Hodge-Podge: A Collection of Literary Claptrap and Fictive Nonsensery

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Hodge-Podge: A Collection of Literary Claptrap and Fictive Nonsensery

By Django Gold
Advisor: Ricco Siasoco
English and Arts & Sciences Honors Thesis
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I dedicate this work to Robert Edmund Gold, deceased, father and friend, who taught me, among other things, the value of sincerity.

What I have assembled here is far from perfect, but it approaches honesty.
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Preface

I do believe that what follows stands well enough on its own, but vanity demands that I throw in a little something here if only to satisfy myself. First and foremost, I give thanks to my advisor, Ricco Siasoco, whose experience and expertise as a writer enabled me to take my thesis where I wanted it. It’s amazing the number of stupid mistakes one can make until a helpful second party points them out, and Ricco definitely had his hands full with me. What follows is richer for his counsel. Secondly, the illustrations are taken from Berke Breathed’s *Bloom County* comic and are used without permission. I’m not sure if I’m allowed to use them, but I don’t think they ever made any Hodge-Podge plush dolls, so it may be moot. Finally, it’s worthwhile to note that this thesis was originally planned as a novella and proceeded down that path for a few miles before taking a U-turn and backtracking to the short fiction onramp. The novella’s first chapter was excised, snipped of its loose ends, and given a title: “The Kill,” as you will soon come to know it. It was a difficult decision to abandon the novella project, as I had invested quite a bit of time, effort, and research in putting it to paper, but it was a necessary one. I had too many other ideas floating around in my head and felt obligated to get them down. I may have sacrificed the unity of the novella form, but I think I got back a unity of perspective of that my original thesis never had a chance to reach. As disparate as these eight stories may seem to be in terms of narrative technique, tone, locale, etc., there is a common theme that runs through them all and that is that they each contain a small piece of what I consider my world. It’s a fun and interesting place, my world, and it was just as fun and interesting to try and share it. I hope you enjoy what I’ve done.
Daniel awoke at quarter to four, some minutes before the alarm. His awakening felt unresolved and fragile, an uncertain foothold on an uncertain trail. There was no groggy intermission to bleed the edge between the gray of the morning and the dancing black of sleep; he immediately felt a clear, somehow antiseptic, awareness of his surroundings and this clarity brought with it an unaccountable unease. He was out of place, he felt, repositioned in the night by a phantom hand. He reached to defuse the impending alarm and stealthily rolled to his back, his arms folded and positioned snugly along his bare stomach which was soft with heat, rising and falling with his breath. From this new position, he could make out the barest of the room’s features. The curtains were open on his wife’s side of the bed and a faint blue shaded the dark outside, sharing just enough light with the inside to illuminate the corners of the bed, the bureau, the brass of the door handle. Across the bed, the mirror glinted vaguely but without reflection.

He resolved to combat his malaise through action, and did so, carefully shifting his weight out of bed, and padding out of the room, opening and closing the door with two concentrated clicks. He ran his fingers along the wall on his left side, navigating by memory—this had been his home long enough grant him confidence. He reached the kitchen and rewarded himself with the electric light. He ran water and rubbed his face clean of sleep, scraping the sediment from the corners of his eyes and wiping away the gum from the corners of his mouth. His clothing and gear were arranged neatly by the backdoor: socks, long underwear, flannel shirt, corduroys, boots, sweatshirt, parka, ski hat, satchel, cooler, rifle, rifle kit, a plastic jug of water. Daniel sipped at the water
thoughtfully before capping it, and then began to dress, stretching the long underwear over his thighs.

Outside, the air possessed the unyielding chill of Oregon winter, it coated the world in a blue vapor that snapped at exposed flesh and seemed to harden the trees and ground and sky into stone replicas. Though dawn would not enter for another hour, it had sent ahead as emissary a clean gray prelude that highlighted well enough the features surrounding Daniel’s home, the blue of the deathless evergreens, the blue of the cold, tamped earth. For his part, Daniel did not mind the cold, could even enjoy it at times like these when well-snugged in his hunting gear, with only an exposed face to remind the other parts of his body just how lucky they were to be alive.

Daniel balanced his equipment in one load and deposited it carefully in the back of his truck. He closed the gate and moved to the cab where he swung the door open and lifted himself in. He slid the key into the ignition but did not start the truck; a nettle in his brain told him with authority that something was wrong. It was no longer the blank unease of the bedroom, though it was certainly still that, there was now something simply incorrect about his actions. He felt as if he were moving steadfastly along an erroneous path to a resolution he knew to be false. His stomach muttered and he would have liked very much a hot breakfast, though he knew from experience that it was best to eat late in the morning when hunting so as not to become slow with satiation. It was a thirty minute drive to the Fowler’s Trail turnoff and Durr would certainly be waiting for him, could perhaps be there right now, preparing his rifle, eyeing the approaching dawn with anticipation.
“Yes, something is wrong,” he thought. “But it will have to continue being wrong until I find out just what it is. Then we will see.” Daniel turned the key and the engine growled.

The boundaries of Chancery, Oregon are broad and have never contained more than two thousand people, even at the peak of the West’s brief flirtation with the gold rush. The ground, though hilly and impossibly unnavigable at points, lies low to sea level, avoiding the upward push of the Sierra Nevada range that takes gradual hold of the land as one moves towards the ocean. It is thick land, not lush, but dense with trees and undergrowth and animal life. The town’s central commercial area, consisting of two gas stations, a general store, a pair of equally-nondescript saloons, a hardware and hunting supplies store, an auto shop, and an eroding Methodist church, lies along a paved two-lane road referred to as Mainline Avenue without even a hint of irony. Heading North along Mainline, one draws closer to civilization; South, and one leaves it as the road becomes Route Five, the common stretch of pavement that binds the various dirt paths of the town, most of which lead to the isolated residences one finds in such deeply-wooded regions of rural Oregon. The only turnoff of significance is the gated entrance of a compound labeled simply “Timber” by an iron overhang that will sway in wind. Through this gate one finds the town’s artery, it’s justification: Greenlands Timber, employer of virtually all of the town’s adult male residents, under cooperative ownership of Daniel Durr Sr. and Mark Owen. Beyond this vital turnoff and the various residential offshoots that follow, the road adopts a noticeable incline as it wraps itself around Bishop Mountain, a gradual hill of barely two thousand feet that serves to separate the scraps of Chancery from what is only civilization by virtue of Route Five itself. Once around
Bishop Mountain, the road smoothes out into a long straightaway that leads into California if one chooses not to take a left at the Fowler’s Trail turnoff.

The roads were not icy, but they could have been, and as a result Daniel drove cautiously and reached the turnoff in forty minutes instead of the usual thirty. As he drove, the dissipating fog gave the road form, and at his arrival, only the vaguest cloudy strings remained. Durr was seated in the back of his own truck, his denimed legs hanging over the open gate. As Daniel crunched onto the turnoff, Durr raised a hand and vaulted into the gravel to meet him.

Daniel nodded through the windshield as he killed the engine. He opened the door and stepped out. “Good morning,” he said.

Durr walked over and clasped a hand to his boy’s shoulder in greeting; he was a few inches shorter than his son and his arm extended upwards at the angle of a disingenuous Nazi salute. “For hunting you mean, weather this cold, we’ll have the place to ourselves if you don’t mind sacrificing a tit or three.” He paused as if considering something, then turned back to his own vehicle. He opened the cab and pulled out a worn yellow satchel, a grim blood-worn blue tarp wrapped and protruding from its unzipped mouth, which he mounted on his shoulder, and his rifle which he held one-handed by the stock, barrel downwards as if it were a metal detector.

Durr gestured broadly to the limitless woods that surrounded them. Besides the thin paved line that made up the Fowler’s Trail turnoff and the graveled shoulder upon which their trucks were parked, all was wild. “Shall we?” Durr asked, walking away from Daniel.
“I’m not loaded,” Daniel said, and walked to the still-open gate of Durr’s truck where he lay his rifle and filled it with shells. It was the only rifle Daniel had ever owned, a pre-64 Winchester M70; he had received it from Durr when he was eleven, and had maintained it perfectly since, keeping it clean and oiled even in the off-season.

“Okay,” Daniel said. They were not entirely alone. Another truck was parked at the other end of the shoulder, and some distance away, a battered station wagon. Daniel didn’t recognize either of the vehicles, but he would probably know their drivers were they present. He raised and closed the gate to Durr’s truck and advanced towards his waiting father.

A low steel guardrail bordered the turnoff on its right side, opening briefly enough at one point to allow a single man and perhaps his bicycle passage. Father and son wordlessly moved through the breach, transitioning from loose gravel to the authority of the trail, which was narrow and smooth. It was flanked on either side by mounting walls of earth which approached shoulder-height after a few minutes’ climb and then tapered off abruptly as the trail flattened and emerged into a barren clearing that opened a view of what was referred to as Hunter’s Valley out of accuracy. Standing at this point, one looked downward and observed a panorama of the land, a wide downward-sloping expanse, black and blue with the thickness of evergreens which billowed in mimicry of the rolling terrain. When tinted with dawn, as the Valley was at their arrival, one was impressed with a vision of the untainted natural environment, perhaps made absurd by the foreknowledge that any observer was there for the hopeful purpose of putting bullets into the animals.
“Take the left side, move through the muskeg, get past the thinner parts of the wood. Have the place to ourselves and the unlucky buck of our choosing.” A low chuckle, uncommitted, obliged. In truth, Durr’s plan of action required no voice; it had been followed steadfastly in all but the rarest of previous hunting expeditions that Daniel could remember in the Valley. The left side was difficult terrain, thick with undergrowth, craggy at points; it was near-impossible to maintain a straight path. Return was similarly difficult, considerably more so when dragging a carcass as Durr evidently planned. They would take this challenging path because of its difficulty, not in spite of it; its offshoots would likely be entirely vacant and better for the experienced hunter. As if to validate Durr’s idea, a series of brittle gunshots erupted to their right, carried by the wind across a long distance.

Hunting season had been underway for exactly two weeks and not a snowflake had fallen to assist the hunters in tracking. This would make for a somewhat easier descent than usual, but Daniel was still reluctant to endure his father’s rigid approach to the land. He enjoyed the feel of the air in these early hours, the crispness of breath and the rising cool of the sun as it emerged into the morning. The land, similarly, was a pleasantness; hard earth, cold-dry evergreens and the wet of moss. The dirty, soothing scent of things alive and growing. On the other hand, he was less enthusiastic about the hunting itself; he would have preferred to explore the woods on his own terms, unencumbered by pack and rifle, free to make as much noise as he wanted, to turn back when he wanted, to elude the drive of hunting that had long become for him a monotony. For Daniel, only the moment after the fatal rifle explosion raised his blood; all that came before and after was mere exercise. He saw in his father, however, absolute devotion to
this exercise, a reverence for its particulars that resembled the priest’s piety. Daniel could accept this.

Father and son crested the high point of the clearing where it immediately sloped into the dense woods. They drifted to the left, and tucked themselves beneath the first boughs of the forest, descending at a controlled lope. The air became thick as they moved further into the Valley, fans of gray light broke through at infrequent points in the canopy and poked at eye-corners. With the exception of the deliberate crunch of the two men’s’ footfalls and the general rustle of their hunting apparatus, natural silence filled the wooded tunnel. Daniel shifted his rifle to a shoulder, and pawed at his parka until he brought forth a single cigarette which he slipped to his mouth. He would not light it, as the smoke would make blaring obvious to any animal the presence of man, but its subtle weight on his lips relaxed him almost as much as its chemicals would have. Ahead of him, Durr trudged with a casual awareness that years of tracking had made not second, but first nature. Daniel could sense the man’s eyes darting purposefully to the land, pushing aside the various insignificant details of the land in search of some kind of signal. On a day like this, with no snow to provide visible tracks, the range of signals available to the hunter was limited. Durr was an experienced hunter and possessed the kind of severe cleverness that gave him an increased advantage in the exercise, but even he could admit the importance of luck on such days.

The trail had grown vague as the two invaded the canopy and now had disappeared completely. Durr stopped, shifted his pack off, and kneeled to the ground. He had not seen anything, Daniel immediately recognized, and both were silent.
“You got that water?” Daniel dug through his knapsack and handed the plastic jug to his father, offering him the handle. Durr took a tug and swallowed.

“Well, I can’t see shit.” They were not two miles from the clearing, had perhaps walked for three quarters of an hour. Impatience was not characteristic of a successful hunter, and none registered on Durr’s face, but it was clear to both men that their present course of action was not set towards success. It was not because of any evidence, it was hunter’s instinct, a kind worth having.

“We could keep up this path, or I’m thinking it might be best to break off left,” and he gestured precisely with his barrel, “can’t get any worse at least. What do you think?”

The question was ridiculous, laughable if Daniel had had the sense of humor. Left was what Durr had arbitrated as the best option and this best option would surely be taken. Daniel saw this certainty not in the eyes, those hard blue stones that were lidded fiercely against the needlelike glare of the encroaching sun, but rather in the tightened corners of the mouth, which, surrounded by his hoary whiskers, were points of resolution.

Daniel was able to speak two empty words—“I guess”—before a gunshot broke out to their right at a distance that both men intuitively measured as between two and three hundred yards. Another.

For a moment there was silence, but soon they could hear him. At first, it was the memory of steps, then their echo, then their presence, and then they heard all of him, flitting through the woods with the controlled gait of one truly at home. His footfalls became raps, there was a lively rustle of broken twigs and displaced brush and the deer, a lithe young boy wearing the yellow-brown coat of inexperience, appeared for a mere
second before darting directly across their former path and penetrating the tree line so that he was receding just as quickly as he had approached: his movements, their echo, and finally their memory before nothing at all.

Instinctively, Daniel had drawn his rifle up and to his chest, his thumb poised at the safety. Durr had barely moved, had only turned his head to follow the fawn’s presence and now turned back to where it had emerged, seeing clearly what both men had overlooked before, the approach of the hunting party that had caused the disturbance.

There were three figures, adult men, and, despite the density of the tree growth, Daniel immediately recognized the man at the forefront of the group; though his features were indistinct at this distance, his bearing, so casually embedded and recognized in Daniel’s subconscious mind, informed him whose shape approached.

The party crested a low ridge and emerged. A tender and high voice opened in greeting: “You my deer?”

Daniel spoke: “Only to my wife, Benny, you don’t get so familiar with me.” All five men laughed in a general way and Ben O’Donnell and the two strangers closed the final feet so that the two hunting groups met in a loose circle.

“Saw your fawn pass through here,” Durr said. “Quick bastard.” Durr’s voice was low and nearly monotone, baffling interpretation as to his tone and meaning. To Daniel’s ears, these words could have been anything from commiseration to condemnation to nothing at all. Condescension. From Benny’s cheerful expression, which, had its analysis been undertaken, was mostly expectancy with a touch of apprehension, Daniel saw that he took Durr’s remarks for fraternity and grinned accordingly with that desperate amicability found so consistently in the weak.
“Damn thing jumped out right behind us and stopped dead in its tracks. Can’t believe we couldn’t get a good shot in, Mr. Durr, the three of us. Only deer I’ve even seen these last two weeks, Mr. Durr.”

Ben O’Donnell was a resident of Chancery, an employee of Greenlands Timber, a work associate of both father and son; Daniel’s feelings towards him ranged from disdain to calm tolerance. Though he was a good and honest man, and a knowledgeable presence in the workplace, Daniel would not allow himself to like him for fear that his weakness might become acceptable to him. Such things were bound to happen should he let them.

Durr briefly recounted the morning’s uneventful details, and Ben introduced his two companions, a cousin and the cousin’s friend, four heads nodded in taciturn greeting. The three men were of the same young-middle age and had similar round and ruddy faces typical of heavyset Irish. Their conversation endured for only a minute, Durr considered genuinely the make and heft of the cousin’s rifle, a clunky and expensive Browning that would have a fighting chance against an elephant, before returning it and raising his own to his shoulder, a sign of imminent departure.

“Good hunting, you two, see you on Monday, Dan. Goodbye, Mr. Durr.” The three men followed the open ground in approximately the direction the fawn had bounded.

“See you, Benny. Good hunting.” Durr was silent and remained so until the racket of the men’s clumping boots was no longer audible, as if he were keeping an important secret from them.
“Christ.” Durr pushed these words out and spat as if trying in vain to eliminate a bad taste in his mouth. “Okay.” Durr hefted his pack on and marched a few yards in the direction Benny had gone before branching right at the angle of a pencil-point.

They walked for another hour before arriving at a suitable location. During this time, the light strengthened as the sun rose above the morning, emanating such low heat as to guarantee another day or two without first snowfall. It was merely very cool, uncharacteristic at this point deep into November, two weeks into the season. The two men pushed further East, each step carrying them away from the erratic clatter of gunshots that sounded with a decreasing frequency and volume until, as the two crested the ridge of a particularly broad and tall hill, it vanished utterly. Descending, Daniel caught sight of a low-lying clearing that he intuitively recognized as the day’s stand.

The clearing lay some hundred yards beyond where the hill ended and perhaps two hundred yards from the start of another. While the trees up until this point had been strictly evergreen and densely embedded, those that grew at the base of this last valley were a thin mix of pine and deciduous, the autumn-dyed leaves of the latter somehow alien against the familiar blue backdrop of the environment. Here, too, the undergrowth was thinner and appeared almost lush, lacking the brittleness that defined so audibly the clumsy footsteps of men in pursuit of a nimbler prey.

Durr stopped at the foot of the hill and grunted purposefully, approvingly. He kneeled, and when Daniel saw what had drawn his father’s attention, his intuition was confirmed: deer shit, fresh, fertile in promise.

Durr turned and spoke: “I think we’ve found what we’re looking for, or at least a piece of it.” This was a joke; years of such dry speech had trained Daniel to distinguish
between his father’s various forms of address, all of which tended towards the same
detracted tone. He rose. “Stay here, I’ll move down the skirt a few. Watch for signs.”
He glided down the edge of where the woods were still thick, invigorated it would seem
from this latest development, stopping at a brush-flanked pine fifty yards away, where he
sat and leaned against the trunk, his rifle on his lap. Daniel followed his example,
deciding on the lone deciduous that remained in the thicker area of the woods, a tall birch
still heavy with dry leaves: orange, red, gold, pink, rust. He sat and waited.

The sun climbed towards noon and Daniel casually observed its light patterns
through the canopy, prompting the stifling of a sneeze. At times like these when inertia
threatened boredom, he allowed his mind to drift like a leaf through a wind-flattened
field, catching at various points, but never remaining at any one long enough to warrant
serious inspection. It was a combination of backwards recollection, forwards
anticipation, and upwards daydream; from his earliest memories, Daniel’s mind was
susceptible to this distraction and, when not committed to a task that required his
immediate and unwavering attention, it flitted according to its own hidden navigation.

On this occasion, Daniel began in consideration of the past two weeks, how he
had managed to delay this expedition for both weekends, insisting to his father that they
avoid the swarm of brash, trigger-happy novices that invariably crowded the woods on
the season’s first weekend and then excusing himself by simply citing weariness and the
need for rest on the second. He had, after all, worked a noble sixty hours both weeks of
the season and as he reasoned, first privately, and then to the old man’s face, he would
not bring much to the table under such fatigue. Durr consented, but nothing could be
waylaid forever and here they were.
For the most part, however, Daniel simply delighted in the presence of the natural world, a love that had been with him since early childhood and had only built upon itself since then. It was not circumstantial that he had been born and raised in such an environment, this was his generous portion of the world and he would gladly spend the remainder of his life—still a time of no mean significance—in a close relationship with those natural elements that felt as necessary to him as the air in his lungs. He could not understand the allure that cities held for some; in his brief exposure to the chaos of the metropolis, he had marveled at how lonely one could feel when surrounded by so many, many people. He had felt the oppressive rumble of human population at its busiest and it choked him, polluted his nose, eyes, skin, ears, tongue, and brain with a machine taste that was sterile yet not clean. No, for cleanliness, one must go to the woods. The bright cold of country air, the dark smell of dirt.

He traced his mind over his immediate surroundings. Down and to the right, through a series of partially-concealing undergrowth, he absorbed Durr’s observant patience; the father sat at a right angle, spine against pine, his legs folded precisely beneath him—Daniel knew from experience that the old man could maintain that pose for hours without cramping, a feat worthy of a yogi. He was certain that Durr was only as loud as his respiration; he would have looked a forgotten stone monument were it not for his able rifle, an organ of his that exhaled undeniably human breath. It would breathe today—Daniel was sure of it—it would serve its purpose succinctly. Daniel turned his attention back to the clearing, where a low wind approached from the upcoming hill, creaking through the branches of the deciduous, rattling the needles of the pine. Wind from this direction would not betray their presence, the smoky man-scent and the boot
leather. Instead it carried with it the aroma of the wooded grounds beyond their reckoning. Daniel smelled much of the same as he had experienced for the whole of that morning, but his intuition brought him certainty that their prey approached.

Mind’s eye: solitary, the buck advances, crests the next hill, descends. In spite of its impressive bulk, its movements are fluid, controlled, it moves with an enviable certainty that man has yet to improve upon. Hooves, dense and dark, strike the earth only out of habit; it appears to glide just above the ground, coursing through the openings in the foliage, landing and launching itself with almost no sound or strain at all. The neck, stout obelisk, supports a head fiercely beautiful, rimmed with a bone crown that extends towards the sky, catching at a branch now and again, but no less graceful for it. His skin, tough yet yielding, bears a golden coat that shines when exposed to the infrequent stretches of light admitted through the canopy; this coat seems almost impossible in its beauty, it has been fitted precisely for this animal alone and bends around his movement like the very air embraces all moving things. He darts forward, riding gravity to the hill’s bottom; the world has grown dangerous recently, the presence of men is as obtrusive as their gunshots that beat against the sky like the wings of hateful birds. The bleak scent of man now infuses the air at almost every moment; one must push deep into the woods, away from his destruction, his violence. One must learn the science of evasion, one must live.

Daniel opened his vision and was surprised only that the deer descending the hill was female, a doe, and thus crownless. Instead, there were meek ears, low and flattened like felt, and the coat was not god-golden, but a patient brown. She reached the bottom of the hill and ambled forward; emerging into the sunlight she was still a beautiful
specimen, two hundred pounds at the least and doubtlessly within Durr’s range of acceptable targets.

As if to support this assumption, Daniel saw that Durr was signing towards him: first a thumbs-up, then a single index finger to indicate an approximate shooting distance of one hundred yards, and finally that same finger aimed at Daniel like a spear. The doe’s course would take her to the son before the father. Daniel would shoot first, and if necessary, Durr would finish the matter. Durr had shouldered his rifle and was following the doe’s progress with the barrel as she trotted forward; from this impressive distance, the experienced marksman could easily fire and kill, but he would not. Daniel thumbed the safety of the rifle off, cupping his palm over the catch so as to mute its click. He realized that he still had the unlit cigarette in his mouth, its filter long soaked through with saliva, he let it fall noiselessly to his lap, licking his lips and raising the rifle stock to his shoulder.

The doe continued its advance, unaware of the impending explosion. She paused briefly as if to urinate, but did not, and disappeared briefly behind a copse of shrubs before re-emerging into Daniel’s line of sight, now perfectly within range.

Only once in Daniel’s life had his father struck him: when Daniel was eleven years old, on a hunting expedition very much like this one, he had intentionally missed at what was to be his first deer. The three of them—Daniel, Durr, and Mark Owen, Durr’s friend and co-owner of the timber company—had ventured into the woods on three separate occasions and had come up dry each time, not once even witnessing an animal worth shooting at. On this, their fourth shared expedition, the day seemed to be moving towards a similar conclusion and Durr doubtlessly faulted with mounting anger his son’s
inexperience, his inability to move silently, to avoid conversation, to endure the monotony of what the lack of targets reduced to a cargo-heavy hiking expedition.

A kingly buck had broken the horizon, had approached, had waited for Durr’s son to take its life, push his bullet into its heart. Durr knelt with a hand cupped around Daniel’s ear, instructing him with precision enough to make it a simple task. When he gets past that tree, wait for him to turn his side to you and shoot him, right between the shoulder and breast like we know how. By the time the buck reached the tree, Daniel was quaking. The boy shouldered his man-sized rifle, leveled it, and aimed and shot a few yards to the left of his target: the simple-minded and ineffectual deception of children. The buck jolted back and then surged forwards with an abruptness that would have remained Daniel’s most vivid memory of the day were it not for the awe-inspiring precision with which Durr reacted, following the animal with his rifle for only a split second before firing and downing the buck. Mark Owen had neither moved nor spoken: he knew better than to waste bullets when a marksman like Durr had a sight and he felt, too, like an approaching warm wind, the incandescent rage that would very soon surface from Durr’s glowing brain. A knowing sailor avoids bad weather when he anticipates it: Mark Owen resolved at the moment the boy’s gun went off to absent himself from the situation as best he could. Indeed, he achieved a presence so inert that his figure did not exist in Daniel’s memory at any point on that day, voidlike. Through all of Daniel’s reflections on the events of that long-ago day, he saw only two hunters in the Valley.

“The fuck do you think we’re doing out here?” After firing, Durr had uncharacteristically discarded his rifle to his side and now towered above the boy, his voice contorted in strangled fury as if this fury was tangible, clogged in his windpipe. He
seized his son’s puny wrists and yanked them to his chest, a pair of mouse-sized fists clenched weakly against his collarbone.

“We’re doing—we came here to hunt, damnit!” He coughed hot spit into the boy’s face. “If you can hit a fucking can, you can kill a deer.” He was now shaking him furiously, pushing his arms out and snapping them back against his chest. The wrists were strained and would soon break.

Daniel stared idiotically, mute in terror, shaking as if in fever. He began weeping at the instant his father had spoken and his cheeks were now slick with tears, his nose seemed flushed with slime and mucus blotted his upper lip like a deformity. Durr beheld this image which seemed a grotesque caricature of his own; his precise features and strong bearing were melting off of what he saw as his mirror-image and it filled him with a disgust so strong that his stomach filled with hot oil and he became nauseous with an uneasy frustration that ignited him to action.

