at that moment and whispered in Roy’s ear so the man couldn’t hear. The message made Roy stand up suddenly. “We better get started,” he said.

“No, wait. Tell me how you know about the switches.” The man was now standing up as well, trying to block Roy from leaving.

“She needs us all to go in. Please,” Richard said sternly, as he grabbed the man’s arm so Roy could pass.

“What’s wrong with you guys? Richard, why are you being an ass?” The man could hear Roy in the living room now, clapping his hands. “People, come on. Let’s get this over with.” By the time the man entered the living room, he found everyone standing in a big circle in the middle of the room.

“You’re the star tonight, kiddo.” Roy walked over and took the man’s hand and tried to pull him into the middle of the circle.

“What is this?” the man asked, resisting. Stephen came from behind and grabbed his other arm. Stephen’s hands were damp, as always, but the strength of his grip surprised the man.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Stephen whispered. “But this is the way she wanted it. It’s got to be in front of everybody.”

The man still resisted but felt a third person—he assumed it was Richard—pushing at him from behind until he was finally in the middle of the circle.

“I’m sorry about this,” a woman said as she stepped toward him. Because of the poor light in the room, he couldn’t make her face out in any detail, and yet he was sure he knew her.

“What are you doing?” Roy asked the woman. “This was not the plan. This wasn’t how you described the scene to me.”

“Olivia?” the man asked, wanting to get closer but being held back.

The woman took another step forward and cupped his face with her hands. A strong scent came off her skin that made the man’s tongue twist inside his mouth. “Timmy?” he said. He closed his eyes and he could see his son’s face. “Where is he?”

“She’s gone, sir,” Stephen whispered.

The man opened his eyes and saw that Cherokee had taken the older woman’s place. She was now holding his face in her hands.

“It’s what you wanted. That’s what she told us, at least,” Cherokee said.

“Get off me,” the man said, pulling his face away. “Who the hell are you talking about? Where’s Olivia?” He looked over at

Roy. "Goddam it! Where'd she go?"

"I would've never gotten involved if she'd told me..." Roy looked up and started talking to the ceiling. "Do you hear me? You're just being mean now."

"Roy. You can't talk to her like that," Cherokee said.

"Oh, whatever!! She needs to hear it. She made us all go along with this—telling us we'd be helping him grow. All that closure bullshit. But look at him. He's a mess. It's totally out of character for him. Do you hear that?" Roy said, pumping his fist to the ceiling. "You're losing control! You used to come up with interesting ideas. You were a pretty good storyteller once. But now all you do is write about him. All these years, and you can't even name him. It's pitiful!"

"Come on, Roy. Calm down," Cherokee said. "This isn't about you."

"Oh it isn't?" Roy asked, still looking up at the ceiling. "You could do a lot with me—hell, you could write whole books about any of us." Roy pointed at his guests who were still standing in a circle. "The room's filled with queens and whores—people love to read about us," Roy said, as he turned to look at the man. "I'm sorry, kiddo, but hetero men who can't commit—it's been done already—a million times. No one wants to read about that anymore."

"Who the hell are you talking to, Roy?" the man asked. "And where did Olivia go?"

"We're not hookers, just for the record," Cherokee said.

"Sorry," Roy said. "It was just a figure of speech."

"You're a prostitute?" the man asked, turning to Cherokee.

"Didn't you just hear what I said?"

"All of them—since Olivia—they've been prostitutes? I've never paid anything," the man said, a bit defensively.

"No. She takes care of it," Roy said.

"I don't understand any of this," the man said. "Olivia! Olivia, come back!"

"She won't," Roy said.

"Why not?"

"It doesn't matter." Roy's face had now begun to soften again—the creases and folds reappearing slowly. "You're dead, kiddo. Nothing matters to you—nothing should, at least."

The man began to laugh. He couldn't help himself. It started with a quiet chuckle, but the more he heard himself, the more he let himself go until he was almost gasping for breath.

Roy looked back up to the ceiling. "I won't tell him the rest."

"What else could you tell him, Roy?" Cherokee asked, not sounding very pleased.

"We were supposed to be honest with him, but we don't have to be cruel about it," Roy insisted to the ceiling. "This is a cruel way to end this story, and I, for one, won't be part of it."

"Baby," Cherokee said to the man after he stopped laughing, "baby, you need to hear this: she found you naked in front of your computer."

The man could now hear some of the tall, tanned men standing in the shadows snickering. "What are you talking about?" he asked, trying to pull loose from Stephen who was still holding him.

"It was your heart," Cherokee continued as she put her hand on his chest. "It gave out. Just stopped. Would've given out regardless. Anyway, your son found you that way, and she was pretty angry about it and embarrassed. You can't blame her for that. And then, after she took care of the funeral and everything, she went through your files and saw the credit card slips—for the hotel rooms and you know—and all the e-mails you used to write me and the others. All that stuff."

While he listened, the man found that the sound of Cherokee's voice had changed from earlier in the morning. She must be an actress after all, he thought. Someone with a voice like a chameleon—sometimes edgy, sometimes calming and familiar. At that moment her voice made him feel that each perfectly

wrought sound was a gift she'd prepared just for him.

"Sometimes I ask for things, and she gives them to me," Cherokee was saying, coming closer so that now her face was inches away from his. "Maybe you could ask for what you want and she'll listen."

"You're the woman from the porn site, aren't you?" the man asked, realizing why she'd looked familiar to him earlier, why her voice comforted him.

Cherokee looked at Roy without answering the man.

"Why you looking at me? You told him everything else. Go ahead, finish it," Roy said.

"That's why you look familiar. Isn't it?" the man asked in a louder voice.

"Yes," Cherokee answered.

He pulled loose from Stephen and though he heard Roy calling after him, he didn't stop running until he got out of the house and into his car. More than anything he wanted to be home, but the traffic that wound its way through the Santa Monica Mountains was heavy as usual. An accident ahead, or just the usual crowd of people who also desperately wanted to be home filled the lanes of the 405.

As he sat in traffic, inching his way home, he went over the night's events until a strange sensation came over him, a feeling of calm that he hadn't felt in years. He felt as if he'd found the answer to a question he didn't even know he'd been asking himself. All those people sitting in their cars so near him and yet not connected to him. That, the man realized, was the real reason why people hated sitting in traffic. Speed was the drug of choice. It was pure escapism from loneliness. And these switches that had been happening to him for years were the same. His life since Olivia, the man told himself, had been nothing more than a prolonged rainbow rush of colored boxes. And this realization took him somewhere deeper, somewhere he'd been avoiding: he missed his wife more than he knew.

“Olivia,” he screamed, making the mother in the car next to him look over. “Olivia!” he yelled out again and again for the rest of the ride home.

She looked down at the man’s unanswered plea on the ancient computer screen she’d inherited from her dead husband, took a sip of water from the glass that stood next to the chipped watermelon-colored lamp she knew she had to get rid of one day soon. Her eye caught a glimpse of the dish of dusty change on her dresser and she smiled to herself, wondering what her agent would think of this novel she’d just finished. Maybe “the man” seemed too unsympathetic, or maybe she should change the ending, wrap it up, make it prettier, more hopeful. But she wouldn’t change a thing in the end. She knew the story was right, true in the way a story should be true. Who better than her would know what a man like the one in her story deserved?

Who better than her?

Who better?

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THE COLOR OF KALAMUNDING

Aileen Ibardaloza

There is no gentleness in the way I pick a fruit. I have committed all seven sins of memory, and it has left me short of breath and short of temper. I reach and yank, mercilessly, at clusters of kalamunding. I find it necessary in order to recapture fragmented perceptions of sweetness—to qualify what I remember of lemonades.