He suddenly released the boy, cocking both fists and sending a jab to the boy’s mouth and a second to his back as he tumbled down. Daniel collapsed in a comical shape, his ass extended skyward, his face pressed to the dirt, and his hands covering his eyes rather than his throbbing mouth as if attempting to un-see some monstrous secret.

Durr grunted in disgust and turned to walk towards the fallen deer. From his blinded position, Daniel heard his father speaking. Time passed.

“Get up. Danny.” He had shifted to a fetal position; now one set of fingers rested in his mouth, probing gingerly the inconspicuous gap left by a swallowed incisor. His mouth tasted copper and he felt his body’s blood, hot and alien, slicking his throat and down into his stomach.
“Danny.” Durr knelt and hoisted his son up by his torso, shifting him onto his feet and then releasing him when he saw that he would hold to balance. He turned and walked to the animal mound and he heard his son’s shuffle behind him.

Daniel saw at last what his father had brought him to witness: the buck lay prostrate on the ground, leaning on its side, its legs extended and unmoving. From here, its flowing bulk became real and Daniel breathed and tasted the animal’s death, the pungent deep of its hide mingled with the shit and urine that had escaped its body at the moment of its fall. A nickel-sized hole spurted brown blood down the buck’s neck in a trail that curled around its throat and came to rest in the grass beneath. Daniel approached so that he loomed above the mound: from this angle, he could look down and see the cold glass of the animal’s eyes. He laid his hand on the buck’s undercarriage and understood its heat as being warm the way a tablecloth is when a serving dish is removed. He felt respect.

Durr was behind him: “You need to bleed him here.” He had his knife out and traced a path around the animal’s throat and another down its torso from its neck to its balls. He flipped the knife in his hand, pinching its blade, and handed it to Daniel.

The throat was a knot and Daniel plunged the blade in behind it and pulled out against the jugular haphazardly, wheeling the knife around him in a stuttering arc, almost falling. An impossible amount of blood leaped from this new wound and soaked into the dirt before forming a pool above the saturated ground.

“Here.” Durr turned Daniel’s small body to a better position and folded his hand around his son’s. As one, they pushed the knife in at the top of the deer’s chest and
pulled it down as if unzipping the animal. Now there was more blood and the two stepped back to witness its collapse.

Daniel felt a happiness that made him dizzy. Clearly, and with a strange maturity of mind, he saw this event as an act of fulfillment. God had shaped a mold for him at his birth, and until now he not been large enough to fill it. But today he had expanded, thanks to the kill he had expanded, and this expansion moved behind him also, enveloping his father, who would lead, accompany, and then merge. Daniel could feel his father’s silent presence behind him, a warm shape that he leaned against and, for a time, Durr allowed it.

Twenty years later, Daniel fired and did not miss. The doe consumed the bullet and was in turn consumed by it, shuddering to the ground with a mere kick in protest.

“Ah,” Durr shouted, standing. “Good shooting.”

“Not a kill shot,” Daniel shouted back. Truth: as they approached the doe’s body, her breathing was evident, though her bulk rose only slightly with each inspiration. They circled the mound and the men could see in her face strained agony as the slug bubbled in her heart. Durr had unsheathed his knife and immediately presented it to Daniel.

“Your deer,” he said. Daniel knew this was untrue, as the venison and hide gleaned from the animal would certainly end up with Durr, but he took the knife anyway, knowing this as a necessary task, momentarily despising his father nonetheless. The doe whimpered weakly and did not seem to notice as the human made itself intimate and then slashed her life. Daniel felt very little the fulfillment of his first killing, but there was still something, a flood of heat that had become familiar. He slit open the belly and stood
back where his father was kneeling, rummaging through his knapsack. Durr rose and
turned to Daniel, two wax papered bundles in his hand. Breakfast time.

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“Laura’s pregnant.” This was later, as the sun lolled just over the horizon and the
air smiled an evening-blue. The deer had been cleaned and at a distance lay its discarded
insides. They were gray and anonymous, they would be consumed when the humans
made their exit.

Durr took a pensive drag from his cigarette as if he were considering a math
equation. He exhaled: “When?”

“Found out yesterday afternoon.” Doctor in Healds says she’s got a bun cooking.

“When’ll he be out of the oven?” Durr asked distractedly.

“July, July 10th he says.” Daniel paused. “If it’s a boy,” he said, justifying
himself.

“I think that it will be.” Durr had unfurled the blood-and-blue tarp and was
spreading it on a clean stretch of grass away from the site of the cleaning. “Well,
congratulations, son, you’re in for some interesting years.” He allowed a toothy smile to
emerge from behind his whiskers. “Now, help me.”

Daniel moved towards the hollowed deer and lifted its hind legs as his father took
hold of the other end. They raised the body and shuffled it to the tarp where it hit the
earth impressively. For the two, it was like a handshake. “My life is about to change,”
Daniel thought. Then: “Or maybe not.”

“Alright, forward march, Papa,” Durr said. He had folded the tarp over the doe
and was holding two of its ends expectantly. The two would trudge back the way they
had came, cursing over the awkward weight. They would load it into Durr’s truck and part ways. Durr would take the animal to Glauson’s for tagging and then home, where he would skin the animal and begin cutting up its meat for boiling and drying. Daniel would go home and join his wife in dinner and talk. He would sleep as uneasily as he had the night before, aware to the presence, but not the nature, of this new venue of life he had undertaken and he would feel as if he were being guided along some invisible course to an equally unseen conclusion.

Now, though, there was an hour of daylight left and the two men began to climb the hill they had hours earlier descended. The air was cool and would soon turn cold. Winter was coming as father and son returned home, the weight of the kill between them.
Hot Breath

By 1945, journalists were starting to figure out be-bop and where it was coming from: Harlem, uptown, Minton’s, jungle, labyrinth, New York. Not from the docile 52nd Street clubs where nine-pieces lumbered along to the changes, hi-hat regimenting the air like a metronome click, piano a dog to his master’s heel, bass lines that buried the ear in sawdust, woodwinds squeaking out bland sixteen-measure solos that dared not rise above the din for fear they find an audience. There, attention was paid to the shoe and the wallet: will they dance to it; and will they pay for it? And can white hold it to his chest and keep it for his own? Can he force his soul into it and claim ancestry? And the journalists agreed that he could, and they wrote as much, and they followed white’s performances and his sessions, and let black and his music rage along beneath the surface, ignored. And when black’s ideas, his breath, found their way to white’s horn, the writers talked up the horn and not the wind moving through its valves.

Ideas, like wind, allow no master, no owner; as such, no one can complain when they are stolen, though some certainly did try. None but Charlie Parker himself could replicate the sound he had birthed, but plenty could imitate it, and the white musicians that had the chops and the ear to do so were taking Bird’s share of the profit and fame, while the man himself pawned a horn every now and again. The overall effect of this imitation, if not beneficial to be-bop’s founding fathers themselves, ultimately helped the music find a wider audience. The secret negro father could not long be concealed, and the writers were forced eventually to acknowledge his presence, pay him his due. The black musicians moved down to 52nd Street, got work, showed their faces. Bird would be
dead in ten years, his junk- and booze-choked body would be disposed of, and his music would drift away without him. It would move forward, outward, it would expand, grow hot. And it would spread itself thin, diluted beyond recognition, and die. But this was a process of decades: in 1945, “bop was top,” as a young man might say, and the negro father was earning his due.

I had graduated from Columbia in 1943, not at the top of my class, but damned close. There were 418 of us, fourteen of them negroes, myself included. My Baker scholarship, the bulk of my financial support, demanded that I maintain a 3.2 GPA for continued assistance. I had achieved 3.835, with a major in English, just the kind of field for someone like me that prefers books to conversation. As foolish as I was then, I was studious as hell, compulsively so. For four years, I spent eighteen hours a day in my one-room 32nd Avenue apartment, diligently completing my assignments and absorbing the information I was told to commit to memory. Perhaps I felt the need to prove myself to the white institution (my first year in, a professor had returned an essay of mine, praising my grammar and punctuation), more likely I studied because I had nothing else and my free moments were to me like a cage. I was empty, you see, and desperately conscious of this emptiness, but not enough so to do much about it; it was easier to knead a passive misery.

When I ventured outside, I was a monument; I spoke only when spoken to, and then briefly and in keenest consideration of maintaining “clean” speech. In the lecture halls, a black head in a sea of pink, I sat in the back row and kept my eyes to my notes. I walked between classes and home with my gaze fixed ahead, collecting the curious looks of my fellow students in my peripheral vision; I knew that they saw me, even if they
pretended not, that my blackness projected itself outward like a frown, that pulses raced in my presence, that my oddity was noted. This awareness was at its most intense when I walked the campus grounds itself, diminished somewhat as I hit Broadway, declined as I made my way through St. Nicholas Park and drew nearer my cold and rotting negro habitat, and vanished only when I was secured in the solitude of my hovel.

My hovel was a one-room apartment on 135th Street, busted pipes and all that. It was two blocks past the YMCA where Langston Hughes lived when he attended Columbia. I imagine he and I underwent similar experiences at our shared alma mater, but I also imagine there was a significant difference, namely that the River-Speaker had passion about what he was doing. He embraced the written language, while I was merely good with it, glumming about in constant malaise, opiating myself with work to get my mind off of my loveless existence. Lovelessness, that was the problem. In fact, it’s the problem, if you get me.

Jazz was an accident for me, I do know that. In the winter months, my unheated apartment was cold enough to kill a man if he wasn’t careful. Conversely, beginning in July and running to mid-September, I lived in a swamp and drank water by the gallon just so I wouldn’t run out of something to sweat. It was during one of these particularly devilish nights, when the heat simply will not allow one sleep, that I found myself out for a rare post-midnight walk. I say “found myself” as if the walk was something that occurred spontaneously rather than a conscious decision, but truthfully that is how I remember it: lying nude on my mattress, slick with what came to feel like needles against my skin, pleading to no one in particular for respite, and then, seconds later, fully clothed, head down, boots cracking against the sidewalk. I suppose this is how important events
in ones life play out: rapidly, so as to avoid harmful meddling on the part of the one himself.

The city is loud in the dark. Noise: shouts, all of the same abrupt, vicious tenor; doors slamming; televisions muttering, spraying blue light against window glass; automobiles rumbling, engines occasionally whining or hollering or choking or pleading, but always saying something, wheels squealing against the gutted pavement; bottles emptied and breaking; radios belching static or urban hymns or even the night-time news; the roar of minor crowds and their inhabitants—teenage thugs drunk on vigor and intentions, matriarch negresses wailing at their losses, teeth wet and gleaming, cut-apart victims sobbing in anticipation of tomorrow’s weathered grimace, these are some, and more—teeming with their own distinct brand of life. When the lights are low, this noise seems to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time, and it can be frightening. It is as if the soil itself is screaming against those who have trod upon her and erected their concrete cities. And the city itself, under the cover of blackness, screams back, triumphant, doomed.

I can’t say I had a destination on that hot summer night, but I did intentionally avoid the black spaces, where shadow concealed danger, and I only kept my head down for appearance’s sake; I was quite aware of my surroundings and the people I passed and was noticed by. I was dressed in my poor student’s garb and wouldn’t have feared robbery, but my skin is light enough that I could be confused for white in the dark, and that is its own excuse in neighborhoods like those that I strolled. But to speak of intention is pointless; I ended up where I ended up without considering it, and only recognizing it at the last second, when I stood in the doorway at Minton’s.
Minton’s was one of the smaller venues on 118th Street in be-bop’s heyday. It was a crowded joint devoted solely to music, no 52nd Street entertainment here; musicians came here to cut their teeth before making it to the white joints. The kind of place where a jam session would last until 9 a.m. out of respect. I had passed it and the other jazz clubs once or twice, but in the daytime, when the sunlight made the marquees meaningless. Nothing like what things looked like at night, with the lights bleeding into your vision. The streets appeared slick, as if after a recent rain. Smoke hung in the air and you tasted it And, underneath it all, the pulse, a rhythm that summoned the urban negro and demanded his attention. Here I was.

It was perhaps three o’clock, the last set. I had brought no money, so it was necessary that nobody be manning the door, and that was indeed that case. Inside, it was a clutter of noise focused to a pinpoint: the stage act. The club was small, with too many tables and chairs squeezed into the center of the room. If you couldn’t find a chair, you leaned against a wall; you did not come to Minton’s to dance, you came to listen. The stage itself was in the room’s back-left corner, about half the size of my apartment, with a piano flush against the left wall. The other players huddled together at the right side, with the drum kit almost reaching the drop-off point. They appeared trapped, was my first impression, and beyond that I thought nothing.

I cannot describe my experience that night other than that I was enveloped, and eventually came to enjoy it. I had never heard improvised music up to that point, and the notes seemed plucked at random, and they dove at me. And I called it love, for what else could be so frightening?
The set ended to applause that threatened to break apart the building. My heart thudded and I clapped my hands to rust. The house lights came on, revealing a sea of eager black faces. I slinked to the bathroom and drank greedily from the tap. I felt dry, close to fainting. I covered my face in water, dragged it through my ear canals, into my eyes, around my negro lips. Through the wall, a bass line started up again, fluttering, testing the air. The fear was gone, and I was at ease, as if I had found something whose absence had heretofore crippled me, and had only to tuck it in my pocket and find my way home.

And that proved enough. I scraped together money for a phonograph, and began collecting records. And, a year later, an alto saxophone that was a former axe of Bird’s himself, or so the consignment man claimed. And I became a regular at the real Harlem joints, and began to know things. I learned the rules.

It’s not random, it only sounds random. Like how Chinese and Japanese sound the same if you don’t speak a lick of either. You take the chords and you listen to them, and then you play something on top, something that relates.

Graduating, I didn’t have many options. It was expected of me that upon getting my diploma, I would return home and work foreman at the munitions plant. There was a war going on, after all, and it would have been considered a good position for any negro, college education or not. When I visited home during my schooling, the occupation seemed an unsaid assumption on the part of my mother and father, both lifelong employees of the plant; proud as they were of my pursuit of higher education, they held no illusions. I would not return to Baltimore. Be-bop had emerged from the avenues of
Harlem and lay coiled there still; I could not leave it any more than I could abandon my skeleton, in just a few years, it had entered me.

I worked in kitchens, loading docks. Tended bar, cleared tables, I practiced smiling in the mirror as it was a necessary skill and I was none too good at it.

I bought a typewriter and started writing reviews of concerts I had seen and records I had listened to. At Columbia, I would have considered myself a good writer. Here, channeling my obsession and putting it to paper, I was excellent. I’d usually complete an article each week, and send it unsolicited to *Half-Step* and also the smaller local rags. Some of them got published, none of them paid. There was my name though, Jacob Lloyd, and I pulled myself closer to what I needed.

To explain obsession seems almost as difficult a task as writing about music, but I’ve done the latter, and well mind you, so I may as well take a poke at the former and hope to make something of it. It helps to keep in mind that I was young then, and love strikes deepest the inexperienced. And it was love, as foolish as that sounds, I was enamored with this music and wanted it with me, over and in.

I also practiced the horn, many hours a day. Frustration: I wasn’t getting good, I wasn’t even getting competent. Weak tone, stumbling chops, pedantic solos. Playing scales and rhythm patterns is one thing, but it’s external. Jazz players don’t work with the external, they take deep breaths and exhale notes from the internal, they push it out. A partnership of the heart and hands.

Charlie Mingus came to town with a band he had formed out of the Jazz Workshop. They played a four-day stretch at the Onyx, and I reviewed it, writing what I considered my best work yet. The music itself was some weird thing, even by Mingus’
whacked-out standards; long, long pieces, with a lot of neo-classical influence in the arrangements, chromatic ostinatoes and all that shit.

I wrote 1,000 words and sent it to *Half-Step*. This is the last paragraph, it took me a day to complete and another to revise; it’s stuck in my memory for life now, I suspect:

Ultimately, what Mingus knows is what we critics and bop die-hards have spent the past five years forgetting: that jazz music is defined not by any static considerations to form and method—severe, disciplined, and as a result, unchanging—but rather by the evolution of the art form itself, by its taking of an old idea and making it new. What we must remember, and what Mingus and cohorts help remind us through the heedless aggression of their performance, is that as deep a glow as be-bop radiates, it is only one link in a chain that is never-ending and of origins too ancient to recall. Be-bop forces itself on us now, but will pass inevitably, and something new will take its place. Perhaps not anything like what the acolytes of Jazz Workshop profess, but *something*, something that channels the old emotions and speaks them in a new tongue.

Admittedly, these were ideas that had been floating in my head for some time, and it took only the right performance for me to bring them to paper. But they looked good there, and I was not entirely surprised when I got a letter back from *Half-Step* saying that they wanted to put out my review. But I was certainly taken aback with the letter’s second half, in which I was invited to their uptown office to speak with Linus Solovitz, who was an associate editor of the magazine at the time, and, as I learned a few minutes into our talk, looking for an article or two a month out of me.

As the only black writer at the magazine, I was a novelty. The other employees were in their thirties or forties, almost universally Jewish, forward-thinking. They wore
corduroys and penny-loafers, well-worn tweed jackets that they removed when inside, they smoked cigarettes constantly, marijuana occasionally, tucked away in some remote office during the late hours. They spoke and acted quickly, children of the city; now aged, cynical, restless. I was treated with kindness, tolerance. I was smiled at, greeted by my first name, clapped on the back, offered coffee, commendations. I was treated. Linus informed me, not without a generous helping of self-possessed pride, that I would be allowed the same rights as the magazine’s other employees. Our entrances, our washrooms, our respect. It’s a new age, we know better now, it’ll be alright, son, they seemed to say.

I rarely penned album reviews from then on. They wanted me in the clubs, listening, and sometimes interviewing. The reasoning for this was obvious: the real jazz joints, places like Minton’s where new things were happening, were populated exclusively by blacks. *Half-Step* had managed itself for its first five years without actually involving its writers in the real scene, but no longer, and thus my hiring. Possessing a soft chestnut pigment, like the color of dark wicker, my skin allowed me to exist simultaneously between these two worlds, and I came to like it. No matter my pretensions to pride, or the reminder (constant at first, then ebbing) that I was playing Tom to what was essentially a business when you got down to it, I was making money and getting published on a national scale. I could afford nice clothes, good food. I left the River-Speaker district to a place on 6th Avenue, close to the magazine office and the 52nd Street clubs. It became difficult to complain, so I stopped trying, and my smiles became real, and earned.
I was two years into my position and had about forty articles under my belt when Eddie Wilkins hit the scene, and running. He had started out in St. Louis, and cut his teeth playing tenor in the Billy Robinson Big Band, before switching to alto and cutting a couple sessions as a leader, *Wilkin’ It* and *Hot Breath*. These were some fucked up records. No standards, not a lot of respect paid to form. You could call it ahead of its time, and it was, but it wasn’t as refined as most of the modal stuff that came out as the 1950s ended, it was too chaotic. Eddie had the virtuosity that is requisite of bop musicians, but he took it in some violent directions, often breaching through to the dissonant, bordering on the frightening. Eventually the man found his way to New York, all the good ones do, and started getting his name known. By the time he came to my attention, and I was able to get an ear on his records, he had already brought together a quintet on the East coast and was doing some dates down in Philadelphia in expectation of cutting a third album back in New York; the man was striding.

Like the majority of records cut before 1960, you can’t find copies of Eddie Wilkins’ stuff anymore. Mine are long gone, shuffled away into that bland realm where things go when their owners lose interest, but I can picture their sleeves quite clearly in my mind. *Wilkin’ It* is nothing special: the title and personnel in sea-green lettering, with a nondescript photo of the band huddled around the camera, also cast in sea-green. It is the cover art of *Hot Breath* that I have carried with me as a visual correspondent to that very definition of “jazz” I hold in my mind. The title and the personnel listing, this time set in an uncomfortable red-orange. Its image is of only Wilkins himself, from the collar up, his face half-obscured in sunglasses. His mouth is open, twin trails of what could only be smoke climb either side of his head, cast in an uncompromising and undiluted
white. I found out later that the effect was actually produced by overdeveloping the film, but knowing this does not diminish the effect produced by observing the jacket. Simply, he appears demonic.

Linus wanted two things from me in the month of July 1945: five hundred words concerning Lenny Barrett’s new Savoy record; and an interview with Eddie Wilkins, to be conducted at the Three Deuces, where his quintet was playing for a five-night stint. They were expected to get to the studio immediately following this gig; I was excited to hear what I assumed would be material for the new record, I was excited to see the man in person, as until then I had only ghosts to go on.

The difficulty was in getting in touch with the man. Like most small-time musicians, Wilkins didn’t have any kind of representation, a call to the Three Deuces confirmed this. After a bit of searching, the best I could come up with was the local residence of the band’s piano player. Our telephone conversation was brief. He seemed bemused that anybody would want to interview “that loony alto mother,” but said he’d pass on the information if he saw him.

“If?” I asked.

“Always an ‘if’ with that man,” he drawled, sounding annoyed already.

“Well, I’d like to do it on the second night if that would work, Wednesday, between sets. Can you tell him that?”

“If I see him, yeah, I’ll tell him. Just remember, was you who asked for it.”

I didn’t know what to make of that, so I made nothing, and listened to Wilkin’ It and Hot Breath pretty much round-the-clock in the days leading up to the Three Deuces gig. I also listened a bit to Barrett’s thing, the platter I was supposed to be reviewing, but
it wasn’t holding my attention. It was what I would call “reasonable” music, though never in another’s presence, jazz that fit precisely the genre’s parameters without daring to breach them. Head, solos, head, next groove. With the Wilkins stuff, those same parameters were merely launch points, with the destination being farther away than you would think possible, or reasonable. You could feel the fury in Wilkins’ horn, all the way through the valves of your heart, you would shake. The other boys in the band, capable though they were, felt anonymous, banner-carriers; it was the Eddie Wilkins sound, wholly.

I was waiting for it then, bated breath and all that. It was like the cowboy serials they’d show before the movie when I was a kid. If you could only get hold of another nickel, and stand it for a whole week… The hero will always escape, but how? Then, he always got away clean.

The Three Deuces was just like any of the other 52nd Avenue clubs in the bop heyday, and just like most of them, it didn’t make it past the sixties. A single room, dark, filled with tables and a drunk crowd, about three quarters black, except maybe me, the journalist. I was fully intent on interviewing Wilkins on the second night of their gig, but that wouldn’t stop me from seeing them on the first.

There were three sets, the first was to begin at eleven, I showed up at ten and it was already quite crowded. By some stroke of luck, I was able to take a booth at the room’s back, all to myself. I was nervous, a byproduct of my eagerness to witness the man play live, so when the waitress passed, I ordered a drink, which I almost never do. I sipped it like a nun, to be sure, but I was feeling pretty loose by the time the musicians started warming up. I recognized them from the *Wilkin’ It* sleeve: drummer, bassist,
pianist, trumpet player, all four of them. No Eddie Wilkins, and that’s how they played the first set, not exactly steaming. A couple of numbers from the studio albums, but a whole lot of standards too, “All The Things You Are” and all that shit. It was clunky and uninspired; it’s tough to do bop with only one soloist when you’re expecting two. They looked mad, pissed off as hell, and it came out in their playing: staccato, overloud at points, rushed. To the next set, the next song, the next bar.

They wrapped up their set with “Cherokee,” which is about as fast as music comes, and they got their due applause for it. It’s always stunning to see fingers move that fast, and the only thing to do is laugh like a lover. The trumpet player leaned into his microphone and announced the band members: “…and Eddie Wilkins on alto, wherever he’s playing it right now.” He didn’t sound like he was in good humor about it, the other members of the band had already made it backstage.

By the time they started their second set, I was actually drunk, for what would have been the third time in my young life. This time there was a saxophonist, but not Eddie, some guy they had recruited just then. This time they played nothing but standards, and they positively rolled through them, not stopping to “see the sights,” as I once termed quality improvisation. By the time they ended, I left my seat and made my way to the stage, right next to the door that led to the back.

I grabbed the drummer by his sleeve as he walked past me. I was quite, quite drunk by then, you understand, and felt entitled to call to account anybody I felt like.

“Where’s Eddie?” I sputtered.

“The fuck should I know,” he said, and tore his arm away from me.
I didn’t stay for the last set. Instead I went home, rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter, and wrote the Lenny Barrett review without stopping, using all the clichés I had at my disposal. The generally observed rule in writing reviews is that the scale ranges from average to excellent. I gave this one a “good,” in essence, and described the set I had just seen, substituting the appropriate names. I didn’t have to edit it much when I looked at it the next day; some things you just get good at, drunk or not.

“Well, just try again tonight, you know how these people can be…*musicians*, I mean.” This was Linus, the next day, when I explained that the interview might not be possible, because he hadn’t showed up, and I hadn’t even confirmed the interview with him in the first place, and that we might consider lining up another one. It’s funny, because they forgot my blackness at times, but never totally. I had gone to a fellow editor’s home for dinner one night and I could have been white just to the point where he introduced his ivory daughters.

I wouldn’t have wagered a guess as to whether Eddie would show up the second night, but it was *Half-Step’s* money, and I took a seat at the bar this time, the only one open. When the musicians hit the stage, it looked like I’d be disappointed again: everyone except Wilkins and the same fill-in on the alto. More standards, older ones: “Yesterdays”; “All Of You”; “Moritat.”

About halfway through, I became conscious of a disheveled man hovering at my shoulder, brushing against me at intervals. When I turned to face him, he showed me a yellow smile and leaned into me: “You got the time, frenn?” was what he said, and I immediately regretted acknowledging him. He had a sick look to him, like he’d just
barely survived an illness. I showed him the face of my watch, and he gave a tight, high-
pitched laugh that contrasted eerily with the baritone of his speaking voice.