* * *

It is rather tiring, this business of separation. What does it matter if I break one branch off an eight-foot columnar tree? Will it really bother the roots? And what of the fruits when swiftly cut? Do the golden orange halves feel the loss of a golden orange whole? Is it really any worse than summer attempting to linger, unable to sustain its tilt toward the sun?

September, diplomatic September, is a truce between seasons, one refusing to leave, the other dragging its feet. The one that persists eventually withdraws. Its wake has left me with the most haunting of all failures of memory.

* * *

Withdrawal, according to my grandmother's nurse, is the beginning of separation. She could have painted it orange, for visual impact, and I still would have failed to acknowledge the process as death easing its way into and out of my grandmother's hallway.

It is an imposition, really, this business of dying on the dying. Suddenly one finds one's self working around some invisible timetable. So many changes to get used to in a body that is, for all intents and purposes, no longer one's own.

Decreased food intake and increased sleep, while alarming, failed to give me a sense perception of death. I refused it on my grandmother's account and behalf. She was 88 and mostly disoriented, but I chose to diagnose it as a temporary ailment that could respond to treatment; I chose to believe she was going to get better. Didn't she, when she couldn't recall names, touch my face and say, "*Ito pa ba naman ang makakalimutan ko?*" Am I to forget this one? So then I had no recourse but to grasp at life and providence, however fleeting; to prevent a fruit from falling, however ripe, if it meant the permanence of a season, or at least the prolonging of it.

I wanted her to stay. To absolve myself. Again and again. And again. Thus I remained, to the end, unutterably the most selfish of her granddaughters.

* * *

Kalamunding lemonade is still, in my opinion, the most refreshing of all summer drinks. An eight ounce glass normally requires two to three sliced fruits, juiced and diluted with water, and sugar added to taste. It is a drink to toast past summers of citrusy sweetness, in the Manila of our half-remembered youths.

My grandmother's kalamunding tree has stood upright and cold-resistant in her California garden for nearly 40 years. Mature, striking, with oval-shaped leaves and fragrant, white flowers, it continues to bear hundreds of spherical, two-inch fruits year round.

The south part of the garden is a golden orange-evergreen landscape, perfect for gathering the thin, leathery rinds of an eternal present, to keep alive Filipino grandmothers and their not-quite-lime-not-quite-orange lemonades

* * *

“It’s okay not to eat,” the hospice people explained.

At a certain point, food ceases to be a source of nourishment for the dying. If I had been more objective, I would have perceived my grandmother’s gradual loss of appetite as symptomatic of a body preparing to die. Something more incorporeal was sustaining her, and had she been so inclined, she could have drawn a parchment-thin line between the physical material body she still inhabited and the spiritual domain she was withdrawing to.

She preferred to sleep most of the time. I, however, opted to wake her up whenever I could. I wanted her reassurance that she wasn’t dying yet and had hoped to glimpse the sprightly, kindly, beloved woman of my childhood. I spoke tenderly, as though words, my words, held power over life and death. But communication was becoming ineffectual. It would have been infinitely better had I silently held her hand through the night, for a few more nights thereafter.

* * *

Persistence, being the most disquieting of all sins of memory, is the denial of one’s own absolution.

I am haunted by discrete moments of unconditional love, such as when my grandmother understood why I chose not to stay with her at her most fragile, when she was grieving the loss of a husband. I, grieving the loss of a grandfather, stifled by complex family dynamics, left for the opposite coast. I did not come back, even when she asked me to, repeatedly. I would realize, years later, when her hold on life was already too tenuous, that I had very little time, very little chance for atonement.

It was too big a risk to take, that of foregoing the opportunity to be with a loved one. I was never able to take care of her gratifyingly, and there is to be no emotional cleansing for me, no forgiveness, no absolution. At my most fragile, the memories persist most hauntingly.

* * *

She was picking at her bedding, talking about dead family members as though they were still alive. My grandmother, the caregiver says, “is losing her grounding to earth.”

Two weeks prior to her death, her pulse beat and body temperature had begun fluctuating. Her skin was abnormally pale, her breathing sharp, brisk. All I could do was help turn her to her side; put lotion on her thin, cold shins, on her thin, cold arms.

* * *

I write furiously of what I remember, for forgetfulness is a failure as terrible as persistence. I recollect events of ten years ago, when I was living in England and my grandparents had come to see me. At night, after a full day’s sightseeing, I would visit with them and kneel by my grandmother’s side of the bed, my head on her lap. My grandfather would caution me against the wily ways of men, my grandmother would wink at me and smile and gently stroke my hair.

How I long for the ability to flit between different moments in time, to kneel in place of my younger self.

Forgive me, for I will fail you. My love will be frail, and my will, frailer still.

But there is no means of temporizing such a thought, and therefore no means of telling my grandparents of my future neglects. The day they went back to California, I and my grandmother had wept openly, for such separations occurred too often and were too painful. I caught sight of my grandfather

bowing his head. He must have been crying, too. I was sure of it. Why then did he not look at me before he left?

* * *

On Monday, September 10th, I received a call from my cousin asking me to come immediately to my grandmother's house. I found my grandmother nonresponsive, her eyes open, but unseeing. The next couple of days we would be administering morphine every four hours. Her restlessness was increasing, her breathing labored and erratic. I was never able to talk to her again.

I prayed. I read Kundera's *Immortality* and decided I could never wave my arm with such freedom and grace. I gave it a try. I wandered around the house. I waited. I prayed.

My grandmother died on Thursday, "surrounded by loved ones", as reported in the *San Jose Mercury News*. It seemed so strange to find her in the obituaries. Surreal. How could it have been over so fast? What boundaries had she already crossed? Can she hear me, see me, love me still? Forgive me, for I remain, to the end, the most selfish of your granddaughters.

* * *

I never smelled candles. They say it is a common occurrence when someone close to you passes away. I did catch a whiff of something pleasant—an admixture of mangoes and jasmines—light, fragrant, ephemeral.

The coming weeks would bring changes. Mostly necessary. Some images, some scents, sounds, voices, instants have disappeared forever; some I try to grasp for longer than fractions of a second, to be bound and stored and recalled for as long as I need them.

* * *

It has been seven months since we buried my grandmother. I was at her house the other day, to pick some kalamunding fruits.

They were a sight to behold. Like little suns in the palm of my hand.

The house was a study in contrast. Too uncluttered. Too sparse. Somnolent, senescent. It used to hold more people than photographs, more food than remembered recipes. I suppose change is like that. The granddaughters have now become mothers. And my grandmother's daughters? They are now the same age as she when she was our young grandmother. I suppose some memories are like that, indelible.

There is a way to be gentle. Such as when I put my arms around my mother or my aunts. They are the not-quite-lime-not-quite-orange golden orange essence of my grandmother, and I, theirs. Maybe I will fail at failing them. I have suns in my hand.

This is a time for lemonades, for gathering seeds and flowers and leaves and thin, leathery rinds. Find me a fruit, a round, ripe, radiant fruit hanging from an evergreen tree in an ever green garden, and I will pick it, ever so gently.

* * *

I would have wanted to end there. My life reading like a book, as though I have reached an epiphany of sorts. But as you must have surmised by now, I am perfectly flawed. I did mention in the beginning that I have committed all seven sins of memory. In the process of reconstruction, some memories have receded or never registered; others, blocked, misattributed, suggested, edited. For instance, the "whiff of something pleasant" could have been apples and orange blossoms or an aromatic blend of herbs, but I somehow distinctly remember, although not with absolute precision, mangoes and jasmynes, maybe because I have always associated these with my grandmother. In the forgetting curve, the world of fruits and flowers had never been more evanescent than at that point.

While I tried to be as objective as possible, my recollections are not faithful reproductions of my past. They are invariably colored

by my experiences, my affects, by the imperfections and limitations of my own perceptions. There are myths in memory's truths.