“Buy me a whiskey, frenn,” he said next, and he had shoved a grubby dollar
nearly into my mouth. Hoping to get him away from me as speedily as possible, I
complied, gave him his change. He strolled off wordlessly. Nobody else at the bar
seemed to have noticed this strange interaction; the band was still playing after all. I
noticed then that he was cradling a plastic alto case under his armpit and that it was, of
course, Eddie Wilkins. He looked nothing like his photo on either of the record sleeves,
he looked beat up, worn down, deprived of air and sleep. The suit he wore was of the
latest cut, but wrinkled and stained, like he slept in it. I watched him make his way to the
stage until he was right up next to it, where I had interrogated the drummer last night.
None of his bandmates appeared to notice him, and the first set concluded as dismally as
it had begun. When the applause tapered down, and the band had made their way
backstage, Eddie hopped up to the stage and followed them in. Minutes later, the fill-in
emerged, bearing the undecided expression of a man recently awoken, and joined the
crowd.

My heart flooded, dizziness filled me. The final stages of anticipation are nothing
like those earlier stages in which it is the longing that dominates. In the final stages,
expectation replaces longing, a dread certainty of fulfillment; very soon, *it* will happen,
and you must now face the consequences of your desire.

Simply, it was everything I had hoped for, and other things that I had not but
came immediately to hold to my heart.
Lengthily: The set begins with an arrhythmic flutter of cymbal, compounded by a solemn crack of the snare drum that induces the bass player. He begins his exploration by squeaking his fingernails along the strings, thumping the body of his instrument, holding a note for a second before sliding down to nothing, etc. This mania eventually evolves into a rhythm of squeaks, thumps, and slides, which in turn evolves into a regular bass line, a mutter. The drummer is now in check, turning out a neat chik-a-chik on the hi-hat that escalates as the piano joins the fray, a tinkling of keys in the mid-range, and then the same pattern repeated two octaves lower. Again, again, and then in unison, and this appears to be a signal. Trumpet and saxophone emerge together, bursting like twin bolts of lightning, in unison; one-two-three-FOUR, and all but the bass evaporates, deviating from his line into a soft plucking pattern that sputters and then accelerates back into the previous groove. The chik-a-chik resumes, the piano plunks out that same tinkling, and, again: one! two! three! FOUR! And we’re off and running now, no question, as Eddie Wilkins’ alto shrieks like burned lips and the pianist chonks out a progression for him to tread upon. I have heard it said that music is a means of organizing silence, but Eddie is stamping it down; his lines are virtually constant, spiraling like a flame-engulfed fighter plane that will not go down, and I wonder if he even breathes. His first solo lasts for what I remember as being somewhere between four and ten choruses, it’s impossible to recall. When he ceases, and the trumpet player relieves him, Eddie does not back away. In fact, it is only about thirty seconds later that he is puckering a softly inhaled whisper behind the trumpeter, an unchanging note that mounts imperceptibly until it is at an even volume with the soloist; a rapid-fire fill from the drummer, and it is again one-two-three-FOUR, and now alto and trumpet perform an
interesting trick, trading fours while the other man drones his single note. Back and forth they cycle, and one is forced to pay attention not to the brief madness of each man’s four-bar performance, but rather to the droned note behind him. Then, another furious beating on the part of the drums, and the soloists are again playing their game, but this time they are only trading two-bar sections, and the effect achieved is one of hurtling fright. Again, the drums, and now it is mere one-bar sections, and once more with the drums, and now half-bars, room for just a scattering of notes, and, unbelievably, the drums interject once more, and now they are trading quarter bars, but they are no longer soloing, they are playing the four notes of the theme in rapid succession: onetwothreefour-droooohh-ne.

It is madness, and the rhythm players have worked themselves into a rage behind all this; the bass player is pulling at his strings as if they are chains barring his freedom, and suddenly the other four musicians cease, and it is just the bass, tearing at steel, and he calms down, and quiets down, and resumes the groove, which diminishes, and hums, and then ends.

There is applause, uncertain, bewildered perhaps. Eddie Wilkins advances to the front of the stage and growls into the microphone. “That one’s called ‘A Boy’s Education,’” he says, “maybe the kind of education no one needs.” And he introduces the band.

I was unable to hold my seat for more than a few seconds after Eddie started playing, and I stood for the rest of the set, shifting my weight from one foot to the other like a boy with a swollen heart. The music had planted something in my body that filled me with a kind of hopeless energy that required release, it was a dangerous feeling. The rest of the set was as manic as the first number, no ballads, no escape. It just built and
I was brave. “Mr. Wilkins,” I muttered, trying to meet his pupils, “I’m here for Half-Step, the interview—”

“Nobody called ‘bout no innerview,” he grumbled, but opened his eyes fully and he was pleased.

At this, the piano player, with whom I had spoken earlier in the week, turned to face us and spoke: “He’s the one I told you about, from the magazine, man. I told you that, and twice.”
“Aaaah,” Eddie exhaled, for what seemed like a minute, closing his eyes again.

“No, I can’t recall…”

“Damnit, Eddie, do us all a favor and come through on this, man,” came a voice from down low, the bassist’s naturally. “We could use some good publicity for a change.”

“Motherfucker,” Eddie began, and came to his feet. None of his bandmates batted an eye, and he sat down again, as if he had suddenly forgotten the events of the last few minutes. It occurred to me then that he did not recognize me from earlier at the bar, and I considered what could have happened to his brain that would allow him to turn a piece of metal into a demon’s voice, yet prevent him from performing these basic cognitive functions.

“Yeah, I’ll do an interview, why’n not?” He reclined on the sofa, his eyes trained on the ceiling from which a complication of pipes and wires suspended. “Make’n us famous, you’ll see,” he gestured to the room.

“Just get it done in the next forty minutes, man,” the piano player said, walking back towards the hallway that lead to the stage. “Remember, we got three sets to play tonight.” The other bandmates followed him except the bassist who was still tweaking his axe in the corner. I dragged an armchair over to the couch, flipped open my notepad.

Eddie turned himself over the rim of the couch and spoke in the bass player’s direction: “Red, you seen Mickey aroun’ tonight?” Red looked up with unhidden disgust, now cradling his instrument by the neck. “Told him I’d meet him.”

“Yeah, Eddie, I seen him. Not that it’s anything you should worry about.”

“Ain’ worried, Red, just asked if’n you seen him.”
At this, he set his axe down, stood up and darted out of the room, frustration set along the angle of his eyebrows.

“Well, shit, Red, doan need to get into a fit about it,” and he flashed his yellow teeth at me.

I gave him my hand and introduced myself and our interview began as well as I could have hoped. In the two years I’d been working for the magazine, I’d done quite a few interviews, and I had managed to work out a standard procedure through which all appropriate topics would be breached. Starting at the subject’s first exposure to music, moving through the important recordings of his apprenticeship and mastery, addressing the modern music climate, asking him where he saw his music going. These were the four areas I saw as being vital to the interview, the questions that deviated were what made each interview unique. Despite his erratic speech and heavy profanity (both of which could be easily amended by the time I got to the typewriter), he followed the course as loyally as any of my other interview subjects. I was pleased to find that he was born in Baltimore before his family moved to Kansas City, and that he was even poorer than I had been. He claimed to have been brought to music after hearing Gustav Mahler’s Song of the Earth; be-bop was simply the genre through which his horn was able to find its niche. He returned constantly to what he labeled “the music’s stroke,” which was his sexually-phrased way of identifying why new music kept coming up, “’cause every nigger with a brain jus’ wanna keep on strokin’ it after all,” and then that laugh that was his instrument’s high end.
Our interview was just about done, about ten minutes to the third set, when the door from the stage opened behind us and I saw Eddie’s eyes flash eagerly, like a dog’s when meat is placed just outside the range of its leash.

“Mick, my mannn,” and he stretched out on the consonant, enjoying it on his tongue. But gone was his casual arrogance, and his eyes were filled with a mix of wariness and respect. Here was someone to be considered.

Mickey was thuggish, out of place, he wore corduroy slacks and a ragged short-sleeved shirt that stretched around the curve of his stomach, fat, but not enough to fool anyone. I turned to face him and saw his eyes as they flitted over me and then locked onto Wilkins with the cool concentration of someone who knows how to get what he wants.

“Talked to Paul, Eddie, he don’t know nothing ‘bout no sixty dollars he owes you. Said you didn’t show up last night an’ they almost lost the gig ‘cause of that. Your company ain’t in high demand, Eddie. And you owe.”

“Shit, Mick, you cand believe nothin’ that tall motherfucker says, got his head so deep in the clouds…” Eddie opened his mouth into a confident leer that drooped into uncertainty as he trailed off, when he saw that Mickey wasn’t buying it.

Mickey allowed the quiet to sit for a few seconds before speaking. “You owe for fifty, and you come around asking for another dose, that’s a lot of fucking nerve in addition to the money you owe. But get me the money and I’ll call it clear on the insult.”

“Listen—listen, Mickey, they’s a misunderstandin’, Paul owes me for last night and tonight, now that’s sixty altogether, lemme just go an’ talk to him.” He stuttered in the direction of the stage door, and Mickey grabbed him by his arm and forced him to the
floor with one massive knee buried into his back. Eddie wheezed something evil through his teeth and thrashed around a bit, but wasn’t going nowhere, and calmed down when he figured this out.

“M-Mickey,” he gasped. “My horn, man, just until I talk to Paul, collateral.”

I had backed away from the scene gradually, wanting very much to be ignored, so I could barely hear Eddie speak, but Mickey’s voice was clear, and low: “Collateral, fine, but this thing ain’t worth fifty dollars, so you’d better have something to show me, and don’t think I don’t know where to find you when you ain’t even got the horn to blow.”

He released his hold and Eddie scampered up and out of the room, headed towards the stage. I stood petrified, long enough to watch Mickey lope to the couch and pick up the discarded alto, finger its keys idly, and blow a quizzical, cracked note through it before turning to face me with a weary expression.

“Got any idea what this is worth?” he asked me.

“Depends,” I said, and followed Eddie’s steps back into the club.

He was at the bar, and you could hear his voice distinctly above the noise of the crowd, just as his saxophone had risen above the tumult of his rhythm section. The remaining members of the quintet were also there with him, gathered tightly around their bandleader. Also present was the saxman that had filled in for three of those four sets that Eddie had missed; it was he who drew the debtor’s attention, and, as I inched closer to the bar, I could hear the frustration, desperate.

I was feet away from the exit when I heard a scream and the crowd roar what might have been approval. Eddie had taken a glass from the bar and had smashed it into the face of the fill-in, the blood glistened darkly under the dim club lights before
disappearing under a collapse of frantic bodies. My mouth tasted stale, like it had that morning with the film of liquor still along my gums, like it did in the thick summer night. I turned my head to leave and then glanced over my shoulder once more. I could see Mickey, standing on the stage, exposed under the lights; he held the alto by the bell in one hand, it radiated a gilded glow.

Revolutions do not happen in a day, mine did not. But it was that night, the third Wednesday in July of the year 1950, that I began to dissipate, when I began to lose my love—what I would later term “investment”—for jazz and music and art in general. Returning from the Three Deuces that night, I reread the other interviews I had done and assembled Eddie Wilkins’ speech into a shape that mimicked everything I had done before. He was a genius, I said, a man both of and ahead of his time, he would carry our beloved music into its next alarming stage. I condensed the fire of jazz into its mere temperature, a constant and easily-describable entity, and the words flowed from brain to paper, a different discipline from the jazzman’s transcription from ear to note, but displaying the same formulaic assertion. I was finished at dawn; the next day I woke to find that I had accidentally referred to my interviewee as Eddie Davis about half of the time.

It was a loss, but do not consider it a tragedy, I do not. Had Juliet merely become disinterested in her Romeo, there would be no tears. You’d think that as my passion for the music evaporated the quality of my writing would deteriorate, but it certainly did not, and I managed to keep my position at *Half-Step* for a full thirty years, rising through the ranks in the magazine as my negro soul dissipated and diluted, observing the ascending stages of the music as a man might observe a horse race on which he has staked no
wager. It is no tragedy, please. When the art form began its decline in the seventies, “jazz is dead” became the phrase of the day, and though I avoided such gloominess in my writing, in private settings I agreed that it had become an obsolete science.
Sorcery

It was Freeman that told me about the swamp bitch’s intentions, but I do not blame him; he warned me full well of what I was doing, I was just too hungry to see straight. I am Caleb Blair, age thirty-four, clarity waning, death impending, and I am not as dumb as I look, not so dumb that I usually allow my emotions to get the best of me. Looking at my torn mouth, most people see me as being nothing but emotion, and not the sharper ones: brute anger, animal sadness, that’s about the range. There’s more, but the trouble’s that when you keep most of them down, the ones that do come up rise stronger than you want, like holding half a thumb over a hose nozzle. And it’s confusing, it can be, so when you get to feeling anything, you can’t put much of an explanation to it, just ride it and hope you land someplace soft. I touched down in the thorns, and that’s my fault entirely. As I said, I’m no dummy; call me janitor, mushmouth, freak—there’s gears that mesh neatly inside this head, and I can’t claim that I was taken advantage of, by the bitch, or Freeman, or even Emilia, the blushing bride, though each of them played a part in this little mess. Emilia’s smile, Freeman’s cut, the bitch’s fire, that’s the order, but I ran alongside each of them and I’m still running… But I run in circles too, my brain’s heated up almost to boiling point, simmering into mush; it won’t be long now, that’s what The Mutterer told me, is telling me. Reflection, that’s the only clarity—the now and the soon are sunburnt red and black ashes respectively—and even that’s beginning to bleed, so that I should set my reflections down while they’re still clean. So it was Freeman that told me what I was getting myself into:
Freeman’s one of the coloreds that works the kitchen at my hospital; I only see him on my lunch break, spooning up soup or mash or whatever he’s spooning up, point is I hadn’t heard a word from his mouth until last week. I was emptying the garbage on the third floor when she walked by and entered one of the rooms where they keep the old ones set to die. I was leaving this very room when she appeared in the doorway and gave me the kind of smile documented only by incompetent poets, before greeting the fogey behind me, the one I had suspected of shitting himself when I first smelled the room and who, I imagined, she was actually about to clean up. She stunned me, and I walked in the only direction the stunned can: straight, to the room across the hall. It was another convalescent room, one that I had already emptied, and I leaned behind the open door with my ear to the gap. I could hear her voice sharp from there, she was asking the old man in the bed how he was feeling and what he had done today, though she must have known the answers to both: dying. He grumbled a few words and her voice rang out again, clean as a bell, yet soft somehow, a breeze: “Well if that can’t beat all,” and then her laughter, the high notes on a piano. My chest clenched into itself and I now leaned against the wall for support, eyes closed. I heard her gentle footsteps advance towards me and started up. No, she had only walked a few feet to close the door of her patient’s room. I stood a few moments longer and heard nothing until a groan at my back reminded me that I was not alone; the crone that I had assumed asleep when I first came in had woken up and was asking me something. I turned to look at her, a sack of gray flesh, yellow tubes poked into either side of the neck, and shared her sickness. The air smelled like rot, just like every other room. She repeated her question, I think so at least, and I told her to go to sleep. Justifying myself, I took the empty waste bin from the
corner of her room out into the hall and banged it around my cart, returned it, and creaked to the next set of rooms.

Am I a romantic at heart? Doubtful: the phenomenon is not love, it is obsession, or compulsion. The drain. I continued my work that day under a clouded brain, and through the haze of all other concerns her shape emerged as clearly and intensely as the sun slashes the eye. Ours is a large hospital, largest in Mississippi, and there are many nurses here, many janitors. But I had seen her before, and her image had first incited in me that same meager desire shared between me and any pretty face, soft curve, or friendly voice, no exclusive grouping. Now, but now, she had ascended, the angel, and I was yoked: the brain and the heart and the lungs. A slender yet rounded frame, small breasts tight under the white of her uniform, two lines of crisp teeth that could force me prostrate when exposed, low brown eyes that promised forgiveness. Her hair was light and abundant, she kept it in a dense braid on that day and most others; I had seen it released and in my dreams had felt it against my skin, I will not bother to deny that now. She was in me, a burned silhouette, and this was our beginning.

It was coincidence that Freeman and I shared a lunch break that day, coincidence that he chose to sit at the end of the colored tables closest to the trash bins so that I would pass within feet of him as I went to discard my tray. I had spent my thirty minutes alone with my cafeteria meal without eating it, stirring at my stew until it went from scalding to tepid, tearing at the corners of the paper napkin, and, on the whole, wasting my fifteen cents. It has long been my misfortune that when suffering under this kind of mental adherence, when my brain refuses to address any subject other than the one, The Mutterer emerges, my brain’s needling shadow, and a dialogue rises between us. It is no
schizophrenia, but at times I find myself speaking in response to him, answering, or even posing questions to his sniggering face. As I walked to the trash bins, one of his questions was gaining momentum, repeating itself in louder and lengthier tones until I could no longer ignore him. “So, you can love, is that it?” The Mutterer asked, and of course I answered, as I drew near the bins and as Freeman raised his eyes at my approaching footsteps, in an honest voice: “Yes.”

“What’s that?” Freeman’s voice is low like breath, like his presence; I had not noticed him and so I answered what I thought to be my own internal response with a clearer voice: “Yes, I do love—” before realizing who I answered and instantly freezing in my steps. This is where coincidence ends, he knew from here on out, I will swear to God that he knew.

He laughed at me, at what I had revealed, and actually brought his feet around the bench so that he was facing me. His mouth opened in a taunting grin, his teeth exposed and sharp. I turned away and moved to empty my tray when he jumped up, saying “Hold on they,” and swooping a giant black hand down to pick up my stew before I could empty its remains in the trash. The two of us were perhaps equally shocked at what had happened: I gaped at the audacity of a jig taking anything from a white man other than his contempt and he too perceived the strangeness of what had just developed as if he had had no hand in it and was showing up late to the scene. Two other coloreds sat at the table with Freeman, they looked up with slackened mouths and dumb faces as if the sky were opening. “Take it, then,” I said, and threw away the rest of what I had, tray and all, and exited the room.
I stayed away from the cafeteria from then on, and thus did not see Freeman for a few days after that first encounter. For my meals, I would either leave the hospital and walk across the street to the sandwich stands or go without. I avoided him as if he were a former accomplice in an aborted plot; he knew me in ways I did not wish to be known. I could keep away from him, but he stayed with me, would join The Mutterer at times in poking at my ears. Of course, Freeman’s ghost was of relative little concern, a gnat. It was sweet Emilia (name discovered covertly, and held within) who was of greatest importance and my days at work were devoted to her scent: it wasn’t long before I had learned her patterns and activities so that my own came to mimic. She worked exclusively on the third floor, exclusively with the convalescents; I engineered my work schedule so that I was frequently in the right places when she passed by. Beyond that initial obligatory smile she had given me, she would not have noticed my presence any more than that of the other janitors who are as thick and benign as flies, or I prayed she would not. It was more important simply that I be able to see her during the day so that, at nights, I could nurse my unacted desires, those desires that swell with the tough slickness of worms. I wonder now what would have happened had I continued on this course of inaction; possibly the strain of desire would have driven me mad, more likely it would have simply diffused over time as my attentions waned; certainly it has happened before. Just as no object can avoid its inevitable obsolescence, no ideal can hold past an individual’s attention span, and I know this now as I should have then. Nonetheless, I did not continue on this course of inaction; I moved to take her and Freeman helped me.

It was night and I had clocked out. I was waiting for the bus at a distance behind the bus stop, breathing silence. Freeman was there, standing a few feet to the left of the
bench, his back to me; next to him, another negro was making wild gestures, addressing either Freeman or the sky, shaking his fists at one or the other in accompaniment to his ranting. There were no others; it was midnight and those who stayed at the hospital at such an hour were there until past dawn. I cannot say for sure which of the two men made me the more uneasy; in a flash of perception I saw the two of them unclothed. One: the wild African, blood running feverish under his tar-black skin, teeth sleek in anticipation of barbarity, the stone knife poised in thirsty apprehension. Freeman: domesticated, chutney brown, hiding his knife. The bus came, mine. Freeman got on, his companion did not. I paused to consider, and found myself up the steps before I had the chance, compulsion. A bleary-eyed suited man sat at the front of the bus, no other. Freeman walked to the farthest row of seats and took one. I was pulled to the seat opposite.

He noticed me when I approached, but remained silent, I saw recognition in his eyes and something sweeter. For a minute, I was silent, knowing something was necessary but incapable of addressing it. The absurdity of the situation appeared forcefully: the man was a negro and a stranger, he knew nothing of me and had nothing to tell me. I had assumed some psychical connection that day in the cafeteria and this baseless assumption had led me to take a foolish path towards a resolution that did not actually exist.

Freeman spoke: “You got a burden on you or something, mushmouth?” And just as violently, I was again certain: he knew.
I stared at him, mute. He spoke again: “I been seeing you in the lunch hall, and I been seeing you right now, and it looks as some girl’s got a hold of you in a bad way, didn’t I say it?”

“Nigger,” I began in a heavy voice, and quickly dropped my defenses. “What you got to say to me?”

He laughed, a reedy train of ‘hees,’ and spoke, “Going to have to speak up, mushmouth, can’t hardly hear you through all that schhhhh-pit.” Speaking as rarely as I do, it had been a while—since grade school, really—since someone had directly addressed my defect. I reddened and felt the deformity spread so that it became all of me, a red sliver that rent my upper lip and passed over and around my skull, down my back, under my genitals, up through my torso and back up my neck and chin to my lower lip. Bisected, yet still a freakish whole. I turned towards my window where I could see his reflection, grinning.

“Oh, don’t go sulking now, it’s just a little humor, you can take a joke now and again, can’t you?” His laughter tapered, “But I know what I know, and you pretty sharp for a harelipped janitor, you know? Sharp enough to take advice, I mean.” His expression was utterly serious now. “Sharp enough to know what it is you want.”

I turned and stared into him, speaking in the sternest voice I knew, “I know what I want.”

He smiled. “Yeah, yeah, we all know that, don’t we? Problem is, what happens if we get it?”

“Not the problem,” I said. And my eyes pleaded.
“Well, maybe not, then. Not yet, maybe not.” He paused in consideration, but
resumed, “You ever been any farther down the River than we at now?”

His question made me wary. It seemed irrelevant, the natural precedent to a lie.
I told him one: “Been to New Orleans once.”

Freeman cackled like a crow, “Not quite the kind of South I meant, but getting
there, sure, no I meant a bit deeper than that.” I remained silent and he continued, “Well,
say you get down to the gulf, deep down in that steamy part of the country, that’s what I
was referring to.” He licked his lips at this. His tongue seemed unnaturally fresh for a
negro of his age, which I would have guessed at maybe fifty or sixty. His skin had a
strange gray shading to it, and it wasn’t hardly wrinkled; it seemed like it was stretched
too tight over his skeleton and he had to strain to open his mouth.

“I’ve only been down they a couple times, myself, can’t stand the heat, you
understand, but I’ve seen a few things…you get down in that swamp country, you’ll see a
few things, too.”

“Yeah, like what?” Disbelief was creeping back in, the only sure thing was that
the nigger liked to talk.

“Oh, nothing much, same as things you’ll see around here,” and he gave me a
wide-lipped grin that I could have slapped off his face with both hands.

“This is bullshit,” I slurred, and stood. The bus had come to a stop and the bleary-
eyed man at the front was standing to leave. This was my stop too, where I should have
gotten off.
“Oh now, come on, I’m just having a bit of fun, you know, you don’t need to get in a huff about it.” I considered him and sat down. The bus driver turned towards us, frowned vaguely, and turned back around to the advancing road.

“Anyway, the part of Louisiana I’m talking about ain’t on no map, so you’d have a bit of tough work getting down there was you so inclined. You can only take the bus so far, but you’ll do a bit of walking before you make your way to Lydia’s place. And it’s no smooth road you’d be taking if you do decide you want to take it.” He paused again and showed a look that betrayed a sudden melancholy. He spoke in a strained whisper, hiding, “Actually, you may not want to take it after all.”

“This sounds like a lot of shit,” I said. “Who’s Lydia and what reason do I got to see her?” I was lying, what he had said so far had the intrigue of truth and my voice reached a pitch of excitement.

He heard this excitement and the smile returned. “Lydia’s a lady I know—no, no lady, just about the oldest and meanest bitch I know. But we got a kind of agreement, you see, and she can do things for you if you know how to negotiate.”

I stared at him, yielding nothing, and he continued. “When I was about your age, or maybe a bit younger…” He trailed off, and I could tell he was thinking at just how he wanted to tell me what he wanted to tell me and I should have taken warning at this sudden concern, and but for the impatience of my desire I would have.

“What’s the problem? Tell me, who’s Lydia and what’s she got to do with me?”

Freeman grinned and proceeded, “There’s not a lot of them like Lydia left in the world, no, it’s a dying race. She told me once that she had six sisters as good as her or better and now she’s the only one left.”
“Tell me what you know, nigger.” I was sweating suddenly, no, burning, the strain of my desire screaming within me.

“She’ll lift your burden, no lie, she’ll get you what you want, and you’ll hold it in your arms and touch it inside and out—”

I leaped across the aisle and was close enough to breathe the heat of his words. My brain flailed in white light, and I battled a multitude for Freeman’s attention. “Tell me,” I said.

“Your years, boy, she wants your years.” I gaped, motionless, and he continued, “You bring her a little piece of your burden and she’ll bring her to you, no problem at all. Lydia’s just going to want a little piece of your life for herself, in exchange, you understand.”

Relief flowed over my skin like vital rain. The light in my brain dimmed and then disappeared. He was full of shit, no doubt to it, this was just a game for him and he had succeeded in wasting my time thus far, but no longer. Wordlessly, I stood and took a seat at the front of the bus. He made a desperate reach to grab at my arm as I left, and his nails scratched against my skin. Freeman took a piece of me there, all that he needed; I didn’t realize it then, but it’s clear as day now.