I write to remember. Even when there are margins of error in my recounting. My memories of this specific time period—the events immediately preceding the death of my grandmother—could vary greatly from what my mother or any one of my aunts would recall.

In mentioning the stroking of my hair and the touching of my face, I may have implied that I was my grandmother's beloved granddaughter. I am aware of its suggestibility, but that is how I choose to remember her relationship with me.

As I've said, there are myths in memory's truths. My grandmother had other granddaughters, all of them beloved, but it doesn't alter the gentleness and affection in such incidents as the touching of one particular face. There are other fruit trees in my grandmother's garden — apple, avocado, grapefruit — but they do not diminish the vibrancy of the color of kalamunding.

My memory's failures do not weaken my conscious recollections. They can never negate the magnitude of my pain or the depth of my love. As the psychologist Daniel L. Schacter explains, "the seven sins are an integral part of the mind's heritage because they are closely connected to features of memory which make it work well... They also illuminate how memory draws on the past to inform the present, preserves elements of present experience for future reference, and allows us to revisit the past at will."

I did reach an epiphany of sorts. There is a chance that I will choose to not be gentle with golden orange essences. You must have surmised how I am, by now. Not quite lime, not quite orange. In the world of fruits and flowers, I am excessively flawed. Such is my myth.

Find me an apple, a red, juicy apple.

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EDITING FOR THE EAR

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He is a high school student in Chicago, Illinois. Bored by the limitations of life and reality, he enjoys writing stories about people who break through those barriers and discover new perspectives on life. He has a large stack of stories written by hand next to his bed—he hopes to get some of them published in the near future. When not writing, he enjoys playing video games and watching football. [darthbradynepatriots@yahoo.com]

Chris BAYS

He is a member of English Faculty at Clark State Community College in Springfield, Ohio. Prior to teaching, he was a business owner and world traveler, having lived in Germany and Turkey and visited much of Europe and parts of China. His haiku was awarded Honorable Mention in the 2008 Key West Heritage House Robert Frost Poetry Contest. Recently he has had a poem accepted for publication in *Poetry Midwest*. His haiku have appeared in *Acorn*, *Frogpond*, *The Heron's Nest*, and *Modern Haiku*. [tlzhou@aol.com]

G. MARTINEZ CABRERA

He has had his short fiction featured on the public radio show, *VoicesRadio*, *The Externalist*, and last October he had a flash fiction piece placed in *Verbsap*, and the April 2009 edition of the *Broome Review*. [gabe@g-martinezcabrera.com]

Terry DAVIS

Although he has had 86 scientific works published over several decades as a heart surgeon, his most recent publication is an essay, "The Transition Zone", recently published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, describing his mood swings while recovering a heart for transplant. This experience

sparked his interest in non-scientific writing, and short stories in particular.
[terry.davis@nationwidechildrens.org]

Holly DAY

She lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with her two children, husband, and cat. Her newest nonfiction books are *Music Theory for Dummies*, and *Walking Twin Cities*. Her poetry and fiction have most recently appeared in *Pearl*, *Tar Wolf Review*, and *Jones Ave*. [lalena@bitstream.net]

Tessa DICK

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Ashutosh GHILDIYAL

He writes poetry, short fiction, and essays. He is a salaried professional currently based in Mumbai. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in various print and online zines such as *Houston Literary Review*, *Oak Bend Review*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *River Poets Journal*, *The Storyteller*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Calliope*, *Indite Circle*, and others. This is his third appearance in *Cantaraville*. [ashutoshg@cactusglobal.com]

Brant GOBLE

He is a technician, didgeridoo player, perpetual (graduate) student, and editor (of *Gander Press Review*). His works have been published by *55 Words*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Cynic Online Magazine*, and *Words-Myth*. He prefers biographies that are precisely fifty words long, not a word more, not a word less. [brant_goble@ganderpress.com]