I recoiled and glared at him; he stared at his feet in what I saw as shame. The bastard had drawn blood and I would have laid into his old bones were I not so eager to get away from his bullshit.

At the next stop I got off, and began walking in the opposite direction, back to where I should have gotten off in the first place. I didn’t want to, but ended up stealing a glance at his profile in the window as we parted. He was looking straight ahead, lips
pursed tightly as if fighting back tears: another sad old man alone with his lies. I could have pitied him had I not so many miles left until home.

I often work the late shifts and have long become used to rising in the evening and sleeping at dawn, but at a few miles towards home that night I was struck by a weariness so strong it pulled me under several times before I made it to my front door. I would regain consciousness either before or after falling to my hands and knees, so I was quickly scuffed all over. My eyes were filled with lead, and when I blinked, the lids joined in painful suction. My vision was a dime that pulled my legs forward; I tunneled through the fog, following not the light, but its heat. I was drawn, stumbling, and when I finally leaned my weight against my front door to open it, I toppled through the frame and into the floor, falling instantly into sleep.

What can I speak of dreams that would make you understand? Little, surely, little but those wisps of sensation that still remain. The warmth of a hand and the warmth of a mouth. The warmth of a voice, which pushes air in fragrant strands that coil around me in an embrace more necessary than all those things I had once known as beauty. A softness that emerges from the unforgiving dark to move within me, and merges with my heart and lungs and brain, and then my pulse, which it joins. Her presence, her face, her touch, within me, beside me, stronger and more perfect than even my fool’s expectations could have prepared me for. (And, beyond the boundaries of my vision, at the black slivers below the horizon, breathing low and with the hushed tone of authority only: *I will give you this.*)

You doubt, and with good cause; what purpose has language if not deception? I doubt too, now, but for the memory still so vivid of not the dream, but the next morning’s
awakening: my lips kiss the sticky linoleum of the entryway, the blood from my broken nose has hardened and bonds me to the floor, the indifferent wind blows a cool, flattening summer morning draft. My thoughts blank suddenly and I start up and come to my knees and by the time I have made it to my feet, my balance still uncertain from my recent transport, loss has penetrated my heart and my breath catches at dry nothing as the dream-images dissipate, first becoming shadows, then outlines, then voids, mere reminders of what I believe I once had but am now no longer certain of anything but that loss, that loss, oh God, it is in me, I cannot feel anything but. 

That day, I went to Freeman and he told me what I needed to do, where I needed to go, what I needed to gather.

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The air gets thicker as you head South, or more elastic maybe, so that it takes stronger breath to pull it in and it sticks to your lungs when you try to push it out, like it doesn’t want to leave and what’s your business in trying to make it. That, the thickness, is perhaps the last thing you notice; the first is the heat, which becomes slow with moisture, the air turns to sweat on the surface of your skin and you can’t breath without pulling in the same stuff you’re pushing out so that you’re never clean, not even close. Your lips, they secrete a gray slick at the edges so when you open your mouth you can hear the snap all through your head. And your head, to speak of it, what kind of aches and groans you will feel, broken nose or not, colliding thoughts or not.

I slept for most of the way down, in dreamless spurts, jumping to consciousness every five minutes or so and falling back down just as suddenly. I don’t remember most of the ride down, except that at one point the bus stopped for gas and food, just after we
crossed into Louisiana maybe and we were right next to the Mississippi River and it was night. I got off the bus and there were fireworks in the distance, across the river so that you could see the explosion in the sky and then in the reflection it made in the water, a red or green gash. It was the Fourth of July, must have been; I hadn’t seen the fireworks since I was a kid so I sat on the dirt and watched them blow up across that black river, feeling just kind of *touched* by the patterns that the light made, as if the fire could reach me, and I didn’t worry about having to take a piss or grab a sandwich before the bus took off South again. And, believe it or not, I felt almost as good as I did when I was a kid, before I learned any better, I could have just sat there until the sun came up, hearing the pop travel across the sky to my ears, breathing in the smoke that I thought I could just almost smell. And for the first time, The Mutterer was on only my side, and he pleaded for North, begged that he and I return home and away from this poisoned business.

But we didn’t; the bus roared and I had to hold my bladder in until the bus made it to the last stop, which is what I did, sleeping in spurts like I was doing, hoping I wouldn’t wake up having pissed myself.

When we reached the last stop, I was the only passenger left and the road was long unpaved. The station was nothing but a bench and a pay-phone all alone on the side of the road, no lights or anything, just the half moon. The driver threw my suitcase into the dirt and, without even pausing to see if a tip was coming, bounded back up the stairs and cranked the machine around in a half-circle to start back North, North.

I kept on down that dirt road. A few hundred yards in, it disappeared and the underbrush became dense and obtrusive. These weeds were unfamiliar to me, even in the dark, thicker and somehow wilder than what I was used to. The earth, too, had changed
in consistency from the hard-packed dust of the main road: it was now strangely pregnant with moisture, not so much richer, but getting there, like I would imagine the soil beneath the ocean floor. Freeman told me there was a town coming up and I believed him. Even with the sun on the other side of the world, it was hotter in the open air than anything I had ever known, a wet heat that lapped relentlessly at my skin so that my clothes were soaked through by about a mile’s way. My skin shone like glass and I wasn’t tired anymore, not in the slightest.

It wasn’t too far until lights and music. There were two buildings within immediate distance: the first was a poolroom, or really a dusty open-air barn with a couple of ragged tables set up. This was where the music was coming from: a pair of old negroes playing identical bone-white guitars, one of them singing:

*Oh, Devil took my bayyyyyy-bay,*

*Whose I goan’ take for mah own?*

The barn doors stood wide open and my presence was noted: twenty or thirty black faces turned their eyeballs to me as if casually following a moth in the moonlight. They had seen me before, I was certain, or more precisely, they had seen ones like me, probably on seeping nights very much like this one.

The second building was the inn, where Freeman stayed when he had been down here. Couldn’t have gotten much business down here, but couldn’t have cost a dime to run either. The nigger woman at the desk was fat beyond the kind of fat I knew: besides the features of her face and hands, she was a pile of skin, of age indeterminate. It is a
rare occasion that I am able to look on someone with more disgust than they can direct towards me, but I didn’t exactly relish it.

“Give me a room,” I said.

She growled a figure at me and I gave her the money. “Upstairs,” she said, in a voice as low as a man’s.

“Where’s the key?” I said, feeling myself slipping into a pattern.

“Ain’t no lock, simple boy,” she said, and her fat eyelids twitched in a fish’s blink.

The room was filthy, many times worse than what you would find in even the worst highway stops up the River. A rotting box perhaps ten by ten by seven, no bathroom. The bed was unmade. I reclined on the mattress and blades of straw poked up through the thin nylon cover and the dirty bed sheets, drawing red welts on my exposed skin and instantly setting my nerves to burn. I stood up and went to the window, a cracked square of glass in a crumbling black pane. The view was almost nothing; the moon lay beneath clouds, and only the vaguest notions of the terrain persisted, crests and dips and the occasional tree’s silver outline. These carved features rolled almost to the horizon, more and more trees dotting the landscape as it receded. At a point just before the black of the terrain joined the black of the night: my destination. So I slept, and dreamed.

Freeman had been vague in describing just how I was supposed to make it to Lydia’s: from the back of the inn, it was South into the marshlands and from there, into the swamp. “And then?” I had asked him. “You’ll see it,” he had said with unconcerned certainty, and then returned to his lunch.
The pace was slow; I was fumbling around in unfamiliar terrain, navigating a part of the country that seemed undomesticated, excepting the occasional dwellings I encountered, tarpaper-roofed shacks of wet-rotted planks, sun-blackened negroes lying in the shade, casting indifferent stares at my approach. The heat was tremendous and by noon, I was trudging forward in my undershorts with my pants and shirt slung over a shoulder, grimacing as the thistle grass teethed at my exposed skin, drawing bloody beads. Dehydration stole away my breath, and I succumbed to drinking from the various tilting pools of rust-water I met along the way, shivering at the dirty taste, ignoring what vile things I must have been taking in. They followed my swallows as parasites, I feel them now, surging.

By afternoon, the vegetation of the marsh had been joined by overhanging branches and vines and I called it swamp. Here, at least, the dense-leafed canopy protected me from the attention of the white sun and I pulled my stiff clothing back on to protect me from the growing mite population, one that had plagued me only slightly in the open fields on the first half of my walk. They now exploded in colonies of millions, swooping at me constantly, invading my eyes and nose, sinking their tiny mouths into my red skin. By then, I was losing connection with these minor physical difficulties; upon leaving the inn, I was possessed with a mounting surety in my actions, as if I were being drawn along a line. Now, there was no longer “as if”: my every thought was joined by an echo that I came to understand as my own accompaniment, not a device of The Mutterer or any other. “Left,” a genderless voice instructed, my brain confirmed the sentiment, and my body followed its dual-instructions. So, even as the sun began to go down and the shadows thickened in anticipation of night, I advanced without fear of becoming lost.
or entrenched. This new internal presence did not alarm me, but was rather a source of
comfort; I believed, as mad as it sounds, that my steps were placed by a benevolent hand.

I discovered the hand’s owner sitting in the dirt, as I stepped out from the tangle
of the swamp into a low clearing where the jungle growth was suspiciously absent—a pit
of gray ground, a shack, a woman. Before, water lay beneath every step; here, my mud-
heavy shoes collected the dry earth in clumps. She wore a shapeless, colorless dress and
held the body of a suckling boar in the cloth-basket formed by her extended knees; her
eyes followed me as she deftly skinned and cleaned it. I stood for minutes or hours,
watching her trace a finger-length knife along the animal’s frame, transforming it from
corpse to carcass. Speech was unavailable; I opened my mouth and could proceed no
further. The difficulty, I thought at the time, was that somehow her expression was
concealed in the light of the midday sun and I was unable to find her. There is nothing
supernatural about this; I am sure her face was there, but somehow it lay beyond my
sight. And it was calming, I must say, there was in her presence a certainty that cast
aside the strangeness of the deal.

At last, she spoke in a rock’s voice: “Firewood, mushmouth, we don’t eat raw.”
With that, she turned around and glided to the entrance of her home, a windowless
collection of planks with a doorway no taller than a child’s frame. I snapped to attention
and scurried around the border of the swamp, afraid to venture back and lose my way.
The Mutterer grumbled indistinctly but allowed me a calm that prevented my fleeing; this
would have been just the time and the place for such an escape, but the situation was well
away from me by now.
When I had collected what few dry pieces I could, I returned to the shack and ducked in. Lydia was at the room’s center, sitting on a bamboo chair. She had constructed a spitting frame in the room’s center and ran the steel through the skinned pig as I approached, eyeing me as she suspended it above the ground. I placed the wood at her feet as if making an offering to my idol. I found speech. “Freeman sent me—”

“Don’t know no free man,” she said, a voice of hardened clay. “Maybe not even be one, far as I seen.” And then she giggled in an oddly gleeful tone, sparkling with a youth you couldn’t see underneath her tree bark skin.

“No, I mean—Freeman, the cafeteria, Miss—” I began, and then, to avoid pronunciation of the dreadful state, “Up North.”

“I know who you mean, harelip, I seen you well before you seen me, believe that,” she said, as if speaking to a disobedient child, “Why don’t you take a seat?” She gestured at another chair in the corner and I dragged it to the room’s center, across from her. From this new vantage point, I saw her face for the first time, much more clearly than I wanted to: she could have been as old as God, her skin had shriveled up to the consistency of rotted fruit, black and spotted with still blacker scars along its skin. In sickening contrast to this decay were the characteristics of her face: bright, eager eyes; clean nostrils and ears; a mouth of perfect proportions with smooth lips, a clean tongue, and white teeth like a little girl’s, flawlessly aligned. Her hair, too, showed off its false youth: thick and broad, tinged auburn at its outline like some niggers have. It was only the skin, the wrapping, that had suffered the ravages of age; all her other parts seemed to have been spared the injustice.
“Now, this little girl of yours, she a cute one, I’d guess, too pretty to be looking for some freak’s company,” she said, and smiled horribly at me with her white mouth. “You know I saw the cut in your mouth, but Lord, what happened to your beak since then?”

I raised my hand to my face and drew it back immediately, wincing; my nose, broken two days ago, had healed partially as the shattered cartilage lay, twisted into a swollen mess. Lydia produced a hand-sized square of mirror and slid it to me. I studied my reflection: a distorted nose and mouth, skin red and picked at by insects and heat, eyes pink from dust and a lifetime of being stepped on. She spoke behind me, “Guess you know by know that I’m the only chance you got. For anything.” I nodded passively, staring through my reflection. She leaned forward out of her chair and snatched a few limbs of the firewood, arranging them beneath the spitted suckling. She produced flint and with a single strike had the while mess of wood in flame. The pig’s tiny muscles gleamed against the heat. Lydia sneered in the face of my awe.

“What did you bring me, then, harelip?” I turned to her and reached into my back pocket: Emilia’s white nurse’s cap, filched from the break room when she left for the toilet, bearing only a few loose hairs, but enough, Freeman had asserted, for the bitch’s art. I handed it to Lydia and she plucked at the light brown strands idly, before throwing them, cap and all into the cracking fire. The cloth was consumed immediately, the smoke it produced passing not around the pig’s body, but into it, and I saw the carcass pulse like something alive.
“Sit down, then,” she said, and I did, my legs suddenly weak with fatigue, so that it was a collapse. “You hungry, harelip?” she asked. “You must be, after such a long, long walk.”

My breath escaped me in chokes and I could only nod. I remembered that my last meal had been in the hospital cafeteria, more than two days ago. This was something else, though, it was a hunger that spread throughout my body, ravenous, eating at my organs and sapping my strength. She had me.

“You only got one thing I need, so don’t you try no haggling,” she croaked. “We doing a fair trade. Ten years, harelip, that’s all I want from your rotten life,” she said in a calm voice. “Then you can eat all you want.” Her grin.

There was no hesitation; the decision had been made days earlier, decades. “Ten years, fine, they’re yours.” I stared into her face, squeezed by death’s hand but as yet unburst, and felt my sorrow edge back and immediately yield to the mania of desire. The bitch gestured at the glistening boar carcass, then stood and absented herself from the room. I followed her as she stepped through the white rectangle of light that led outside and then tore the spit out of the earth to attack the meat, consuming it without chewing, relentless. It was barely cooked, all but its edges was raw and with the sick-sweet taste of blood. But there was another taste, an achingly familiar one, and I swallowed in strangled gasps. The fire, no longer having the pig to feast on, died immediately, and I squatted there, in the dark, eating my fill.

Truthfully, there isn’t much left to tell. I walked back to town in what could have been seconds and then to the phone at the bus station. Emilia should have been at the hospital, but the voice on the other end of the line said that she hadn’t showed up. I had
her address and her phone number too, so I could have gone back North to claim her, but I did not.

I called her home instead and the other line picked up immediately. “It’s me,” I whispered.

“I know,” she croaked, and I could hear that her throat was dry from sobbing. “I need—I mean—I don’t, but I can’t—Are you the janitor—” and then she broke off into a kind of choking howl. “What’s happening to me?” she screamed, and then broke apart completely so that I was almost convinced that she would not remain on the phone, but of course she did.

“Listen,” I began, suppressing the urge to beat myself silent, “Do you have money? Can you get to the bus station?” And I instructed her.

Her bus arrived at what I guessed to be midnight; I had fallen asleep on the bench and must have been down for a good fourteen hours before the rumble of the engine woke me. I could feel a very deep sunburn on the side of my body I had left exposed, it was like a shell. She stumbled down the steps and into my arms, my purchased love, no longer raging in the inexplicability of her emotions as she had been on the phone but now quite docile, a slave thoroughly callused to her position. Her beautiful face was still beautiful—no portion of sadness could kill that light—but shaded irreparably with the ashes of her incinerated will. Remorse? Most certainly, but buried under too much else.

I seized her and planted a firm kiss on her slackened mouth. She squirmed fiercely, one last storm flushing her insides, and then moved against me savagely, fumbling at my body like a stupid child. “Come with me,” I said, and had the sick idea of taking her hand in mine as we walked back to the inn.
“Wuh-what state are we in?” she burbled through a fresh run of tears.

“A low one,” I said. It was still so hot, God.

We passed the pool hall and it was as crowded as it had been two nights ago, on the night of my arrival. Whereas my first passing had barely occasioned a glance, now the barn went silent and the musicmen even broke their rhythm. I made eye contact with one of them and he spat a venomous streak of chaw in my direction, flecks of it catching on the surface of his bone-white guitar, the crowd murmuring their agreement. There was nothing I could say to that and I led my bride to our bower.

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She sleeps now, tangled in the filthy bed sheets, my crippled love. Her legs are clamped tight and she strains and shudders from within every now and again, struggling in vain against some dream-force that penetrates her with a violence far greater than even I am capable of. The light is on and I can see my reflection in the window-glass: I am ruined beyond recovery, my face is a red clump of distorted features, my skin peels in patches to reveal more of the same—how strong must Lydia’s art be to hold this cherub to me! She moans now in low anguish, and I am reminded of the ludicrous notions I held just days earlier of this fallen angel, that I could actually fantasize our union as something sanguine, beautiful. Now that I have had my fill, I despise myself as I feel the world has quite justly done. A monster, certainly, I was trampled upon, ignored, yes, but nothing like this, this defilement, this—

No more. I neglected to mention that upon leaving the bitch’s hut, I felt the beginnings of a bulge in my gut, a dark swelling that has since spread up into my chest and throat somehow, and has started to hinder my breathing and vision. I run my finger
along my gums and draw blood, it cannot be long now. Ten years, Lydia requested, and I
didn’t even bother to do the arithmetic, so great was my hunger. Thirty-four years old
last May, so it would have been forty-four; and though it seems so young, who knows
what vileness I could have engaged in between now and then? Nothing like this, at least.

Death, then. The Mutterer has returned, and he reminds me that there is another
option available, should I be willing to make another trip down through the swamp, but
I’m not sure how keen my will to live remains now. Freeman, that poor conspirator,
doubtlessly sat in this same room with his slave, considered his options, and chose life,
life always. And he became a more villainous creature than even I. No, I will go to
death, gladly even. I can hope that this ruined thing before me—Emilia, I owe her at
least that—will emerge from this hell with her freedom and as little of her memory as
possible. Probably won’t, oh, what can I care? It is late, and I would like to sit here with
as little thought as is possible, reveling in that unique misery that comes to those of us
that get what we want.

Caleb Blair, July 1943
A Failure of Understanding

At the top-left corner of the station wagon’s rear window, we find an American flag, standard issue. Its colors, we are informed, never run, yet the sticker itself, having suffered four years of exposure to the elements, disproves its slogan. Its yellow and red-yellow stripes have been washed to near-translucency, its corners turn up into the brittle pages of your grandfather’s old paperbacks. Below the United States flag is the Ohio state flag, a red-white-blue caricature of the nation’s emblem, stars and stripes and circles scattered about in a pattern understood by few, Ohioans not withstanding. “In God Anything Is Possible,” reads the caption, the state’s official motto, but let us hope that this is not our only option. And below that, not the identifying symbol of Mrs. Mendelson’s city (Dayton), as hierarchy would suggest, but rather an emblem that reaches far deeper into her heart, the red-and-white of a recently-issued Parent-Teacher Association bumper sticker, the organization of which our beloved Daytonite is Member and District Secretary.

Here, we must intervene and note that Ellen Mendelson’s children, Clara and Timothy, are no longer of school age. Timothy, 25, attended Ohio State (bottom-right, below M.A.D.D.) and went on to a lucrative career in financial accounting. Clara, 20, is in her second year at Purdue University (bottom right, below Ohio State). Mrs. Mendelson, in her fourteenth year as a participant in the P.T.A., understands that her civic obligations lie in the betterment of her community’s schools, not solely in those of her own children. A philanthropist.
Beneath the P.T.A. square lies a cornerstone for the horizontal advancement of the bumper stickers: a second American flag, this one not in the proportioned form of the first, but rather an artist’s rendition: a series of ripples that guides our eye to the right where we find a procession of koans: “Never Drive Faster Than Your Guardian Angel Can Fly”; “Kerry/Edwards 2004”; “Northridge High School Swim Team [Clara]”; “I’m Pro-Choice And I VOTE.”

We have reached the bottom-right corner. From here, it is mostly familiar territory: the collegiate insignias, the M.A.D.D. sticker, and, at the top-right corner of the window, a bright green parking pass for the Dayton Elderly Assistance Center, the organization for which Ellen works part-time. It is for fulfillment of her duties with this program that the Mendelson station wagon currently glides through the neat channels of Dayton suburbia. It is for the sake of this latest assignment that our narrative begins, but there is one last aspect of Ellen Mendelson’s character that requires elucidation. “Happiness,” as the frame around her license plate and the recent birth of Timothy’s son attest, “Is Being A Grandma.” Now, let us begin.

Claude Fogelmann lives fifteen station wagon-minutes away from Ellen’s driveway in a neighborhood not poor, but merely weary, as if its residents had convened, deliberated, and ultimately decided to abandon pretensions to a sweeter presentation of life. The houses are one-story ranch jobs in washed yellows, greens, browns, grays, and the lawns, though trimmed to respectable heights for the most part, have become dry and more dead than alive under the intense July heat. Mr. Fogelmann’s community is a quiet one made up exclusively of the retired and the uninteresting, there is little traffic and the
neighbors avoid eye contact with one another when circumstance meets them in the
street, or at the nearby food mart.

Claude’s house is unremarkable, Ellen finds, but for a hand-made sign nailed into
the aluminum siding, just above the doorbell: “NO SOLICITORS,” it says, angry capitals
buried into a chunk of plywood in what looks like residue from a charcoal briquette. A
flimsy sign, he must have to renew its message often, when it rains. Ellen rolls into the
driveway and follows a cement path to the front steps. Inside, she can hear the television
on and Claude must be in his usual armchair, staring at the screen, watching or not. She
knows that his hearing is fresh for a man in his 70s, he has doubtlessly heard her arrival,
her footsteps clopping up the walkway. Were their positions reversed, Ellen would have
opened the door in greeting before Claude had killed the car’s engine, she would
appreciate his presence, without fawning to it. But their positions are not reversed, and
Ellen politely nudges the doorbell.

A voice from within, gruff: “Who’s that?”

It is three o’clock on a Tuesday afternoon, Ellen has spent one hour each Tuesday
afternoon at this precise time engaged in her duties with Mr. Fogelmann. She has been
doing this for two months now, this is her eighth visit. Claude cannot possibly receive
more than one visit a month besides these ones, and Ellen doesn’t at all wonder why.
Ellen says none of this, she has long learned to combat cruelty with kindness, disdain
with an open smile. She understands Mr. Fogelmann’s miserable mood and tries her best
to alleviate it. Limited success, certainly, but he is not wholly unreceptive to her
affability. He does, after all, suffer from his isolation, his loneliness, and she can sense a
real gratitude even through his efforts of suppression. She is a nuisance to him, he has
claimed in so many vicious words, but she feels the truth on a deeper wavelength, and so she enters his domain, repeating these suppositions again and again in her mind.

“It’s me, Mr. Fogelmann”—‘Claude’ is absolutely out of the question—“just here to do a little tidying up,” Ellen says. From within, a grumble, the creak of an armchair, and then footsteps advance to the door. Ellen prepares a smile.

Claude’s face appears, spectacled, gray, and with lips too thin to support any but the cruelest of mouths. She is admitted with barely a nod and the old man is immediately back in his armchair. The television is on, a baseball game with the volume at a whisper.

The blinds are drawn to slits, and only a dim light from the adjacent kitchen supports what little sun invades the living room. The television pushes a blue aura a few feet past its screen and that is it, that is our light. Ellen has noticed that Claude’s house is strangely unlike an old person’s. Each room is ancient, yes, and adorned with those similarly-ancient furnishings that old houses such as these pass on from owner to owner—thick-wooded furniture, time-paled wallpaper, carpets dense and musty in obsolete oranges and greens and seafoam-greens. But there is an absence of clutter, material reminders of decades passed or survived, there are no former valuables that appear as trinkets to the ignorant observer. Dusty mirrors; postcards and party invitations kept and treasured; flimsy paperbacks and immortal hardcovers; dead batteries and third-generation electronics that must have cost a fortune at the time; blankets and sheets and tablecloths, bizarrely patterned, that should never be thrown out and never are; pencils with quaint engravings, the erasers hardened to uselessness. None of these. It is unsettling, Ellen has considered, as if Claude has just moved in and is patiently waiting for that treasured miscellany to arrive and complete his sphere, but she knows this is not
the case. Claude has lived here many years, but he has left almost no material evidence of his presence; he is an iron fence that somehow casts no shadow.

“How’ve you been, Mr. Fogelmann?” Ellen asks, circling next to the television so that he must at least look at her.

“I’m fine,” he responds, a tone that implies resolution. “The end,” he may as well have said.

“You watching the game?” No response: she knows I’m watching the game, it’s on, isn’t it? “Who’s winning?”

“Score’s on the screen,” he says. This goes on for another minute or so, as long as she can take it before she says, “Well, guess I’ll get to work,” and casts an eager smile that implies a regret that she has to leave the old man’s side.

Mrs. Mendelson has six other senior citizens with whom she visits weekly; the others are universally receptive to her company and don’t bother hiding their excitement. Her visit, she thinks with a touch of self-flattery, is probably the best part of their week; an opportunity to speak on level terms with another human being, to be loved, acknowledged. She thinks of her relationship with these six others as something akin to that which she once had with her children before they grew up, and she enjoys it. She will not shy away from this enjoyment, she does miss her children as small beautiful things, and she does feel pangs of loss when speaking to them on the phone as their speech demonstrates increasing self-dependence. Her son is gone and a parent himself, her daughter will follow. So her visits are mutually beneficial: the seniors get the pleasure of attention to their woes, validation of their status as individuals and Mrs.
Mendelson is able to recapture the delights of motherhood in a novel new stage, exposed to the fragility and need of experience now instead of innocence.

With Claude Fogelmann, the situation differs somewhat. He is a codger, and a mean one, but Ellen is not so simple as to dismiss him on these grounds. When she was a child, and cruel like children are at times, her second-grade teacher admonished her for insults directed at a fellow classmate, a stupid and ugly little girl, as she had described her. “You look at her and you see ‘dummy,’ and you see ‘horseface,’ because you aren’t paying close enough attention,” Mr. Walsh had said. “It’s not your fault. No one can pay close enough attention to see it all, but that doesn’t mean it’s not there.” He had stared into her child’s eyes to see if she understood, and finding that she did, resumed: “If I can teach you anything, Ellen,” he said, “I want it to be that there is only one person in the world, but that one person comes out in many different shapes, and the different lives these shapes live makes them what they are. You and her are really no different, nobody is different.” Even at the age of nine, Ellen got it, and as she aged, she would often look back on Mr. Walsh’s speech with gratitude, as it had taught her tolerance and love in a way that she perhaps would not have learned otherwise. Claude Fogelmann, she sees, has been shaped by his life just as she has by hers; it only his skin that has become wrinkled and dry and loveless, there is something soft beneath, and so she anticipates each visit as a challenge in which she may this time be able to break through to find that hidden something that would reveal the man’s beauty. “If it is there,” she has sometimes caught herself thinking when she considers him in her off time, and she does think of him often.
The primary duty of a D.E.A.C. employee is to lend company and open ears to those placed in their care. There are the odd miscellaneous tasks—a high light bulb’s replacement, bringing in heavy firewood from the stack, reading of small-print instructions—but it is mostly sitting and smiling and listening. Claude requires none of this, or at least says so, and Ellen is forced to busy herself with odd jobs that are never necessary. On her first visit, after twenty viciously unpleasant minutes of one-way conversation, she moved to the kitchen and began washing, drying, and stacking dishes. Claude raised his objection, naturally, and Ellen responded coolly that she was paid to be here so she may as well do something if conversation wasn’t his bag—and she actually said “bag,” yes, quite hip she was once and still can be. This shut him up, for a time.

Today, Ellen resorts to the bathroom, and a shout of “Don’t open the mirror” accompanies her entrance and she doesn’t. Instead, she opens the cabinet below the sink and makes a survey of the cleaning supplies. There is Clorox, that is handy, and an unopened package of sponges. She sets to work first at the tub, which is not filthy, but ringed in Cat-in-the-Hat-like fashion, and it benefits from her attention. The smell of the Clorox froth is pleasant and she lingers.

Her employer is not a charity; for each senior visitee, there is a paying client, generally the senior’s child or children, financing the matter. It is Claude Fogelmann’s son who pays for Ellen’s intrusions (she has formed an image of this younger Fogelmann and dislikes it, anyone who would leave their father alone like this); he lives in Indiana and has bid the D.E.A.C. keep his father company. This is information from Claude’s file, a copy of which is in Ellen’s keeping, in her station wagon’s glove box with the others. There is a little biographical information on Mr. Fogelmann, provided by his son:
born in 1925, Munich; interred in Buchenwald in 1942; emigrated to the United States in 1946; worked as a bricklayer until his knees gave out, then a grocery clerk until retirement; takes medicine for his heart, digestion, headaches; likes baseball, maps, crossword puzzles. One last thing, underlined: grouchy, but has a good heart, you’ll see. Hope, hope!

Ellen returns to the television room and Claude is asleep. Ellen takes a seat in the room’s other chair, a faded brown stuffed thing, sharp at the edges, and observes her charge. Even in sleep, his features have a guarded look, as if he dreams of interrogation. His lips are set defiantly and his eyelids flutter every now and again, it is an eerie image and Ellen looks casually at the baseball game and then to her watch: 20 minutes left for her visit, this would be a good time. She walks to the television and clicks it off, bringing Mr. Fogelmann to a snap awakening; his head shoots forward and he gapes helplessly at his surroundings, a child lost on the beach. “How?” he asks someone and then clamps his mouth shut, guilty. He sighs and leans back into the armchair: still the living room, still this damned woman.

“You still here, I guess,” he drawls, and then pinches the spit from the corners of his mouth with a thumb and forefinger. “Where’d the game go?” This is not quite antagonism, Ellen perceives.

“I turned it off, I thought I could show you something I brought for you,” she says, and absorbs the grunt of his contempt. “Urmph,” it goes.

This is the third time Ellen has presented Claude with a gift. It is not an uncommon act for the agency’s employees to perform, but three gifts in eight visits certainly sets a record. On her second visit, she brought a hardcover collection of
cartography implements, a photographic history of the craft. Knowing Claude’s interest in the subject, she assumed at least a begrudging acceptance of the book, and was of course proved wrong. “Books,” he had sneered, “I’ll never read another one in my life, I promise you that.” And she believes him, he would not lie for appearances, and she hasn’t seen a single book in his house, just the newspaper. Her second gift was delivered two weeks later, a more practical offering: a homemade loaf of spiced pumpkin bread. It was the exact kind of treat she knew he would tolerate, a no-nonsense pastry, hardly sweet, a reliable complement to the morning’s coffee, and she maintained this opinion until she found the item untouched in his refrigerator, unwrapped even, stale to a brick’s consistency. He did not throw it away, she noticed, he kept it for her to find and win his triumph in that way. Defeated again, she tasted shame, self-contempt, and almost turned away from him, almost gave up.

She did not give up, she will not. Ellen is one to learn from her failures, and she is stubborn besides. Her mistake was twofold: she gave tangible gifts, items of charity as Claude would see it, and worthy of his disdain; she gave anything at all. To win him to her confidence, she must instead share with him, connect on some level to demonstrate that she and he are in fact more alike than they could ever fully realize. There is age, and gender, and upbringing; how to bridge this thrice-widened gap?

Ellen is a reader, as most romantics are or should be. A high school graduate, she has likely read more books than your typical college professor, though her tastes are far less discriminating. She reads paperbacks en masse: mysteries, romance novels, legal dramas, stories of odds defied, powers upturned, impossibilities resolved. She subscribes to magazines and reads them cover-to-cover, even the advertisements. At her last dentist
appointment, she stayed in the waiting room a full twenty minutes after her cleaning to finish a Reader’s Digest piece on a man stranded on some mountain, and then a deaf girl that learned to play piano anyway. When her children moved through adolescence, she bought them stacks and stacks of books and read most of them: mice on motorcycles, Indians in cupboards, siblings warring siblings. And the serials, too, she has read them all in pace with her son and daughter: Nancy Drew, The Hardy Boys, The Boxcar Children, R.L. Stine. She approaches a book with anticipation and leaves it scarcely with anything but a pure childish delight at what manages somehow to be a unique and gratifying experience every time. She laughs aloud at the funny parts, rubs her eyes at the sad, checks the room’s corners at the terrifying. She reads in bed, at the breakfast table, reclined on the sofa, and, if she is sufficiently engrossed, in the car, swiping at sentences when held under a traffic signal.

When she read Mr. Fogelmann’s file, it was that foreign word, *Buchenwald*, that struck her in a way she was not at first able to understand. He was interred there, a prisoner then, so he was a criminal once—that would explain some of his mood, he was hardened by the system, sad thing. But, no, she had seen that exact word before, the name of that exact prison, somewhere…she could not recall until just days earlier when it hit her as a revelation, a blanking of her mind like the smoke in the air after a pistol report. No, not a prison at all, oh God, the poor old man.

Her purse is on the kitchen table and she retrieves it, sliding out the book and then returning to the armchair. Claude squints through his blocky lenses and his mouth opens immediately in poison contempt. “Didn’t we talk about this, woman? I haven’t had use for a book in twenty years, and I won’t have use for one now,” he says.
“It’s not a present,” Ellen replies, “I’m not giving this to you, I just want to share something, something I read.” She puts emphasis on the word “share,” just as she had planned. Claude’s mouth tightens in a cynical grimace and she goes on. “This is a collection of stories, of true stories written by…well, everybody, I guess.” She pauses. “I read one the other day and it reminded me of you, and I guess—well, I want you to hear it, will you let me read it to you?”

Claude’s face shows incomprehension, almost confusion. This is not what he expected, Ellen can tell immediately, and this emboldens her. He has been caught off guard by this sudden appeal and she observes that he may allow himself a momentary vulnerability, he may allow himself to be touched.

He does: “Christ, if you went to the trouble, then…as long as it’s not too long.”

And he listens.

It is one of the longer stories in the book, a first-person account of a man named Ruben Dorberg, sixty now, a survivor of the Holocaust. Ruben’s family was shipped from Berlin to the Buchenwald camp and all—father, mother, sisters—but the ten-year-old Ruben were dead before long. Ruben was forced to do a man’s work in the camp, carting loads of scrap iron from here to there; his feet bled through his shoes, the other prisoners took advantage of his weakness, stealing his meals, his clothing when his back was turned. He developed a bloody cough in the cold and was refused medical treatment, he would die soon enough anyway. As a last resort, he fled from the camp one night, sneaking his malnourished frame under a tiny gap in the fence and running to Weimar, the closest town, where he collapsed in the street. When he awoke, he was wrapped in blankets and thought he had died. No, he was in a bed, and he wept at the man that
approached him, for he thought he beheld God. The man explained that he had found
Ruben on his morning walk and asked him if he came from the camp, did he come from
the camp? Ruben cried that he had, and pleaded with the man not to turn him in. The
man said that he would not turn him in, he would keep him hidden up in this room, his
daughter’s, and that he could stay as long as he wanted, forever if need be. So Ruben
remained in the house for two years, staying the whole time indoors, playing with the
man’s daughter, Marie, who was a year his senior. She had stuck her tongue out at an
S.S. man one day as he walked along the street adjacent to her school, and he had struck
her across the face with his pistol, blinding her right eye, which now lay permanently
slouched towards the ground. They slept in the same bed, these two, and he watched her
bruised face heal, age, and grow lovely in spite of her broken eye. Then one day,
treachery: the man had erred in confiding in a friend the secret of his hidden prisoner and
a pair of soldiers came to the door. They tore Ruben from the house and shot his
protector in the head. The daughter, at school, survived. Ruben was taken back to the
camp and would have been executed that day, were it not for the mercy of fortune: word
had gotten in of the Allied advancement towards Weimar, and the camp’s occupants were
to be led away. All but the very old, young, and sick. Ruben was discovered cowering
alone in his woodplank bed by an American soldier named MacGregor and taken to an
orphan asylum in Bordeaux. Years later, as a young man, he happened upon a woman
begging in the street and knew it to be Marie, the slackened eye gave her away, and she
was beautiful even in her poverty. She too recognized Ruben and the two fell to their
knees before one another in embrace. “I found my father’s body when I got home and
that day my life ended along with his and what I thought yours,” she said. “Your father,”
said Ruben, “he saved me and I never even learned his name.” “It was Emile, Emile, and he loved you perhaps even more than I could,” and both dissolved in tears. They married and live happily now in Paris, a love aided by chance and second chance.

Ellen exhales and brushes a finger under each eye; she is weeping mildly, though this is the fifth time she has read the story in the last week. Her heart feels swollen in her chest, it is pushing against her ribs, filling with helium, it threatens to lift her off the ground. Mr. Fogelmann is silent, he has kept his eyes to the ground for the duration of the story and has made almost no movement. He has listened. There is a quiet in the room that Ellen fears to breach; this is her moment, she knows, where she can reach to Claude and touch him, and she is patient, allowing the silence to stretch for almost a half-minute before speaking.

“Beautiful things do happen, Mr. Fogelmann,” she says. “I’m not saying that ugly things don’t happen too—more often than any of us would want—but there are nice things too. We can’t lose hold of them, or all we see and feel is the ugliness that we let harm us.” She takes a breath. This was rehearsed, in her head, and again in the car on the way over. Now, she must speak with him and not at him, she must improvise. She must touch him.

“Claude,” she resumes, “I want you to know that—” Wait. She feels something in the air that puts an abrupt stop to her speech, a scent perhaps, it has reached her. His head is bent down so that she can see few of his features, his glasses and then the ridge of his gray little nose. She hears wind escaping and entering the old man; he is breathing through his mouth.
She begins to speak but manages only a single “I,” as Claude raises his head and
stares into her with an expression that is horrible and ugly enough to hitch her heartbeat.
His mouth is closed now, wound into a malicious sneer, and twin lines of white tears
crease his cheeks. She sees that these cannot be tears of anything but the most violent
rage and she cowers in the armchair.

His voice is louder than she would think possible in one so far aged, an
aggregation of bellows that both encompasses and surpasses the rage of any father,
preacher, teacher, conscience, or judge before him. It is wild like a jungle animal,
constant and low like a drone, as full of hate as the most vicious of propaganda. His
mouth opens and he is less speaking than he is vomiting, purging his stomach and brain
of the poisons that have so long collected in him. He screams with the fury of God.
Though his intentions are brutally true, his words are senseless and spread across the
room chaotically like flaming brands from a trampled bonfire. He raves, contradicts
himself, tells lies, shoots insults—whore, idiot, bitch, liar, fool, fool, fool—shakes his
fists like bone hammers, his voice cracks, spit catches at his throat, choking him. His
words convey all that he can but leave so much unsaid, so much too great for
comprehension. There was a train, and then a camp, and at last a freedom too wretched
to understand: cold, lonely, robbed of humanity, of the capacity to love, the capacity to
look a man in the eye and not see his lowness, what he would do if given the chance. To
live one’s life in understanding of man’s evil, to try and start over, to build a family and a
new life in a new world, to observe with horror and then numbness the disappearance of
things he was once certain he possessed. All that, and more, more, so much evil, so much
necessary evil.
He has the book now, he has pulled it from her weak hands and is tearing at it like a madman, spitting on it, he throws it to the ground and stamps it into the carpet. Such a little old man and such energy to give to this cause. Ellen has risen from her chair and wordlessly runs from the room. She has been too stunned to weep, but it is not long now. She makes it to the car, slams the door, locks it, struggles with the key at the ignition, drops it, and buries herself in her lap while trying to retrieve it.

Claude is alone again, quivering still, his chest heaving from this recent activity. He collapses in the armchair until his breathing returns to normal. He wipes his eyes with his shirttail and then dribbles spit on his glasses to clean them. He then rises and picks up the ruined book which he carries to the kitchen and discards in the bin under the sink. Then, to the bedroom, he undresses and wraps himself tightly in his blankets. The bedroom’s blinds are still open; he rises and shuts them, bringing the room to a soft dark. He lies down again. It is still early in the day and he is not at all tired, but he can will himself to sleep for as long as necessary—an old trick. His mind is oddly placid. He thinks of the oppressive cold of the camp and a few other things and is glad to be inside and warm for everything else. “I will call my son tomorrow,” he says aloud, and then is asleep.

But his scene is not ours, nor can it ever be. Ours is in the driveway, within the space of Mrs. Mendelson’s station wagon, we sit with her and observe calmly her struggling, uncomprehending sobs and we know they are ours to share. If not now, soon, or never, they are reserved for us nonetheless, should we accept them. This is our lot, we fortunate ones, our eyes flooded and rimmed. And be grateful for our ignorance, thank
your stars that we should be allowed to choke occasionally on sorrow rather than feast on understanding, to have it sink and grow hard in our once-pink bellies.
I had been in Thailand for too long. I now consider any period wider than a second in that hell too much, but I had been holed up for over three months and it had worn me down. This was in 1964 or 1965, just after they had repealed the Rolleston Committee rules in Britain. The streets were filled with junkies who couldn’t get their fix from the family doctor anymore, so they were coming to people like me in droves. Business was positively booming, and I had only planned on staying in Bangkok for three days, long enough to pick up, pack, and get back to Hoxton to meet my adoring fans.

The delay was a broken arm. Not mine; a fractured left ulna on the part of Pilot, which is the best I can do in remembering his name. Pilot was the man I had smuggling my baggage back into Heathrow for me, an actual airplane pilot who believed he was my friend. As a legitimate pilot, his carry-on luggage was not subject to scrutiny and he was able to come and go pretty much as he pleased, carrying whatever he needed, be it a change of clothing or a few kilograms of heroin. I say “pretty much,” because it was on a similar operation a few years after my three-month stay in Bangkok that he was in fact picked up for smuggling my drugs and summarily incarcerated. I can’t imagine how they caught him—they weren’t using dogs in those days, and he couldn’t have been simple enough to gossip about what he was doing—but I remember very clearly landing at Heathrow and walking by the terminal of his plane just in time to see him being escorted away in cuffs, his carry-on luggage in the humorless clutch of the airport police. I made eye contact, he didn’t expose me, and I began the search for another mule.
Monetarily speaking, I had been feeding Pilot peanuts, which brings me to an important issue that I want to bring up before getting down to the events that marked my last week in Bangkok that year of 1964 or 1965. “The difference between success and failure, between swimming and mere floating, is a person’s ability to correctly assess currency and the entities unto which it can be applied.” That’s mine. Write it down. Memorize it. The popular illusion is that it is only money and the things that money can buy that may be used as currency, but only a fool sees a price tag and responds with his billfold; money is the lowest link on the currency chain. Certain things money can buy—controlled substances, for example—are the next link, but they are not much better. They are only effective when used against those who need them desperately, conveyance to the marooned. Third is emotional leverage, a science too delicate for my tastes, but a popular one for many. A man who offers friendship, or a woman who promises her flange, I agree that these are effective means of getting what one wants, but they fall short of that final sharpened link, intimidation.

I intimidated Pilot enough so that he felt obligated to serve me, as if he owed me something. Perhaps he saw himself as my partner, and envisioned some kind of worker’s camaraderie between us. Or he believed that his was a task that I was incapable of performing—truth, actually, as I refuse to risk jail time—and saw himself as my benefactor. His perspective on the matter did not and does not concern me; all that matters is that he took my risk while I rode first class on a separate plan, idly calculating my profit margins on my cocktail napkin. And when the feds nabbed him, and slogged him away in the pen, I simply had to find another patsy—a thriving yet eternally stunted
breed—to take his place. Understand currency, and use it to its potential. Ignore it, and subject yourself to purchase.

The city of Bangkok is precisely as you envision it. Poverty, crime, and filth, shoveled into densely-packed city blocks. Narrow streets, rotting and shoddily-constructed buildings, an infrastructure that is perpetually fifty years behind the civilized world standard. Pilot informed me of his inconveniencing injury via a goddamned telegram: BROKE ARM OUT FOR TWO MONTHS WILL KEEP YOU INFORMED SORRY The message was delivered to my usual hotel, a shit structure in Phra Nakhon by the humble name of “Rooms.” Had the telegram come a day earlier, I would have headed straight to the airport and touched down in Heathrow the next day, but it just so happens that I had made my purchase that morning and arrived back at my room just in time to receive the news that I was stuck with my prick hanging out.

I assessed my options. One: I could wait out the two months in Bangkok. Unfavorable, but possible. Two: I could dump the heroin at a significant loss and get back home. Massively unfavorable, it would be a huge financial hit not to mention the absurd indignity of returning to the dogs I had just dealt with and practically giving them back their own bone. Intimidation is a powerful tool in one’s own home, but it cannot be applied in the opponent’s arena, where men with guns conspire in their own language against your bullshit. Additionally, I would be fucked if I didn’t bring something back with me. My funds were desperately close to tapped, and given the Rolleston-heightened demand, the kind of weight I was picking up in Thailand was going for eight to ten times as much back in London—money I did not have—and nobody with a brain was selling much more than a half-kilo at a time anyway. The only way of getting a significant
amount was through the larger operations which I, as an entirely independent operator, was excluded from. So, a resounding “no” to cutting my losses. Three: I could take the risk and smuggle it back myself. Absolutely not; it is a risk I will never take. Four: I could find a new mule and buy him an airplane ticket. Exceedingly difficult; besides not speaking Thai, I knew virtually nobody in Bangkok, let alone someone I would trust in such a venture. And the people I knew back home were equally untrustworthy, and wouldn’t put themselves at risk for me unless I held a gun to their head, which, given my inconvenient coordinates, could not. This is what happens when you put all your eggs in one basket without the necessary vigilance: you take your eyes off for one minute and the basket goes and breaks its goddamned arm. So. I could wait out the two months in Bangkok. Unfavorable, but possible.

How does an interloper spend one’s time? Any way he can. After the first day’s project of extending my claim on the room and securing my contraband beneath the floorboards under my pitiful hotel bed, there wasn’t much left. Bangkok doesn’t have much in the way of tourist attractions, at least not with my budget, and I wasn’t about to leave the city. The odd thing about the metropolis is that no matter how big it gets, it’s still the same shit through and through. Any block can be exchanged for another and none but the most weathered residents will notice. Words like “downtown” and “residential” don’t really mean anything, because it’s all the same clutter, the same noise; an opium house and a temple use the same ugly building in the same fucked neighborhood, and the same types of people frequent both. Ask any broken lowlife where he lives and he can point in any direction and tell the purest truth. It’s true of any
city—and I proudly include London—but after more than three months in Bangkok, I give these slopes the crown.

Kill time. I drank, I whored, I gambled, and when I couldn’t resist it anymore I cooked up a bottlecap lunch or two. Pop wisdom forbids “getting high on your own supply,” which is sage for the dummies buying ounces of reefer, but when you deal with volume like mine it doesn’t hurt to dip, provided you’ve got self-control. When used in moderation, heroin is the pleasure of the mountaintop. It brings about a physical softening and a mental break. For as long as the high lasts, all attachments dissolve. And when the poison has kissed away its last breath in you, the withdrawal can indeed be crippling, but you get through it. You think of the ease with which you can take just the slightest horse-bite, how smooth it will feel in your veins, like warm melted butter, and your hands would execute this plan time and time again, would carry you to the grave if it were required, but then you consider the lost, the addicts, and things even out.

For the addicts, a needle becomes a dagger, and the only appeal is the sensation brought upon by self-inflicted pain. I’ve seen enough of these miserable bonemen to understand the pit’s depth, and just how wide its borders run; I keep away. Here’s a tip: take a trip to the East End, go in the daytime, find a junkie, tell him you’ll give him a dose if he cuts off a finger, watch him cut it off like he’s won a contest. That’s the kind of thing I’ve seen enough of to keep myself in check.

But I dipped, and it passed the time. The dose would give me half a day, and the suck would last for the next two with me crouched in my hotel bed—or at the bars, or in the dens, but always, always, crouching—waiting for the withdrawal to unclamp its claws, thinking of anything but the treasure chest just inches below. And you had better
believe that I didn’t deviate once, not even once. As fucked as it is, the plunge-suck cycle was the best means of killing the days as I could figure out in that country. When I hit the town, or what passes for it, I could indulge myself in all the vice I wanted and still be ever conscious of seconds. Drinking made it worse, the opium halls were similarly terrible, young legs helped some when I could manage, but it would always be the same shuffling routine, and the weeks became tree trunks.

And it carried on like this for a month, and then two, and still no follow-up telegram from Pilot, and I knew for certain that abandonment was not in his simple vocabulary, so I waited for him to heal, and I kept on my plunge-suck schedule so that it was like punching in and out of a shit job. And I came close, I grant you, to leaving the mess under the floorboards and getting out of Bangkok, cleaning myself up as clean as I would go. And sure I was homesick, but more than that ill, ill from the tiny hotel room, the squalid bed, the lost streetwalkers that shuffled by me in ignorant herds. But I did not break down, though the junk running in and out of my bloodstream chewed at me as nimbly as did the thin air and the conspiracy of foreign tongues.

It was the last week of my third month when the telegram finally came: BACK TO WORK MON AUG 2 1400 TERM 12 The closest I ever came to loving a man.

This was on a Friday morning, July thirtieth then. It was a long weekend, certainly made longer by anticipation, and also because I took myself off the bottlecap regimen in preparation of making a clean switch at Terminal 12 when ol’ Pilot rolled into Don Muang International. So the suck tapered off into legitimate sobriety, and I was feeling good, excited to get the hell out, and to unload to the small timers in Hoxton. The
doctors were out of the game, demand was high, and I would make enough of a profit that I wouldn’t have to set foot in Thailand for quite a time.

So it was about time to leave, and I felt, after three months of ruin, that I deserved to celebrate. One thing about heroin that doesn’t get talked about is the destructive effects it has on not just your wood but your sex drive and your overall sexual awareness. If you consider the average male specimen, fairies excluded, every waking moment (and every sleeping one if you buy into some schools of thought) is vulnerable to the intrusion of libido. Walking down a crowded street, body parts jump out at you and dangle in your mind’s eye, and the average male specimen welcomes the dangling, revels in the persistently attractive idea that attaches itself to any woman, whether she incites desire or not: “this one fucks.” It’s a kind of vampirism, I suppose, attach your fangs into the thought that that passing flange would positively squirm against you. But when you throw a spoonful of junk into the bloodstream, all those pleasant visualizations vanish, and not gradually. Walk into the Miss Universe dressing room while plunged, and you had might as well be exploring the morgue: all dead. It’s like forgetting how to ride a bicycle.

But the suck was waning on Friday, was flat-out gone by Saturday, and I woke up Sunday morning with the kind of hard-on that gets documented in medical journals. I had been spending myself at a nearby brothel that put to shame even the worst whorehouses on Isle of Dogs. Cramped, smoke-stained rooms and beds that weren’t clean enough to fuck a whore on. Few of the girls looked a day past thirteen and the owner kept them drugged enough that they were like warm, speechless dolls. Defensively speaking, I justified my patronization then, as I did all my actions, that if I
was doing it, it was because there was something in my make-up that was making me do it, and I therefore couldn’t be held morally accountable. “Morally,” there’s one I haven’t used in a while.