Pedro BLAS GONZALES

He is a Professor of Philosophy at Barry University, Miami Shores, Florida. His books include *Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega y Gasset's Philosophy of Subjectivity*; *Fragments: Essays in Subjectivity, Individuality, and Autonomy*; *Ortega's "The Revolt of the Masses" and the Triumph of the New Man*; *Dreaming in the Cathedral* (novel); *Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay*. [gonz7750@bellsouth.net]

Ron HEACOCK

He is primarily a songwriter. His CD, *Out of My Love*, was released in 1996 by Of the Heart, Ltd. Records. In 1994 his song, "Voice of the Heart" received honors for Outstanding Achievement, Contemporary Folk Singer/Songwriter Category, from the Austin Songwriters Song Competition. Since coming to Nashville in 1997, he has penned, written and co-written nearly fifty songs. [ron@hillhousewriters.com]

Jane HERTENSTEIN

She is the author of *Orphan Girl* and the novel *Beyond Paradise* (Morrow 1999). Her short stories have appeared in *Word Riot* and *Tonopah Review*. Her story "Wild Mushrooms" appeared in *Cantaraville Five*. She is currently shopping a novel manuscript. If in Chicago, drop her a line at breadloafjane@yahoo.com.

Aileen IBARDOLOZA

Her works have appeared in various online and print media, including the anthologies *A Taste of Home* (Anvil, Manila, 2008) and *The Blind Chatelaine's Keys* (BlazeVox, New York, 2008). She is based in California. [aileen.ibardaloza@gmail.com]

Ingrid KEIR

She was born in the San Francisco Bay Area. She was the co-host of Wordparty Poetry and Jazz Tuesdays at Club DeLuxe in San Francisco for three years. She is also one of the founders of The Word Party and thewordparty.com, a collaborative of San Francisco and New York City poets. In addition to her work with The Word Party, she has organized numerous events in San Francisco, including a sold-out celebration for Pablo Neruda's 103rd birthday entitled "Feliz Cumpleanos Neruda!", PoemDome, Word Party meets the Poetry Bus, and She Speaks. She has been a featured performer at diverse venues in the Bay Area. She has self-published two chapbooks, *Urban Booty* (1999) and *The Secrets of Like* (2004). She also published a full-color photography and poetry collaboration with Kyle Knobel, titled *Toward the Light* (2007). She loves the mic, Nutella, furry things, pirates, and getting up on the good foot. [ingrid_keir@yahoo.com]

Raymond LANDEROS

He is seventy-three years old and was born in East Los Angeles. He is a

veteran with twelve years active service with the United States Air Force, from 1953 to 1965, serving in Germany, Japan and Hawaii. He and his wife Akiko have been married for fifty years and have six children, seven grandchildren, and two (soon to be four) great grandchildren. He retired from the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power in 1995 after twenty-six years, and now lives in San Dimas, California, where he is a member of the San Dimas Writers Group. [raylander@msn.com]

Sarah LAYDEN

She recently secured representation for the novel excerpted in this issue, which has also been excerpted in *Freight Stories* and the *Dia de los Muertos* anthology. Her fiction appears or is forthcoming in *The Evansville Review*, *Artful Dodge*, *Vestal Review*, *Zone 3*, *Pindeldyboz*, and elsewhere. Her poetry appears in *Margie*, *Blood Orange Review*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, and the anthology *Just Like a Girl*; one poem recently was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She currently teaches college composition and creative writing, and previously worked as a newspaper reporter before earning her MFA in fiction at Purdue University. [calmoots@yahoo.com]

Tom MAHONY

He is a biological consultant in central California with an MS degree from Humboldt State University. His fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared or is forthcoming in *Posse Review*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Verbsap*, *34th Parallel*, *Void Magazine*, *SFWP*, *Kurungabaa*, *The Flask Review*, *Foliate Oak*, *Decomp*, *The Oddville Press*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Long Story Short*, *Flash Forward*, *Six Sentences*, *Laughter Loaf*, and *Starter Magazine*. He is currently circulating a couple of novels for publication. Visit him at tommahony.net.