So I bartered with Papa-san for how much it would cost me to have a girl come to my hotel room and stay for the night. It wasn’t an unusual request, but he made me feel that it was, glaring at me through his secret eyes as we pegged the price downward. Like many people I once knew, I cannot remember the owner’s name or most of his face, but I am certain I once did. I have a keen memory of saying “Don’t lie to me, Andrew,” but that’s my name, and thus the pimp’s identity has evaporated. And that is a comfort, for if I have forgotten his name, he has likely forgotten mine, and my smoke comes that much closer to dissipating. And that, that I never made an acquaintance good enough to pass my name on, is a comfort, that simple death will blot out all evidence of this pitiful life.

So we settled on a price and the split—what I gave him down, and what I sent with the girl when I was finished. And I told him that he could bring her by in the evening and it was a done deal. I dealt with a few minor details of my return home: showered for the first time in weeks, clipped and then shaved off my rusty beard, bought a clean shirt, carved myself into the right shape to board an airplane. It’s interesting how effortlessly one is molded by environment; I see myself clean and fripperied because I have the money and the leisure time, but who’s to say which of my appearances is the definitive?

The knock came around eight or nine, my first guest of the evening. Papa-san wasn’t exactly a father to his girls; all he said before making his exit was “Don’t leave any marks on her,” as if he were letting me take his roadster out for a spin. His advice
was futile; these girls’ bruises were invisible, deeper than anything a fist could indent. Wading through a cycle of drugged fucking with the kinds of people that cared not a bit for their lives; too much for a girl of any age, but these ones were too young to stand a chance. The older ones, those that started out in their late teenaged years, they had the chance to develop resilience so that their minds wouldn’t go to trash along with their bodies, but the demand wasn’t focused around them, and they were a dying breed. We were hungry for the kids, the innocents, the peach-fuzz cunts and the fifty pound skeletons, and the managers were ready to comply.

The one Papa-san had left in my room was a beauty, and I say that without the aid of nostalgia or regret; it was what I thought at the time, and I was surprised at how sweet a frame could surround so corrupted a picture. She was not a doll. Her skin was a soft gold, no eye shadow or hasty lipstick, gaping doe’s eyes, a light ring of black hair above the lip. They had costumed her plainly, straw sandals, nylon athletic shorts that brushed her ankles, and—absurdly—a faded T-shirt advertising The Shadows of all bands. A silver necklace with a cheap turquoise bangle.

I wanted her to leave immediately. It was different having her in my room, I can’t say why. Perhaps it was a matter of bringing the filth to me rather than going to it. Visiting a brothel, I could always think of it as submerging; bringing the whores home for dinner meant that I had a piece of it stuck in me. The devices I used then to assure myself of my rightness were elaborate, but none were effective enough to convince me that I had any business in spending my night like this.

“Hi,” I said, an awkward boy. “You got a name, pretty girl?”
She stared at me for a moment, before her mouth released something garbled. Let’s call her Charlotte.

“Wan’ a drink?” I had been drinking beers that evening and offered her a warm tin. She took it uncertainly and let it hang at her side without opening it. She blinked sluggishly and cast her eyes vaguely around the room. There wasn’t much light and her pupils were coins.

I sat on the bed and watched Charlotte oscillate like that for many minutes. Your average Bangkok John does not want company or somebody to talk to, they want a mannequin. I can’t imagine what they feed girls this young, half a diazepam might be enough to keep them silent for the whole night. I had decided that I didn’t want anything to do with this one, that I would let her stick around for however long I could stand having a zombie in the room, and then send her home with the money. I felt disgust for myself and infinite pity for her and all those like her. Prostitution feeds on the abuse and objecthood of its employees, but this—chemical slavery, mind dewiring, pubescence hijacking—was simply too much. One look at her sticky eyeballs threatened my gag, and the thought that beneath her secondhand uniform lay a body torn away from girlhood threatened my rarest tears. Her tragic figure proved more effective than the strongest horse-bite at killing any thoughts I could summon of sex or touch, and after an hour of self-loathing I was ready to send her on her way when a pair of knocks came on the door, followed by a laughing drawl: “Open up, Raggedy Andy.” Archer.

What can I say about evil? Archer was an institution in Bangkok, must still be. Probably originally hailed from the United States, but certainly as West as Westerners come. White skin, so there’s that, but also the most insatiable of appetites for anything
his eyes fit around, and not the kind of hunger you’d see for food or drugs or sex, but we’ll get to that in a bit. Like myself, Archer sold junk, but he was one level lower on the food chain, the kind of street-dealer I supplied back home. And he enjoyed it, took great pleasure in feeding the junkies their poison directly; speaking to Archer you found in him a fantastic fulfillment, as if he had spent the day painting his masterwork instead of peddling to the bonemen. He was an institution because the Bangkok gangs let him alone with his operation, thus making him the only white vendor in the entire city, a peculiar exception to the rule.

Peculiar too he was in his habits, though “sadistic” is the word I want. Remember what I said earlier about trading a junkie a dose for his finger? That wasn’t a fable, nor, I must assume, was it a singular event in Archer’s career. The first time I saw him, he entered the room, took the seat next to mine, and nonchalantly placed an acquired digit on the bar. I blanched and he screamed in delight, for he fed off of the horror of those around him as much as he did those he exploited directly. His reputation was something like that of the closet-spook tales told to naïve children, something frightening just outside our midst, except he had no business with shadows, he stalked in the open, hungry and leering. He ate most of the regional cuisine: the girls and the narcotics, though his appetites for the former meant that he generally stayed away from all but the rarest bottlecapped meal. But he also ate misery, and thrived on it; unlike most of the street urchins that accepted their shared pain as part of the territory, Archer observed it with a positive glee, and let it flow within him. And that is how he earned his reputation, which was his most powerful currency, because he was feared like the devil and you’d
sooner put a finger on a hot stove than on Archer; you didn’t want his attention, let alone his ire.

One last thing: Archer was, and after many years still is, the most intelligent individual I have encountered. Though mad, and let us emphasize that he was certainly as crazy as this earth makes them, his brain also maneuvered with the speed and precision of an electric drill. He observed at all layers, and could decipher a man’s thoughts with startling accuracy. Converse with him, and you were naked, your secret intentions laid barer than even you were capable of seeing. And it was this nimble intelligence and perception of his that was perhaps most frightening about his character, for he could have had easy success in any field he chose in the civilized world, but having tasted the debauchery of Bangkok life, he made the choice to stay.

Archer knocked and I considered silence, but only for a moment. He knew I was here, just as he knew everything he wanted to know, and there was no sense in revealing to him any more of my fear than he already had to spend. I opened the door and he entered without a word, just a playful grin that let me know all was well. He took a brief look around the room and I could sense his detective work: my suitcase, packed; my carry-on case, its precious cargo excavated just that morning; my pretty little date, fully clothed and cautiously gazing at this new guest.

“Leaving so soon, Andy? You’d been here long enough, I thought you’d grown fond of our little community.” He faced me with that same grin and when he saw how desperately incorrect his joke was, his mouth widened into a toothy smile, the only physical characteristic of his that I can bring to mind. Everything about his appearance
was average and utterly unremarkable save his teeth which were large and perfect, and seemed somehow to lack depth, so that his mouth held two rows of fence slats.

“Well, guess this kind of hustle isn’t everyone’s payday,” he said, collapsing into the room’s only chair with an exaggerated sigh. He produced cigarettes and fingered one.

“See you’ve got company, so we’ll make this quick and I’ll leave you to it, Romeo.” He cast a purposeful glance at Charlotte and casually ran a pink tongue along his top lip.

I had accumulated a fairly difficult debt at the Mahjong houses; I was a poor gambler, uncharacteristically vulnerable to emotion, and I usually played either drunk or stoned, so it was inevitable that I owed money to not a few players. I had paid off all the debts to those I couldn’t welsh, but Archer, fantastic gambler that he necessarily was, had been conspicuously absent in the recent weeks and in the excitement of my imminent departure I had forgotten about his sizeable claim. When he showed up in my room the night before my return, I was determined to pay him off and make tracks away from his stink, but I realized as he sat down that I was short, and not by a little. One can live in Thailand on spare change, but reckless spending will get the best of you just like in any other country.

“Two thousand baht.” He lipped his cigarette and his words came out distorted as he searched for a light. “Pay me.”

I did my best to meet his eyes, but broke contact instantly. He snapped a match off and frowned around the dissipating smoke. “That’s a problem, Andy, don’t think that it’s not.” That the situation was anything but a problem was the furthest thing from my mind, and I began to panic. This was exactly the kind of thing that would fuck my long-
awaited escape from this pit, and I could see Archer absorb my panic, and could hear his 
brain sizzling as he thought of how to best spend this newly acquired currency.

“What else do you have? Smack?” He stood up and toed my carry-on. “Don’t 
suppose you’ve got any real estate around here you might want to give up.” He said this 
without humor and it occurred to me that he certainly carried a gun and could end up 
walking out with whatever he wanted, were he so moved.

He had his gaze transfixed on Charlotte again, and took a step towards her. He 
brought a hand to his scalp. “I’ll take a kilo, straight up, and consider it a favor.”
Another step, and Charlotte came out of her stupor long enough to bring her eyes to the 
floor. Archer took another step and the two were now divided by no more than the width 
of a hand.

“Since when do these things make house calls?” he muttered, but he wasn’t 
talking to me, or to her. I was thinking over his offer, knew that it was a terrible deal, but 
also wanted more than anything to make a clean break from this whole mess. I would 
have given him the kilo, sure, and was about to tell him, but his strange attention on 
Charlotte stopped my speech. Archer seemed mesmerized, as dumbstruck as the object 
of, apparently, his affection.

“Where on earth did you find one like this?” He had a hand extended, and was 
carefully parting her bangs, running a finger along her hair line. “You can tell this one 
hasn’t been at it long, eh?” He turned to me with the flashing smile that has never left 
me, the smile that was like the moon, screaming.
“No—No, I guess not,” I said. A dim voice from within reminded me of something that had not as yet occurred to me, that flange wasn’t solely its owner’s currency. I stifled my revulsion and forced my expression stolid.

“The depressants they take,” he began, as he lazily slid his index finger between her lips, up to the knuckle, “combined with the diminished appetite that they develop as a result, has a bad effect on their gums.” He was moving his finger along the semi-circle of her teeth. Charlotte was on another planet, staring unconcernedly down the length of Archer’s extended arm.

“Depending on how loose the teeth are along the gum line,” he resumed, adopting the lecturing tone of a doctor, “you can get a fair idea of what kind of shape the cunny is in.” He pulled out his finger, a thin strand of saliva trailing behind, and wiped it on her amber cheek, leaving a glassy imprint. He looked at me again, utterly humorless now, the cloth ridge of an utterly humorless erection just perceptible. “This one’s barely even broken.”

I nodded dumbly.

“I want her, give her to me. For the debt.” Archer faced me now, equal parts menace and desperation in his eyes. He was hungry all right, famished.

“I don’t think—”

“Come on, Andy, now is not the time for thinking.” He swallowed. “I’m giving you a way out of this, and a cheap one, too…you couldn’t have paid any more than two hundred for this angel—”

“Her pimp—” I took a breath. “You can’t…” This was a dose of his own medicine; I had divined his intentions for the girl, I knew Archer believed in true
consumption, exclusive consumption, unshared with anyone. Charlotte’s days of whoring—of anything—were drawing to a close.

He curled his mouth into a grimace. “Yes, I don’t think he’s going to like this, no, no. And I doubt he has an insurance policy on this one.” All of his jokes were like that, a species of humor that even he wouldn’t laugh at.

“Okay, okay,” he began. I sensed his disappointment, that the leverage brought about by his intimidating presence was being trumped by his own heedless desires. This girl wasn’t anything special, at least not so much as he saw it; it was a fixation that even he was powerless to shake. Somehow, astoundingly, my currency had proved more valuable than his. “For your troubles with the pimp, should you even deal with him again,” he said. “Seeing as how you’re leaving and all.” He glared at me and held out a thin stack of bills. If I didn’t take it, he was going to kill me.

Charlotte was shaking; in my consideration of Archer, I hadn’t noticed that she seemed to have emerged somewhat from her catatonia and was now shuddering as if exposed to a pervasive chill. I doubted the drugs had worn off—it was still early, after all. More likely, somewhere within, her animal instinct had awakened to the danger that would soon consume her, and this instinctual reflex was doing the best it could to combat the effects of the sedatives. It was a losing battle; this doomed creature wasn’t about to take flight or blend into the hotel room scenery, she was going to get eaten like a field mouse. I shared her revulsion, though I had a better idea from where it came. If I allowed Archer to take her, it would complete my descent, there was no lower point towards which to descend.
Archer took Charlotte’s hand in his and pulled her with him towards the door. She didn’t resist, but her footsteps fell at opposed angles to her destination, as if trying to steer herself away from him without using any power of her own. The beer I had given her, unopened, fell unnoticed to the ground.

“Have a good flight, Andy,” Archer said, opening the door. “See me when you do come back. You know where to find me.” I did know where to find him, I suppose I knew all along. From that moment, if I ever required Archer’s company, he would be always at my side, or in it.

A miracle occurred. A water lily sprouted in a poisoned pond. I opened my carry-on and placed a package in Archer’s hand along with the money he had given me. I pulled Charlotte back and pushed myself between her and the devil. “Get lost,” I told him. “Or you kill me.” He stared into me with eyes as dark as the dark, and we held one another like that until his expression burned and then gave way, and he walked out with the door still open and my heroin in his pocket. I had thought it was only the currency of his exposed desire that I could use against an adversary as keen as Archer, but righteousness somehow proved an even greater tool of purchase. Against the only unselfish face he had seen in perhaps decades, Archer wilted.

I gave Archer a few minutes, and took Charlotte back to the brothel. Her future was as ugly as this latest business had been, but I had spared her something far worse, something of a nature that even I, having had the opportunity to peer over its edge, cannot adequately define. And it’s best, I suppose, that I retain even that small ignorance, that I would not allow myself to sink as deep as Archer had gone and know full well my
capacity for evil, what horrible things I wanted for my own. I had spared myself as well as the girl.

Can you believe it, though? Does this small triumph over humanity’s worst mean a thing? If, returning to my petty life and its minor evils, my behavior reverted to its earlier moral abandonment, could I claim any kind of success? Would you believe that I had gained anything, that I had come any closer to saving myself from the cynical hole my years of vice had cleared out for me? Do you believe that I made a small noble indentation in my vile frame in those seconds that I gave Archer permission to kill me rather than complete my soul’s destruction?

If so, you haven’t been paying attention. I pocketed the money and fed the girl to the monster; it was more likely that the dawn fail to arrive than Charlotte survive to meet it. I then went to my bag and plunged up with a greater hunger than I have ever had for anything in my life, a hunger to wipe myself clean, to force away disgrace. It was the sharpest high I’d ever taken and it left me glowing.

I made it to the airport, found Pilot through the haze of withdrawal, sat next to him, and watched him leave with my bag as I fingered his. I was back in Hoxton within twenty-four hours. Demand was high, and I sold all I had in less than a week. I was able to live nicely for quite a long time. When I ran out, I flew into Saigon instead of Bangkok, and found things very much the same.

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I believed, first sitting alone at Pilot’s terminal with his abandoned carry-on, and later when in my own plane, the jitters of the suck beginning to shred at my muscles, that I would never be able to sleep again, that this would be my penalty for finally finding the
ladder’s bottom rung and then hanging there from my ankles to embrace the void beneath. I no longer deserved rest, and rest therefore would no longer be permitted me. It was from this point onward that no amount of denial could convince me that I was a mere tourist in hell; I had submerged myself too deep in the shit, and it and I were now one and the same. There was no longer any sense in believing that my actions were motivated by anything but the most ruthless of selfishness, or that I truly considered the emotions or needs of others in any mode besides how they could be best manipulated in support of my own design.

And it was this thought, this acquiescence, that bestowed upon me the calm of the cynic, he who knows just what he is and what he could never have become. And because of this calm, I eventually fell to sleep, I always do.
Deserter’s Execution

You perform your task mechanically, following dutifully (duty; now to yourself only, you smile) the steps you had laid in your mind from the date of your plan’s inception. Its details were pored over again and again as you lay sleepless under your firm military blanket, closing your eyes to summon visions of disappearing terrain across the black of your sealed eyelids. In these visions, you begin your patrol duty at midnight, and, after performing one revolution around the camp, calmly make your way to the point along the circuit furthest removed from the sentry station, take off and disable your mechanical equipment along with the hated carbine and other unneeded miscellany, collect the clutter in your canvas laundry bag, and discard the whole of it at a point well off of the sentry path, where it will not be discovered until many hours later, and perhaps not even then. As you saw these actions take place in your mind’s eye, your vision-counterpart was no specter; on the contrary, he moved through space just as you do, generating breath, a heartbeat, sweat that seized your skin and even threatened momentary blindness. He was real, or as close to reality as you dared make him, and it is because of this realness of vision that when it came to showtime, you performed flawlessly, because you had a blueprint on which to base your actions. You were merely retracing footsteps yet untaken. No panic, no confusion, a precise execution.

And then, it is running. For this you are at last grateful for the mindless military marches that pounded your body into its current hardness, the seemingly-interminable exercises and drills that taught you first to put one foot in front of the other and then to forget that you had done so. The uphill sprints that swelled your lungs with heat, heat
that threatened to explode them leave rags for remnants; or the group marches that
transformed pain to fraternity, the clop-clop of boots, the cadence of weariness; all to
shorten the time it would take to reach the enemy upon sighting him. This endurance,
this resilience, it is a tool that you can use now for your own purposes, against your own
enemies (for this is what your former allies have instantly become, you understand), to
lengthen the distance between they and you, between their rage and your death. So you
run, a sprint at first, fueled by a mania that made your head dizzy and your limbs thick
with blood, but evening out into a comfortable gallop, at the rate you will (and must)
maintain until dawn. It is more than comfortable, to speak truthfully; in fact, it is
liberating, your body feels unimaginably light, as if you are being pulled to your
destination rather than seeking it out. Your legs skim across the ground like a bird’s
wings creasing the surface of a lake, your arms rotate around the trunk of your body like -
the gear lever on a locomotive wheel. There is also, after some time, the rising heat in
your chest, but it too is a lightness, it reminds you that you are a machine under your own
control. Pain, an abstraction. So you run, so you run, under the casual, half-lidded eye of
a white moon, checking your compass every so often to ensure that your path remains
ture. The earth is flat, with the close-cropped, dry grass of late summer, and you admire
the pattern of your footfalls, and when it begins to slope upward, as your map told you it
would, you smile to no one and take another healthy bite of air.

It is just before dawn when you reach your first goal, the broad blue face of the
forest wall, the friendly evergreens that will hold themselves above you, obscuring you
from hostile eyes. You pause only briefly to survey the scenery—the arriving gray light
from the horizon allows you this—and then descend towards the forest. You are starting
to feel weary, and you know that you have earned it: nearly six hours of uninterrupted
running, 32.5 miles according to the map, no small feat. You make it 33.5 as you work
your way through the tree line, the thick underbrush forces you to walk and you are now
painfully conscious of the weight your feet must support. When you stop—at last! a
voice within exhales—you make camp, opening your bedroll and allowing yourself a
portion of food and a few sips of water. Truthfully, you do not want it, your stomach
feels a hole in your body, but you know that you need it, and will need it. It has grown
lighter, the sky is now a thin gray approaching white, and tree trunk shadows spread and
mingle. From your reclined position, you begin to consider how concealed you may be
from view and then you are effortlessly asleep.

It is afternoon when you return, a thread past three o’clock. It is the first time in
almost a year in which you have come to consciousness on your own, and not through the
assistance of the daybreak alarm and the hustle of bodies it summons. Nonetheless, you
jolt upwards with habitually harried breath. It takes a minute to settle down; you are in
the forest, where you intended to be, not yet safe, but free. Your muscles are as sore as
they’ve ever been, but not debilitatingly so. You are, after all, a kind of machine now. It
will be many hours until dark, until you can proceed, and you fill them in much the same
way as you did when preparing for your initial desertion, by visualizing the path that lies
between you and safety, and the steps you must take in order to secure this course.

You open your map for reference, understanding that the true points of guidance
operate internally. But the topology is helpful nonetheless, and your eyes scan your
notes. A pencil mark runs East from your former military base (a square bisected by a
sword according to the government-printed legend) to the thickly wooded area in which
you now lay (shaded a dark green to emphasize its impassability). These woods run about twenty-five miles longitudinally and you are at about dead-center. Your pencil mark runs North through the forest (you will follow), before breaking out North/North-East into the collection of small villages (a dot and a name each) that separates the wooded region from the Boundary, your destination, your hope. The great difficulty will be this last step, taking up the distance between the forest and the line. There, you will meet many eyes, not like the depleted countryside of last night where only the occasional wink of light in the distance interrupted your solitude. There, you will have to…no, worry about it then, there are challenges to face *now*.

A first challenge: at around five o’clock, the sky abruptly darkens, and just as suddenly looses a heavy rain. You have your poncho, but it is cold now, quite cold. You take stock of your belongings and find them inadequate against this sudden inclemency: bedroll; knapsack; uniform, despised, yet still clinging to your skin; the civilian clothes you wore upon enrolling (you strip and put these wash-worn articles on beneath the uniform, it helps); medic kit; canteen, heavy with more water than you will need; what passes for food, the kind you can eat with one hand and taste as texture; some minor personal effects (this is actually how you think of them now, it will take some time to fix that); electric lantern; compass and map. And there is your sidearm, the revolver, heavy in your hands as you consider its dull shape, the dark promise held in its mouth. You didn’t want to bring it, you don’t want to use it, but you might.

At around seven, a helicopter flutters high overhead, so high that its presence almost escapes your attention. It cannot be connected to you, it is too elevated, but your heart sprints nonetheless. They have other ways, you know, the dogs and their devices of
detection, and the deserter’s own carelessness. Others you don’t know about, and don’t want to discover. Do not think of that, it is dark soon, prepare yourself. You shut your eyes and begin to cover ground that way.

The rain stops and the night is pleasant, warm and quite dry, a summer’s night. You advance through the undergrowth of the forest, it is slow going, and the moon is dim. A cloud covers its glow and all is blackness, you dare not use your lantern and you come to develop an intimate relationship with the earth. As sore as your feet are from the previous night’s activity, they are remarkably sensitive to the subtleties of terrain, assessing the soil’s hardness or tenderness, its slope, the interference of brush. Eventually the moon resumes and maintains its smile; you are able to proceed at a leisurely pace, feeling the cool of the air in your lungs, every so often casually checking your compass.

It allows you time to think, this loping pace. Your thoughts drift mildly between nostalgia and hopes for the future. You avoid reflection on the last year of your life, the year spent under the military yoke; those memories are numerous and horrible, they will undoubtedly remain with you for longer than you would like, but you can push them out, and you do. Instead you think of your life before the army, before the war, before the merest hints of civil unrest even, when you were a boy. Your childhood home, the crowded bedroom shared with your younger sisters, the smell of breakfast and dirty, warm blankets. Inevitably, you think of your family and then the terrible idea comes that they will perhaps be punished for your misdeed, your desertion. It is a painful one, and it presses heavily. You force it out eventually. Your decision was a necessary one, there was truly no choice in the matter, it was something that had to be done.
Why necessary? Principally, to secure your freedom; secondarily, your sanity.

No longer will you expend your personal energies in support of the military machine; it is not your fight, it is not your responsibility. The tasks and restraints imposed upon you by the State serve only the good of the State itself, they are not designed for the sake of your well-being. The soldier labors, pains, and dies so that the State might prosper; this is a violation of the individual. Though your life before the military was by no means a happy one, it was at least a period in which you functioned for the sake of your own good, for your own advancement. You took this position for granted, and now you return to it, grateful. To follow senseless orders with senseless vigor, to sacrifice for the advantage of your unseen and unknown overlords, to ingest the placebo of Loyalty while your skin thickens and your mind dissolves: a crime. And no more.

And there is something else that drives you now, the visceral impact of death that has become like a tempting flame to which your mind, the insect, continually returns. What have you seen now, and what have you participated in? Too much; you have killed and cut apart and aided others in doing so. True, these things will happen regardless, will continue to happen, under any circumstances, but you can no longer stomach your own involvement. You soldiers have learned, through experience, one of two things: to delight in the slaughter, to hone your instruments of murder just as a carpenter gains mastery over his instruments of woodworking, to thrill in the business; and, if you cannot tolerate this vileness, to ignore it even while you perform, to reduce man to matter and then to cut your share. You were a devotee of the second camp, from the beginning, but no more. What sense is there in pursuance of this art? They have left inescapable imprints in your skin, your abandoned works, that even now edge into your field of
thought, threatening to flow over and dilute the efficiency of your current design. A just
punishment for vileness, you cannot deny that.

Your tenure was a mistake, a terrible one. But not hopeless; you have always
taken comfort in the undeniable fact that at any given stage in ones life, within the range
of ones conduct always lies the best option. It must be found, and pursued. So live with
it then, but live.

Your body begins to groan with hurt as midnight approaches. The pain begins as
the comforting ache that follows a hard day’s work, but intensifies quickly, so that you
are soon forced to a knee, and you thrust a dry, bitter nothing out of your stomach. This
hurt is unlike anything you have felt, even in your weeks of military training, which is
nothing to bat an eye at. It shoots from its source—your feet, where the muscles
scream—up your legs and then circling around your gut, leaving its thorny imprints,
before ascending through your chest, swelling your heart and crushing your lungs, finally
reaching your brain which it pins and attacks, using your skull as an echo chamber. You
rub your temples and swallow a few pills from the medic box. Freedom alright, drink
some water.

By the time you have resumed your trek, it has begun to mist and you drag your
poncho back on. It smells sour, but that’s soon gone. The mist becomes rain, which in
turn becomes heavy rain. Fog too, and then lightning of all things. The moon is gone,
and the lightning becomes your guide; all is darkness and suddenly all is cast in silver
brilliance. You advance according to this limited exposure, and it is slow going,
naturally. Eventually, you arrive to the decision that you must use your lantern. It is a
risk, doubtless, but it is madness to continue on like this; in six hours of darkness, you
can’t have covered any more than two or two and a half miles, and this is not a hike, you remind yourself, they are looking for you. True, the light from the lantern will damn you if it is seen, but with the heavy rain, its glow will be diminished. As it is, you only use the lamp’s meagerest setting, which casts a bland gray about ten feet in all directions. With this light, you make some progress, though you begin to see helmeted sentry units within the shadows in your paranoia, hear radio static in the thunder claps.

Tragedy. Cresting a hill, you feel the catch on your knapsack slip open. You turn to resettle it, lose your balance on the muddy incline, and you are hurtling down the hill you have just climbed. It is a manic descent and it takes your body many a tumble before you are able to stop yourself. By this point, you have lost nearly all of the contents of your pack. Your map remains, it is plastered to the container’s base, and your lantern is still clutched in your hand, thankfully unbroken, but that is all. You stretch your arms behind your head and breathe until your heartbeat resumes patience. You are quite, quite conscious of your soreness now, a clean military cot would be a fine place to recline.

None of that, get your act together. You retrace your footsteps to the top of the hill, turning the lantern to its fullest brightness. The rain is quite heavy now, and there is mud, you do not panic. By the time you have reached the top, you have reclaimed much of your food, your canteen, and of course your sidearm (always with you, forever yours). You descend and find your medic kit, open, its contents submerged in sloppy earth, you recover what you can. Another ascension, somewhat frantic, and it appears that your compass is lost. The rain pounds the soil, hard as nails, and you don’t dare continue on until it stops. You find a tree trunk, huddle next to it, open your soaked-through bedroll and cover yourself. It is as cold as it comes, the wind has started now, and cuts your face
even through the folds of your hood. You consider turning on your lantern so that its
bulb might provide some heat, but it is a wasteful and dangerous idea. It is dark, and you
are drowsy in spite of your discomfort. Sleep.

What do you make of yourself? Someone asks you this in a dream, your father
perhaps, or a childhood friend, or a sadistic platoon captain you once wished death upon.
You begin to answer.

You spend the next day’s light in a state of waking hibernation, folded against a
tree trunk, your chin set between your knees. It is a strange compromise between
awareness and numbness, between an opened and a closed door. On one hand, the
slightest sensation (rustle of leaves, ribbon of sun glare between clouds, animal scent,
breath of wind) brings your body to alertness, muscles tight against skin, but your mind
stays out of the fray, entombed. It is an uneasy balance, and perhaps not truly balanced at
all, perhaps it is merely the frozen and helpless image before its unavoidable plunge.

It is another hasty night, and yet little progress is made. On approaching dawn,
you estimate that you are less than two miles away from the wood’s gradual end, where
the tree trunks diminish, mingling with stumps, then roads, then buildings. The dwellings
in these regions are sparsely planted, and almost primitive through their distance from the
metropolis, but they are not empty, and their inhabitants are not eyeless. And you have
pursuers also, do not forget, and they have doubtless made better time than you, though
hopefully in all the wrong directions.

You find yourself possessed by an uneasy restlessness, even as you curl up on the
ground for another uneven sleep. You recall the bewildering haste of your first night’s
journey, the ceaseless sprint that thrived on your pain. Now, there is no pain, nothing so
brilliant, only the dull soreness that prompts distracted thoughts, or ennui. It is a
dangerous feeling, this restlessness; experience has taught you that it leads to an
unsettlingly comfortable hopelessness, and little else. Now is not the time for
uncertainty, no matter the ease into which it may be slipped, you must remind yourself.
You recline now, but you do so on a narrow ledge, with the drop of capture and death
close to your drowsy shoulder. And there is another plunge you must avoid, the black of
despair that claims your efforts to self-realization futile, amounting to nothing beyond
limp strands slipped from an uncertain fist.

The helicopter breaks first into your eardrums as a low vibration, and then crosses
your field of vision as a shadow across the gray near-dawn. You breathe not at all and
clench your muscles as if to block the conversation of your bloodstream. Again, just as
with the first machine, (two, three, four) days ago, its elevation is too great to witness
your huddling shape, but it serves as a reminder, which is good, necessary. Naturally, its
passing arrests your sleep. Unnaturally, your disobedient hands flee to your sidearm, and
its weight in your hands puts you to slumber.

The crackle that awakens you is of course not thunder, but the moment in which
you believe this is your last moment of naïveté, so cherish it. You flail for the revolver
and do not find it, now or ever. It is noon, the sun is a silver coin above you, and hot.
You are deaf for many seconds and do not hear the lovely boy laughs of the three soldiers
around you; their fun was a burst of rifle fire inches away from your hibernating right ear
and they rejoice in their mischief. For these seconds, all is a radio whine, but this
dissipates to allow in a cave’s echo of sound. In your left ear, and that will be all from
here on out.
The scent of gunpowder burning clears your nostrils and clouds your brain, it is all you can understand as you are lifted, bent, cuffed, and then secured to rope which the eldest of the soldiers—a pimple-scarred gargoyle about your age—cheerfully leads you by, the other two boy-soldiers at your rear, carbines casually at your back. A glance over your shoulder reveals the pathetic scraps of your camp, the last of your possessions, abandoned. A ridge eclipses them and you are at last alone.

After what seems like mere minutes of walking—embarrassing—the trees thin considerably. Another pattering of footsteps eliminates all foliage and the land flattens abruptly into what can only be the end of your woodland adventure. There is a hauler as well, and a buggy, and this too is an end. The gargoyle uncinches your leash and the other two hoist you up and over into the back of the hauler as if you are something merely cumbersome, a sack of cement. You offer resistance of course, but your useless kicks and tapered grunts are nothing. The hauler is a large one, with a massive cargo hold, but it is almost completely filled with unmovable crates that extend nearly to the steel roof, and you have only enough room to lie down as the door closes, leaving you in the dark.

It occurs to you that you too are cargo. They did not send the lumbering hauler for the express purpose of holding you; your capture was merely a stop along the way, almost casual. So this means that your location was never much of a secret. And that you never held much of a chance.

The vehicle bounces along the rutted outlands paths, every part groaning. Your companion cargo creaks as well, and you spend some time searching for weakness in the faces of the crates, but none can be found, the slats are firm and wedged together
precisely. Not that it would be any use, your hands are bound, and they wouldn’t load you in with anything of value… For an indeterminate period of time, you are taken with hopeless rage, and you throw yourself against the walls of your current cage, engendering nothing beyond some entertaining noises. Attempting who knows what, you lose a fingernail against the iron of the door, and that is the end of that game. You take a seat again, your spine flush against the hold wall, and sit calmly, your emotions blank for the time being. *It* has happened and who knows what that means? Eventually, you feel that your vessel has moved onto paved road, and you feel with a instant certainty that you are back home.

The door slides up and you dive headfirst through the opening; you manage to knock down one of them with a satisfying blow of your shoulder before they collect you. You are in a cement chamber, a mausoleum, no, merely a docking bay. The gaping door reveals that it is night again (it was *just* day, no more than four hours ago, this loss of time is unsettling), but there are lights, and the familiarity of your surroundings is undeniable. There is a certain odor…the once-comforting scent patterns of machinery and precise angles. You are dragged inside.

No interview, no interrogation, no torture. You are discarded in a room, not even a proper cell, it possibly once held a boiler, with unattached pipes protruding from both the floor and the ceiling. No light, other than an unchanging white beam beneath the door. And it is quite black, believe it, and your hands remain cuffed so that they develop a purple hurt before long, and when you are finally able to sleep (face down, the aroma of dirty tile) you wake the next (morning?) having shed a fair number of (nocturnal?) tears at the wrenching. At first you pace restlessly, pawing at your surroundings with your
nearly immobile fingers, but it is not long before this jars your body too painfully to be continued, and you lie prostrate, only moving twice from then on, both to relieve yourself in the room’s corner; as painful and difficult as this is, it is a small dignity that you can salvage.

So it was futility, then, this is what you have learned. Better to have remained a slave and a live one. Your future is certain; as soon as you are adequately softened up, you will be brought outside and shot. It will be just after dawn, in the main courtyard between the hangers and the mess hall. There will be quite a crowd, all available personnel. You will be held before them, chained to the flagpole, your crimes will be boomed throughout the ranks, the assemblage will chant the State Anthem, a line of riflemen will assemble. You have seen this.

Of course, and it will only serve the aims of your oppressors, it will only reinforce their ideals, what you would call beliefs in something human. You disobeyed not those in power but rather the power itself, and itpunishes eternally, like waves against the shoreline.

Mistakes are inevitably made, a voice reminds, it sounds like one of yours. This, like any other stage in life, bears a best option, find it and commit to it. The best option? Simple: bash your left temple against the exposed pipes and end this before they get a chance to, take away one of their circus shows. Imagine that, their boy killers assembled in ranks to greet a dead body in a blood-stained uniform. That’s a morale booster for those bastards. And you actually attempt this, one or two times, but the pain is immense and jars all throughout and around your body and you give the idea up. You’re a coward, then, fine, why else would you have joined the military in the first place?
When the door opens, you are too dead to stand and charge it, and the influx of light blinds you besides. What sounds like a canteen is thrown in and bounces into your head. You scramble to open it, but to no avail; your hands are numb and the fingers only shudder vaguely when you send them instructions. Boots advance, and you are lifted to your feet. The canteen is opened and placed in your mouth, the water streams down your neck, but you catch and swallow some regardless. It feels like steam in your stomach. Gloves hook themselves around your elbows and you find the voice to proclaim your pain, apparently there is life in your ruined arms yet. A needle shines in the dark and your veins are filled with something soft; this would explain why none of the men you have seen executed put up much of a fight or made trouble for their murderers. Turns out it wasn’t guilt after all, but serum.

Outside it is bright and silent. Your vision is useless and your surroundings could be anything at all, but, no, this is a familiar place, and their silence cannot conceal their presence, the spectators, your former peers, whose voices and shapes you would certainly still recognize were you allowed. The two men at your elbows depart, you feel the resistance of the chain against your swollen wrists, and this must be it, the execution.

Jagged, a voice pushes up through the earth and you recognize the charred tones of the Lieutenant through electric channels. He is a busy man, and though his words leave too quickly for your comprehension, the rhythm of his speech flows along familiar runnels. He is reciting your crimes, and it is a long speech, you are certain that they have tacked a few penalties onto your record, or perhaps not at all, perhaps treason is ample enough by itself to warrant this laconia. The sun is a brand, it sears through just above
your eyebrows and you shift your face towards the ground; let them interpret the sign as they will, you are tired.

Through your cloud brain emerges thought; it seems you cannot avoid this pest even at the eve of your destruction. So this is the sum of a life: the weight of the bullets that is used to put it down. No revelation, no ascension, a name on a line, a few petty stories eaten by the wind. It was only your self-possession that promised anything more, your pretensions. Amongst the landlocked mob, you thought yourself higher, and then plummeted desperately in your attempt at flight. Where, if they even were, are your ideals? Call it cowardice, or refusal to accept your portion, but give it your contempt, and understand what it is that you are made of.

Vaguely, your hearing making a shallow indentation into your consciousness, the Lieutenant speaks a note of finality, and the rifles are cocked. Now, an explosion of voices invades the air, the Anthem, spoken in unison by the assemblage, each voice equal and anonymous.

If a man is a grain, and his actions only the dullest of vibrations, than by what measurement can his thoughts be taken? Unopened boxes, strands idle and disconnected. Yes, but. But here you stand, now, against the others, the traitor, the enemy. You failed to understand what it means to live, you sought something within yourself that failed to manifest. Yes, but. But you have lived, nonetheless, and you have chosen your own path in defiance of its slope. You will die, you will be forgotten, but this does not mean that you never were there, that you did not struggle against your pinions, that you did not act bravely despite your fear.
The Anthem ends in a hum. Before you hovers your will, a beam, you must only turn your eyes upward to see it, stand upright to grab it. You do so and your will is yours, it becomes clear. The details of your surroundings emerge, both sharply-outlined and irrelevant. The faces of countless boy soldiers, hungry, drawn towards the impending slaughter. Ten black hollows stare into your figure and unload their cargo, the slug bullets advance tediously, spiraling with the intensity of a clock’s second-hand. It is laughable, but you stand patiently with the rays of the morning sun piercing your retinas. The sunbeams join your will; it is all one image now, one shimmering whole, and as your death approaches, this whole gains a white momentum.
She found the box in what she considered The Boy’s Room, the furnished half of their basement that had been either The Family Room or The Den in the past, but now belonged irrevocably to those boys, her husband and twin sons, a site of male activity. There was a television at the room’s top-left corner, a couch and a pair of ratty armchairs encircling. Opposite the television area, in the bottom-left corner, stood an area where drinks could be made and consumed, a hasty collection of mismatched stools and a scrap of a plywood bar, over-laminated so that it left a stick on the forearms. There was a refrigerator with sodas and beers and the few odd condiments.

When they had first moved into the house, Rosie and John and their then-infant boys Aaron and Connor, the basement had been entirely functional, a cold cement room into which a family only assembled in fear of the passing tornado. It had possessed a pungent smell that seemed permanent, an irremovable reminder of the dark earth that bulged just feet below the cement floor. As a wife just recently made mother, Rosie tried to avoid the basement and its cold, dank air, except when forced down to tend to the laundry. Her machines were in a small, door-less anteroom that one reached by immediately turning right upon descending the stairs. In this private space, she felt more at ease; the sun filtered through the room’s two slender windows, casting everything in a warm yellow-gray, and the pleasant smell of detergents mingling with cotton overpowered the basement’s hostile natural odor.
John had never made secret his intentions to renovate their basement; when the two had first visited the house with the woman from the real estate company, he had spoken enthusiastically about what could be done with such a wide-open space. At the time, it was nothing more than a dark hole which the real estate woman dismissively referred to as the boiler room, but John had had ideas for its improvement, and good ones. Its renovation was a gradual process; their budget was tight in those early years with Rosie forced to quit her receptionist work to stay home with the children, but little by little, John made progress. First, a simple cleaning, a scouring of the walls and floor with bleach, a scraping of corners, a wiping of windows so that the light could get in for the first time in who knows how many years. Then, a visit from the electrician: most of the electrical outlets were dead and required rewiring; also, two rows of fluorescent lights were installed to replace the single hanging bulb that had formerly served the purpose. These lights set the room in a brilliant white that had the effect of showing off just how ugly and uncomfortable the room truly was. Rosie bit her tongue on that last one; she felt obligated to support her husband in anything, no matter how unattractive his current project seemed to her. She was more than content with the state of their home as it stood without the use of the basement. It was a beautiful house in a respectable and likeable neighborhood, all that she could want. Two stories, four bedrooms, three bathrooms, two spacious living rooms on the bottom floor, numerous other rooms whose uses they couldn’t even tap as it was; it seemed unnecessary, with all the space that they already had, to move underground.

But John had started, and though she could not feign matching his enthusiasm, she could at least smile and produce a sincere compliment whenever he rattled off his
latest acquisitions or plans. So the project’s pace accelerated, with her husband tacking down a thin and utilitarian speckled-brown carpeting that bulged and sagged at various points on the uneven cement. Not uncomfortably so, in such a way to induce stumbling, but enough that it fell under a wife’s and mother’s disapproval. The room was then outfitted with whatever furniture could be procured from Altoona’s various thrift shops. The couch itself was recovered from the street; one day she arrived home to find her husband and Bill Decker maneuvering the hulking green thing down the wooden basement steps, grunting and giggling like boys. Then came the construction of the bar, the acquisition of the second-hand television console, and the purchase of two mammoth space heaters that, when turned on full-blast, would alleviate the unheated basement’s persistent chill in scarcely a minute’s time. Finally, to conclude the project’s five-year arc, the installation of a paneled office-style ceiling which served two purposes: eliminating the stubborn filth of the overhead from view; and, by lowering the ceiling, giving the room a more intimate feel, thus making almost invisible any signs of the room’s former identity.

By this point, their boys were of school age, and the furnished basement was beginning to “reap its rewards” as John proudly put it. It served as a recreation hall for Rosie’s three boys. There were many events: Saturday morning cartoons; late night drinking sessions; Monopoly marathons; poker, itself a drinking session; Nintendo; Cubs games; Bears games; Bulls games. There were many excuses to go underground, and her three boys used them quite often, so that it seemed to Rosie that the sound of boy’s or men’s ruckus muttered through the floorboards more often than not.
Despite the remodeling, Rosie still rarely ventured down into the basement, preferring to remain at the top of the stairs when communicating with her boys, hunched and always shouting louder than was necessary, as if her voice had to navigate the walls of a subterranean maze in order to find its listeners. In the rare moments when she did spend time underground, for the odd baseball game or movie (a VCR was purchased as part of their eleventh-year wedding anniversary, providing for the boys another beam to huddle around), she was unable to shake from her head the room’s initial ugliness. Though the cold and rankness had long disappeared, there was still a secret unpleasantness, dwelling low, beneath her reason, that Rosie could not shake. It was by no means revulsion, but at times it cropped up to nearly such a state. Once, lying awake in a solitary bed, the muffled, nearly muted, voices of John’s poker game emerged from two floors below. She strained to make out individual words but could not; it was a flow of indistinguishable noise that reached her ears, a rumbling wave, occasionally cresting in what could be either shouts or laughter. She tried to visualize the scene—drunkenness that approached the raucous, the air thick and burning with cigarette smoke, empty beer cans littering the ground, the kind of language used when women were absent—but found herself unable. All that presented itself, even when she closed her eyes in concentration, was an image nearly voidlike, the basement as it had first been upon moving in, the meek shadow outline around the hanging light bulb the only exception to an utter blackness. She strained to place within the scene the familiar objects she knew, but they floated away the instant her focus moved to another, so that it was only the blackness that remained, and a dead light bulb that would reveal nothing to her of what she could not see on her own.
It was only on that day in which she found herself in need of the witch that she entered the Boy’s Room with anything other than obligation. The witch was a prized Halloween ornament, a felt doll perched atop a miniature broomstick. She had obtained it some years ago at a Davenport crafts fair and liked its look very much, its eager green grin, the flax bristles that constituted its crooked brush. And, as she reasoned, its friendly visage excluded it from something that could be seen as a sacrilege. In past years she had suspended the thing above the front door within their porch so that it dangled there in the light wind, weaving about like she imagined a real witch would have done. It was a big hit with many of her friends, and even some of the trick-or-treaters commented on it, or at least their accompanying parents. Sadly, she was unable to find it in the garage rafters where she had sworn she had placed it last November. She could visualize removing it from its peg with the handle of an extended kitchen broom, winding the string pinned to its neck, wrapping it in a black trash bag, and climbing the shortened ladder in the garage to the loft, where she had carefully squeezed it next to the boxed Christmas decorations, which she didn’t like nearly so much. But, alas, it was nowhere to be found, and neither were the other ornaments. In their place were Aaron’s and Connor’s winter toys—sleds, saucers, snowshoes—piled haphazardly as a result of being tossed up in the order each item was last used. Frowning, Rosie descended and entered the kitchen. Connor had just arrived home from school, and stood bent at the waist in front of the open refrigerator, clinking around. He looked up at Rosie’s footfalls on the linoleum and straightened to his full height: an even six feet, and barely fourteen years old.

“Do we have any cheese besides Swiss?” His voice did not yet match his height and was strained, breaking frequently.
“Hello to you too,” Rosie scolded. “There’s a box of Kraft singles in the door, where’s Aaron?”

“Julie’s, I think.”

The girlfriend. She had appeared only recently in her son’s life, and Rosie’s initial questions had been consistently rebuffed. Aaron revealed nothing except her name and that the two shared homeroom; other than that, it was a part of his world from which his mother was excluded. She felt this exclusion, and the accompanying hollow of loss.

Connor’s back was at the counter now, applying mustard to slices of white bread, the cheese at hand. Rosie spoke: “Do you have any idea where the ornaments are, the holiday lights? The witch? I went to—”

“Yeah, we moved—”

“—garage, and your winter—”

“—all that crap to the basement.”

“What was that?” A splash of adrenaline entered her bloodstream.

“In the basement, in that big straw chest by the TV.”

“That is not what I was referring to; we don’t use that kind of language in this house, and you shouldn’t be using it at all.” Rosie didn’t even think such words, and there were certain ones that she had managed to never speak even once in her life.

“Okay, Mom, sorry,” and she caught the token of his insincerity before he turned back to the counter.

“Don’t you roll your eyes at me, Connor Pritchard, I didn’t—”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” and in a lower, yet still discernible voice: “Christ…”
She started up again at this casual blasphemy, but he was out of the room and thumping up the stairs to his room, his sandwich materials still on the counter. Rosie collected and returned them to the refrigerator, mentally organizing a list of grievances to present to John when he got home.

Downstairs, it was cold and gray in response to the October afternoon. She turned on the lights and they flickered and then buzzed brightly, so that now it was only cold. Two floors up, Connor’s music blared, filtering through the floorboards as a dreary moan. He could blow his eardrums out, and he wouldn’t even notice.

The chest she had been directed towards was a cumbersome thing, picked up years ago at a swap meet for scarcely more than the price of a meal. Its frame was held together by strands of tightly-bound straw that had flaked off in a number of places, giving the thing a prickly appearance. Its lid was a hinged dome, so that the chest, placed flush against the wall as it was now, could not be opened without being pulled out of its spot. It was heavy, more than Rosie was accustomed to handling, and she had to strain her thighs and abdomen to dislodge it. “Toilet muscles,” her late father had crassly called them, and she used these very ones to skate the chest back and forth until it could be opened.

The witch was indeed where Connor had said it was, and she removed it from its bag with the kind of delight reserved for the arrival of an old friend. Careless transportation had dislodged a number of the broom’s bristles, and she collected them from the black folds of the trash bag, tacking another grievance onto what inevitably grew into a list of no mean length. She kneeled and surveyed the remaining contents of the box, odds and ends exclusively: the box of Christmas ornaments; a heavy down coat,
John’s; the broken clock that had once sat on their mantle before it was knocked down by an errant grievance; the lampshade from some forgotten lamp, flattened into trash due to careless handling; countless other miscellany, mostly things that had just enough potential not to be discarded.

And there was the box, the box. It was small, a cube perhaps ten inches on each side. She would have overlooked it had there not been a peculiarity to it: its top was sealed with clear packing tape, but the frayed edges of the bottom flaps indicated that the other side was unbound. The weight inside was significant and clattered a bit, like a box of plastic toys might. She flipped it over. Opening it, Rosie found no toys. Instead, it was a collection of videotapes, at least fifteen or twenty in two matching stacks. The two on top were *Rocky* and a movie she hadn’t seen or heard of before, *Soylent Green*. She saw Charlton Heston’s comforting face on the front and she lifted the videotape to read the description on the back. Her hand spasmed and the tape clattered to the carpeted cement floor. Behind *Soylent Green* lay a movie whose title she couldn’t comprehend.

What she did comprehend were the images displayed so prominently on the third tape’s cover: a woman kneeling, leering at the viewer with a mixture of longing and pain, a man behind her, penetrating; the same man reclining on a sofabed, a different woman with her gaping mouth on the tip of his penis, her eyes again trained on the viewer; a third woman, entering into a combination of these two different positions, flanked on either side by a pair of tattooed-and-tanned men, their eyes clenched in vile ecstasy; and many others, enough to fill the cover. “Deep-Fucked Cunts,” the title proudly announced.

Dizziness encroached. Rosie thrust her hand at her monstrous discovery as if to blot it out, she succeeded only in spraining her index finger and dislodging the tape
slightly. There was another tape behind it; its exposed inch betrayed a similar identity as
the first. Rosie cradled her injured digit, holding it to her breast where she felt her heart
rage. Her mouth tasted bitter, like it would when she had a cold, or after a glass of wine.
She stood up and moved back into the couch, collapsing into it. From this position, she
could still see the top half of that first offending tape; the whore’s gaping expression, her
eyes seemingly trained on Rosie herself, taunting her with degradation. She was unable
to think coherently, only aware of her revulsion, as yet unaware of this discovery’s
implications. The moan of Connor’s heavy metal reentered, and at that moment she
heard the front door open, Aaron’s rapid steps moving across the house. He entered the
bathroom, closed the door, seconds passed, a flush, and water flowed through the pipes,
just above her head. Aaron would then get food. If he hadn’t eaten something at Julie’s.
Maybe he would just come right down here to watch television. Rosie started up, and
closed first the box and then the straw chest. She had begun inching it back into its space
against the wall when she saw Soylent Green still out of its place, on the carpet below
her. She forced herself to a kind of calm, opened the chest, opened the box, placed the
videotape back where it belonged. She closed the box, flipped it back over, placed it in
its previous space, and then closed and realigned the straw chest. She picked up the
witch, no longer so friendly an object, and walked deliberately up the basement stairs.

In the kitchen, Connor was back, fixing another sandwich. Rosie eyed him
without speaking, blank.

“It was where I said, right? In the chest?” He either didn’t notice or didn’t
comment on Rosie’s disorientation.

“Yes,” Rosie said, speaking as if under trance, “I found it.”
The discovery of the box occurred on a Monday, Rosie’s day off. She generally worked Tuesday through Friday, and that week made it through Wednesday before calling in sick the following morning. Her behavior of the last two days exhibited the kind of disorientation of a recently awakened coma patient: taking uneasy steps in a world superficially similar to his former one, yet tampered with somehow, secretly changed. After the first afternoon’s shock had dissipated, preoccupation over her discovery lingered, an inescapable vibration. In her unoccupied moments, when alone in a room, taskless, or during the unsleeping hours of night, this drone roared above everything else, so that she was helpless to ignore it. When occupied, at work or in her duties at home, she was only able to distract part of her attention, and the hum was never fully absent, merely humming beneath the surface, ready to crescendo at her next free moment.