Yonatan MAISEL

He is a psychologist and writer. His most recent works appear in *Review Americana* and *Bartleby-Snopés*. He lives with his wife Rivkah and faithful dog Halva. He spends a good deal of his spare time novel and innovative methods to avoid taking out the garbage. [yonatan.maisel@yahoo.com]

Vicki MILLER

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Kristine Ong MUSLIM

Her publication credits and recent acceptances include more than seven hundred poems and stories in over three hundred publications worldwide, such as *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Chronogram*, *Cordite*, *Grasslimb*, *Narrative Magazine*, *New Madrid*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Scrivener Creative Review*, and *Turnrow*. She has been nominated three times for the Pushcart Prize and received several Honorable Mentions in *The Year's Best in Fantasy and Horror*.
[kristineongmuslim@yahoo.com]

M.J. NICHOLLS

At the age of 22, he has been writing regularly for the past seven years. In that time he has worked on novellas, short stories, illustrated fiction, comics, and novels. While studying for his English Literature MA at the University of Edinburgh, he attended various writing classes and groups. As a result, he redrafted an overambitious debut novel. Since then he has completed two other novels which he is editing and circulating to publishers.
[omskprowler@aol.co.uk]

Ethel ROHAN

Born and raised in Dublin, Ireland, she now lives in San Francisco. She received her MFA in fiction from Mills College, California. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from several literary magazines including *Prick of the Spindle*, *Identity Theory*, *Miranda Literary Magazine*, *SUB-LIT*, and *Word Riot*. Her blog is straightfromtheheartinmyhip.blogspot.com

Craig RONDINONE

He resides at the Jersey Shore. He currently works as a stats editor for Major League Baseball and as a columnist for *PA Sports Ticker*, where his weekly "Rotisserie by the Numbers" fantasy sports columns can be seen all over the internet. His first book, the short story collection *Ten Tales to Make Your Head Explode*, was published in May 2004. His second book, an illustrated children's

story for second-graders entitled *Jeepers*, came out in September 2005. His short stories and poems have been published in *Clever*, *Mobius*, *The Timber Creek Review*, *Writers Bloc*, and *The Pink Chameleon*. His short story "The Dead Zone" finished fourth out of 1,217 entries in the prestigious Tom Howard/John H. Reid Short Story Contest in 2006 and was featured in Reid's recently published anthology of past award winners, *Watching Time*. [RotByTheNumbers@aol.com]

Matt RYAN

His poems and short stories have appeared in numerous journals, including *Pindeldyboz*, *Opium*, and *elimae*. He has an MFA in Writing from Spalding University. [mattryanisme@yahoo.com]

Jeanette THOMPSON

Born in 1927, she has long pursued many avenues of artistic expression. She obtained a degree in Art History from the University of California, Berkeley. Her early career in graphic arts and advertising gave way to her abiding interest in painting and ceramics. She also shared her creativity and love of the arts with others through many years of teaching ceramics. She has always enjoyed writing and has found herself increasingly drawn to the expressive outlet that the medium provides. She lives in Glendale, California, where she actively pursues her many interests. [tvirshup@gmail.com]

UPCOMING IN EIGHT

- “The Tragic Untimely Death of Mrs. Poe”, a story by Norman Danzig
- “A Mother of Men”, a story by Jack Adler
- Poetry by Anne Babson

Plus fiction, nonfiction, poetry and scripts from writers around the world.



NOTICES

Thanks go to Emily Toth, author of *Inside Peyton Place: The Life of Grace Metalious* (University of Mississippi Press) and to LA freelancer Kate Coe for their generous comments of my memoir-in-progress.

My memoir, *A Poet from Hollywood: The Secret Life of the Gyllenhaals* is being released this winter by Cantarabooks. To be one of the first to be notified of its publication, send an email to apoetfromhollywood@cantarabooks.com.

This issue is dedicated to Grace Metalious (1924-64), author of *Peyton Place* and three other novels.