That the pornography belonged to John was unquestionable, though she certainly did try in her best ways at first to deny it. It couldn’t belong to either of her sons, she reasoned; though they might be able somehow to procure one or two tapes (her babies, the idea revolted her), it was beyond their resources to attain a collection as extensive as this one evidently was. That they might belong to a mysterious third party, thus neatly absolving her entire household of responsibility, was possible, but almost certainly not the case. The box was placed too deliberately to belong to anyone else, one of John’s friends, say, or the previous owners of the house. Perhaps he was being set up, perhaps unknown forces were using calculated means to ruin her husband’s respectable image, make him out to be a pervert, disgrace his family and his name. Perhaps, and perhaps
these forces had also conspired to bring her to the box’s discovery, place it where its
finding was only facilitated by the extremes of chance? Unlikely. And so she came to
accept the reality of the situation, though she struggled to accept its ramifications in how
she viewed her husband.

John was a virtuous and honest man. In their sixteen years of marriage there had
been nothing to challenge this. He was a Certified Public Accountant and had always
held good work, he kept his family clothed and fed and loved, he never mistreated her or
took her presence for granted, he behaved properly and respectably. He was a religious
man, and devout. He had saved his love for marriage as she had, and their relationship
was the stronger for it. The family attended services weekly, never deviating, even when
on vacation. Their sons had been baptized and given proper Christian names, raised by
Christian virtues. He was kind to his parents and maintained a good relationship with
Rosie’s mother, he didn’t smoke, and he only drank occasionally, he drove at the speed
limit and with his seatbelt on.

He owned a collection of filth and kept it hidden in his dark basement, he was a
diseased lecher hunched greedily over his horde. In two days, Rosie transformed him
into a monster so that she began to almost fear him, this husband-creature of hers. She
hoped this change would go unobserved, but also wanted desperately for him to
recognize this new awareness of hers, that she had found him out. When he arrived home
from work the night after her discovery, she recoiled slightly from his kiss, mashing her
lips together as if having swallowed something strong.

“Everything okay, Sarah?” Sarah Rose Pritchard, maiden name Gullens, Sarah to
most, Rosie to her husband when he is sympathetic or in need of sympathy.
“Yes—yeah, just a little...tired I guess.”

“You look a little pale, think you might be getting a cold?”

“No, John. I’m disoriented because I discovered your secret, your sin,” she didn’t say. Instead: “Maybe. I might be fighting off a little something. I should have some Vitamin C before bed.”

“Why wait? Here, take some now.” He fetched the sweet tablets and drew a mug of water. She chewed them and chased the sediment from her mouth with the cool water.

“Ro-sie,” he clucked his tongue in genuine regret, squeezed her hand, and left to change out of his business outfit.

“Meatloaf for dinner,” she croaked at him. He was already halfway up the stairs, he was quick.

“Super,” he shouted. And so on.

The invented sickness justified her peculiar behavior in the following days. Her silence, her disoriented complexion, the wariness of her gaze, all could be safely tucked beneath the excuse of her illness. Neither Aaron nor Connor seemed to noticed the change in behavior; they had adopted the relentlessly self-absorbed mode of teenaged boys and would not have detected anything out of the ordinary had Rosie walked into the room headless, provided their meals were served as usual. It was John who exhibited concern, doing his incompetent best to help around the house. Though he pressured her otherwise, Rosie showed up to work as normal on both Tuesday and Wednesday, able to fulfill her receptionist responsibilities at Fairbrooks Dentistry as usual. At the office, Lynne and Dr. Fairbrooks commented on her diminished appearance but appeared satisfied that it was merely “a little something.” She noticed that she felt markedly less
preoccupied when in the receptionist’s chair, or, more accurately, when she was out of
the house. It was the house, she realized, where John’s evil lurked, not just in the
darkness of his basement, but throughout, where he tread his sinful step and concocted
his dirty thoughts. Her home, formerly the object of her greatest pride, had become
sullied, possibly irrevocably so; maybe she could never shake this taint from her
associations of the place, and it would be hers forever.

It was not long before her feigned illness was supplemented by something
legitimate. Her appetite had diminished and the mounting October chill weakened her
immune system. Additionally, she had hardly gotten any sleep since the discovery. At
nights, she lay on her side, eyes half-lidded, her back to John and farther away from him
than usual. “I don’t want to get you sick, too,” she had explained to him when he
questioned her. Secretly, she knew that he was already quite sick, unchangeably.

In the black bedroom, she watched either the red glow of the crawling alarm clock digits or the even slower shift of the room’s shadows as her portion of the earth moved back under the sun. Her mind bounded along the same points again and again, creating additional subpoints until there was a multiplicity of problems for her consideration. In particular, the image of the videotape box’s leering women continued to rush across her mind, their strained eyes and open mouths trained on her. They taunted her, these nameless harlots, let her know that it was they and not she that held her husband’s attention, their vile seduction that effortlessly trumped her wifely loyalty. On both Monday and Tuesday nights, through an anxious process of self-examination, she arrived at the decision that she must confront John about her discovery, only to abandon her resolve the instant the alarm clock erupted. On Wednesday, the third night, sheer
exhaustion sent her under immediately so that she awoke the next morning with the
rumblings of a cold in her diaphragm and John’s hairy arm across her chest, pinning her.

She prepared breakfast for her boys, the three of them, dressed for work, and
made it to the Fairbrooks Dentistry parking lot before turning back home. It was her
cold, she realized, she really should take better care of herself so that she didn’t end up
suffering physical harm from this crisis in addition to what had already become a
spreading mental wound. She believed that this was the reason she went home, up until
her call to work, up until her preparation of a soothing mug of honey-lemon tea, up until
she turned on the two space heaters in John’s basement and sat at the ratty couch, staring
intently at the straw chest as if it were her opponent.

It was a compulsion and by no means a rational one, but she was helpless in
ignoring it, she had to examine the tapes fully, to see the extent of her husband’s
depravity. What she would find would doubtlessly disgust her, and could even increase
the pain. It was not worth it. She remained sitting for some minutes, gathering her
resolve, and then finally stood and in one fierce motion wrenched the straw chest free
from the wall, the muscles in her back clenching in protest. She opened the chest and
removed the box.

Her examination of its contents was methodical; she did not want any evidence of
her having been here, of having laid eyes on these things. Having laid the box with its
open side facing up, she removed the tapes one by one, laying them on the carpet in the
order she removed them, so that in the end she had two lines of equal length leading away
from what became a harmless cardboard container. There were eighteen tapes total,
sixteen pornographic, *Soylent Green*, and *Rocky*. Kneeling on the hard basement carpet,
the offending titles appeared equally as graphic as the first one she had seen, if not more so. Only one of the tape boxes was unadorned, the others featured cover art that summoned in her that same dizzy helplessness she had experienced Monday. Anonymous faces held expressions of strained pleasure and pain, fields of exposed flesh, acts of sexual degradation vile enough to threaten her gag reflex. What kind of upbringing could these men and women have had to enter into this horrible profession, this moral and physical prostitution? What earthly gain could they claim knowing what awaited them in the next world, the judgment and punishment that would have them submerged in flames for all eternity? As if to remind her of this burning, the basement’s space heaters, each a behemoth in itself, had by now made the room’s air thick and unrelenting. She had donned her heavy cotton bathrobe upon returning home and its weight was suffocating against the mechanical heat. Moving to turn off the machines, she checked the time on the VCR clock: 10:28, still early. Aaron would be in World History, Connor in Geometry, John would be milling about the office, doing whatever accountants did in the morning hours.

She remembered receiving the VCR, tearing open the wrapping paper to a masked disappointment; the size of the box did not match the quality of the gift. She had little use for the thing, and was not a fan of home video viewing in general, believing that movies should be seen in a crowd, the larger the better, for their full enjoyment. In fact, she had had the suspicion that the gift had largely been for the benefit of John, and the boys, who had been lobbying for the purchase in prior months. But she had accepted it with a gracious smile, as she had trained herself to do in the face of nearly anything her husband did, and had watched in mild amusement as the device sat in their downstairs
living room untouched for weeks before she suggested to John that he move the thing to
the basement where it would get some use. It had gotten some use, alright; sixteen tapes
in five years, a staggering figure. Why so many? Where was John even buying them?
No, she could figure that out, she had seen stores in Des Moines—dirty little shops on
unkempt streets—but why did he need so many, and when was he watching them, when
she was out of the house, when she slept…?

She was crying a little now, meek sobs that worked with her already congested
nose to trace a thin streak of snot on her upper lip. Helplessness: she had arrived at the
boundaries of her husband’s secret world, but could not pass through, could only stand
by, listening to the activity raging inside, imagining its form. She had seen the videos
themselves but could never see inside John’s head, could never determine his intentions
or desires or just how he allowed himself to sink to this level of degradation. He, a
husband, a father, a Christian. How he could sit in church every Sunday and hear of the
evils of lust and moral falsehood and not dissolve in anguish, how he could sit at the table
with his family and look them in the eye without his shame bursting out. What went on
in there that she could not know?

Upstairs, the phone rang. Rosie stood braced as it rang again and again, five
times total until the machine would pick up, which it did.

She could hear the answering machine click on in their kitchen. “Hello, you’ve
reached the home of John and Sarah Pritchard—And Aaron!—And Connor!” The four
of them in unison: “Please leave a message and we’ll get back to you as soon as we can.
Thank you!”
“Hey, Rosie. I called you at work and they said you stayed home sick for the day…I guess you’re asleep now, which is good…I was just calling to check in with you, find out how you were feeling. Hope a day at home will do you some good, get some rest, have some soup…I guess you know what to do better than me. I think I’m going to take the kids to a ballgame tonight, maybe go out to dinner someplace first to get them out of your hair while you’re sick…”

John had made dinner the previous night, overcooked chicken and undercooked rice, and had been trying to help out in other ways to alleviate her stress, keeping Aaron and Connor quiet, tidying up around the house. He loved her, in the face of this recent ugliness she could not forget that, and was concerned about her well-being. He was a good husband, a good man, and it was this that was perhaps most upsetting of all, that while he engaged in these abhorrent acts underground, he was able to behave himself around her when he emerged. It was a double life, and she wondered which half of him was the dominant of the two, it was unreasonable to expect that they were equals. Just because he spent more time living respectably than engaged in sin didn’t mean that there wasn’t a powerful undercurrent within him that raged always. Beneath his every noble act could exist a depth of twisted thoughts that kept sated his internal lusts. Just because he didn’t act on his perversion (which, she assumed and prayed, he didn’t), didn’t mean that it wasn’t constantly on his mind, the gluttonous worm within the apple. He was a deceiver, this is what she had learned, and it was a terrible knowledge.

“…so anyway, I’ll see you later tonight before I take the guys out to a game. Give me a call if you want me to bring you anything home, ginger ale or anything like that. Okay, Rosie honey, I’ll see to you soon, love you.”
She had been lost in thought in these last few seconds and snapped back into herself in time to hear the tail-end of the message. For a moment, she had forgotten whose voice was coming from the answering machine, but she figured it out quickly. Of course: her husband.

After returning the basement to its original state, she spent most of the day on the living room couch, eating toast and watching television only vaguely, often forgetting what program she was viewing during the commercial breaks. Her cold symptoms accelerated, her throat tightened, making swallowing quite painful, and her headache moved from dull to overwhelming. At a quarter to three, she retired to her bed and thus missed both her three boys’ arrival home, though she did hear the ruckus made by Connor and Aaron. So it was that she didn’t have to deal with John when he arrived home for more than a few seconds; as she heard his approach to their room, she killed the bedside light and mimicked sleep. “Sarah?” he ventured, and she remained immobile, tense under the sheets. He closed the door, the slim light vanished from her covered eyes, and she heard his footsteps travel downstairs in clumps. A few minutes later, the front door opened and closed, and John’s sedan rumbled from the garage to the street and then to nothing.

She was asleep when they got back from the hockey game, the thick, swirling kind of sleep that accompanies sickness, but John’s entrance to their bedroom woke her from an abrupt dream in which she danced under a crowd’s hostile vigilance. She jolted upward in the dark and John, sitting on his side of the bed, turned on his bedside lamp.

“Sorry to wake you,” he said, and took off his shoes. “Feeling better?” He stood, undressing.
Rosie swallowed and oriented herself. In her dream, she and John danced in a coliseum, the hot stares of a million eyes following their movements. “A little, I guess,” she said. In fact, she felt much better; the cold appeared to have been a small one. “I’ll probably go to work tomorrow. How was the game?” John walked around the side of the bed, wearing only his underwear now, to the master bathroom on her side of the room.

“Good, the Kernels won.” He closed the door to the bathroom and she could hear him brush his teeth, urinate, wash his hands.

She wanted to return to sleep, so that her brief waking wouldn’t keep her up, and also to avoid this dishonest game with her husband. She felt everything she said to him a lie; the only truth was to confront him with what she had found, as she had told herself she would do several times before. The difficulty in doing so was her fear of where things would go after the topic was breached, what their marriage would become with his shame uncovered. And the alternative? Keep it inside, hope the sickness would diminish over time, so that she could eventually go a day or two at a time without thinking about it. And if it did not diminish?

The bathroom door opened and her husband’s frame emerged, tall, a little doughy but still in fine shape for his age. He circled around the bed, clicked off the light and then he was there, at her back, a hand along her hip. He pulled her closer to him and kissed her neck, a dart of the tongue. She could feel that familiar hot weight against her and felt disgust at its intrusion. It was different now, it would always be, she had lost something.

Rosie’s years of marriage had brought her to feel comfort with both her body and her husband’s. She had had no others before John and his was the first she had even seen
outside of an accidental peek at her father’s when she was too young to know what it meant. She had been genuinely frightened the night of their consummation, unsure of what to do, but more so ashamed of her own nakedness. Then she had been unwilling to undress in front of him, squirming out of her dinner clothes in between the sheets on a humid Maui night, and when he had come to her, she had been overly compliant, fearful of his displeasure. Gradually, as they came to understand one another as husband and wife, she allowed herself to become vulnerable, taking joy in the touch of a man who was hers alone, and knowing his corresponding pleasure. She became comfortable with her nakedness, would allow him to watch her dress and undress, to emerge from the shower, glistening and his.

This evolution had required sixteen years of love and devotion; it had taken only four days to obliterate not only the progression of their intimacy, but it had actually regressed, so that she was now not frightened of her own nakedness, but of his intentions. For the first time, she was aware that they were not aligned in their thoughts, that while she saw no one other than John when the two were entwined, his mind’s eye must be focused on the kinds of things he saw in the box. The girls on those tapes—their expressions—so unlike her; they stooped to acts of violation that she would never even have thought of. And yet, when he covered her, when he entered her, it must be their bodies and their agonized expressions that he brought to mind. John’s Rosie was only a hole, the real attraction lay in the box, where he bred his dark lust, and where she had left her ignorance.

He kissed her a second time and maneuvered his head into the space between her neck and shoulder. She felt his breath and caught its scent, fluoride that didn’t quite
conceal the beers he had evidently had at the hockey game. He was by no means drunk, but he was, as he put it, “soft,” and she knew from experience the kind of amorous mood such a state brought about. She remained still, as if unaware of his intentions, and he continued pawing at her, slinking his fingers along the rim of her pajama bottoms. A black revulsion passed through her bloodstream, and she suppressed a shudder.

“Rooosieeee,” he intoned in a lilting whisper behind her ear, in need not of sympathy but its touch.

“I’m sick,” she muttered, nudging her shoulder up in hopes of forcing his retreat. She was about to say “please,” when he rolled back, leaving a clasp of his hand on her side as goodbye.

“Okay,” he said. “I know.” A few seconds, and, “Good night.”

“Good night,” she returned, though she was certain she would not sleep.

The clock at her bedside, that glowing red reminder of her recent insomnia, showed 11:30, and it was 12:07 when she felt his weight shift as he rose to a sitting position and then slipped out of bed, shuffling to the door in his moccasins. She remained motionless and so could hear his stealthy manipulations, the lightness of his footsteps, and how he opened and closed the door with extreme pressure on the knob so that it would make almost no click. His footsteps receded down the hallway, then padded down to the first floor. She heard him draw a glass of water in the kitchen, and then…the door opening, the basement, the groan of his footsteps on the uncarpeted wooden stairs.

So this was his window of opportunity—his secret world lay utterly open—in the night as a thief. She tried to summon the scene to her mind’s eye as she had attempted in the past, and was again unsuccessful; she could only picture the disparate elements, could
not bring them to a whole. She saw the box itself, and then the television screen, displaying the horrible images she had seen on the videotape sleeves, the acts and the girls’ taunting expressions, faces that told Rosie what her husband truly desired. She saw John, felt his excitement, could almost see into his brain itself, stood on tiptoes peering just at the brim of his cauldron. She saw the couch, or the armchairs, whichever he sat in, and yet another terrible thought came to her: “Our sons sit there, John, they gather with their friends to watch television, and you, you…this is our home, bastard!” Her train of thought halted, the profanity seemed to hang above her, burning its pattern into the air itself. She regretted immediately what she had thought, the malice as well as the language. This was a terrible thing, but she would not allow John to bring her down with her, she was not at fault. She spoke a quiet prayer to the quiet room, thanking God for his generosity and requesting strength for John to overcome his illness and for her to withstand this terrible knowledge she had unearthed. She asked that her sons might grow up pure and honest, that they would learn the teachings of their savior and become righteous men. That done, she hummed “How Great Thou Art” until her heart calmed itself, and she was asleep before John’s return.

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Rosie returned to work the next day, Friday, and told everything to Lynne after lunch in the parking lot. They had gone to Amber’s Café for lunch, an end-of-the-week tradition established for as long as she had worked in the dental office, and throughout their meal, as the two spoke over matters of work and home, the idea came to her that if this secret of hers could be revealed to anyone, it must be Lynne, who, ten years Rosie’s senior, and with her own husband and children, was the best option she had for a
confidant. Disclosing the details of the box and its recent impact on her life had previously not occurred to her; until the two sat across from one another at Amber’s, poking fun at the lime green necktie Dr. Fairbrooks’ had worn that day, the entire matter seemed something that must be kept to herself, or perhaps between she and John were she ever able to bring the issue before him. As Lynne moved the conversation along to an argument she and her own husband had had that morning before work, three words popped into Rosie’s head and did not pop out: she would understand.

If anyone could, it was Lynne. True, she had her mother, with whom she had an open and chatty relationship, and there were also her friends, or the people she considered her friends, members of the church, neighbors, a few of the wives of John’s friends, but in each case something was lacking. With her mother, it was mostly shame, the fear of letting her know what kind of man she had ended up with. Her mother had approved of John, and the two of them got along fairly well, but Rosie could not bear the idea of revealing to her such an embarrassing secret. The very act seemed impossible, and the lingering effects would be awkward and unavoidable. With her friends, the greatest fear she had is that the information, once disclosed, would spread like wildfire through the Altoona gossip channels, until the gazes and unheard conversations between strangers would drive her to anxiety even worse than this. She did not consider any of her friends loyal enough to resist the temptation to let this tawdry information slip, thus dirtying both hers and John’s name.

No, her anguish could not continue to build without release, and if it were revealed to anyone, it would be Lynne, clever, sweet Lynne, who, despite her older age and her entrenched status as someone with whom Rosie only spoke in the office, was
Rosie’s best role model. She was a marvelous woman, cynical and warm simultaneously, who took no guff and yet treated those who reciprocated it with both kindness and understanding. She could be trusted, both to keep the secret and to offer something helpful that would aid Rosie in her climb.

Not in Amber’s itself, but in the parking lot, when closed in Rosie’s station wagon, away from the hungry ears of the lunchtime crowd. There, Rosie, beginning with “I have to tell you something,” and ending with a plaintive “help me,” before melting into an overdue attack of heaving tears. Lynne was silent throughout the confession, and offered nothing more than a pack of tissues to the outflowing of Rosie’s anguish. For a bewildered moment, Rosie believed that she had erred in confiding in this woman, that her vulnerability would be met with disgust or, worse, unconcern. But no, she saw through the wavering blend of her clogged eyes Lynne’s expression, sympathetic yet softly amused, as if watching her child learning to ride a bicycle and falling for the umpteenth time, unable to attain the simplest balance.

When Rosie had regained composure, Lynne spoke, in the accentless, matter-of-fact tone she used with intimates and strangers alike: “Sarah, you’re just sick over this, and it’s terrible, but you’re overreacting.” She paused, and Rosie jumped on her.

“Our—reacting?! It’s in our home, Lynne! It’s where my boys watch their programs and play games and he’s just doing it right under my nose, in the night like a snake, and it’s just…right under my nose!”

Rosie stopped in the face of Lynne’s sceptical expression and felt the impulse to scratch it off. Instead, she fumbled at the keys clenched in her sweaty palm and ignited. Lynne couldn’t understand her, she didn’t even know why she had bothered coming to
her in the first place, the arrogant... She didn’t want to spend another moment in her company, she couldn’t keep working along her side, her knowing what she knew, oh, God, why did she bother talking to her in the first place?

Lynne settled her steady palm on Rosie’s trembling hand, and the two exhaled as one. “Wait...wait,” she said, “just calm down...let me say just one thing, and then we’ll leave if you still want...and I won’t bring this matter up ever again...” She brought Rosie’s hand to rest in her own, the two hands folded in the space between the seats, just on the parking brake. She remained silent until she heard Rosie’s breath slip in and out with ease.

“I’ll tell you a story,” Lynne began, “Here me out, I think it’ll do some good. As you know, I didn’t grow up in Iowa, I used to live in a little farming town in Kansas called Sublette, from birth to when I was about twenty-five. It was me and my parents and my older brother Kenny. We had our own patch of land, we grew mostly wheat, sometimes a few special things when the belt wasn’t cinched so tight. It wasn’t a big plot of land, thirty acres, give or take, and all the work that needed doing could be done by my father and brother and a hired hand that drove out to Sublette during the harvest season and lived with us for as long as my father needed him. Anyway, at the end of every harvest season, when the wheat was cut, and bundled, and sent to the mill, and Daddy had himself a bit of money in his pocket, he and the hired hand would drive into Liberal, which was the bigger town twenty miles South, where they would stay overnight, and then return sometime the next day. They didn’t talk much about it, but somehow I got word that every year they would go to a place called The Palace. It wasn’t a secret, they weren’t sneaking out in the night or anything, it was just a tradition these two men had,
and when Kenny turned sixteen, Daddy started taking him along with them. I didn’t think much of it at the time, from the sound of it, The Palace was some kind of upscale tavern, the kind you wouldn’t find in Sublette, where you could only buy two or three kinds of beer and the town’s only bar sold them in mismatched glasses. It wasn’t until I made it to high school that I found out from the other girl that most of their fathers also went to The Palace, and that it wasn’t a bar at all. It was a brothel…a whorehouse.”

At this, Rosie pulled her hand free from Lynne’s and brought it to her mouth in despair. It was not at Lynne’s father’s transgression, but rather at the fact that he had brought his son under his wing. Aaron and Connor would grow, they would grow into their father’s inheritance, her sons.

Lynne continued: “So when I found out, I was upset about it, and felt I had to go to my mother and break the horrible news to her. I don’t know why, it just seemed that it was something she deserved to know even if it would hurt her. I waited until one day when Daddy and Kenny were out, and I walked into the kitchen and told her everything. When I was done, I broke down, and she came to me and held me for a while and then she said that she knew what kind of place The Palace was, it wasn’t any kind of secret, and then she said some of the things I’m about to say to you, Sarah, and I hope you’ll hear me out, and after you do, we don’t have to say anything else about it, ever, we can just get back to work and go on as we always have, no sweat. Okay?”

Rosie nodded dumbly, wanting to hear what Lynne and Lynne’s mother had to say, frustrated that her anger had abated with the story’s telling.

“There’s a lot of differences between men and women, more than anyone can know, I think. There’s a lot of different stuff going on inside, things we don’t reveal to
anyone else. What we show off on the outside isn’t what’s going on inside, that’s true of anyone, man or woman. I know there’s a thousand cruel and unnecessary things that I think but don’t say, and I’m it’s true with you and anybody else. You probably think this whole lecture is useless or condescending or foolish or whatever, but you don’t say so, and that’s important. What we keep inside of us may be ugly, but it’s because of our goodness that it stays inside and doesn’t hurt anyone. There’s no such thing as an entirely good person, it’s a mixture of the light and the dark and the good ones are those who can keep the dark held in, and show off as much of the light as they can.”

Lynne paused for breath, and continued. “Now, with men, remember that things weren’t always like they are now, with a couple getting married and sticking together ‘til death do they part. When we were all a bunch of cavemen running around, the men would want to get themselves with as many women as they could, you know, spread his seed—” Rosie crimsoned. “—and that’s pretty much how things went until civilization started up, and we humans starting acting more like we do now. But the caveman part of a man can’t just die, it’s his foundation, and it’s always going to be part of who he is. No matter how far the human race advances, there’s going to be a part of every man that wants nothing more than to take as many women as he can. And luckily for us, most men don’t, they keep that part of them, that ugly part, within themselves and stick with their wives.

“Most of what I’ve just said is me, the theories I’ve come up with, and they’re just that—theories—so you don’t have to pay them any mind if you don’t want. But please listen to this, what my mother said to me: ‘Lynne, baby, your Daddy works hard all year keeping us clothed and fed and warm, and he loves us all to pieces, wants only the best
for you and Kenny. And he’s a good husband, hardly drinks, never laid a violent hand on me, provides me with everything I need, and gave me two beautiful children to love and hold onto. And whatever he sees in those loose women he visits at The Palace, well it’s nothing that I’ve got or want, so let him have it there, ‘cause he comes back to me for the real love, the kind that keeps a man going.’

“I didn’t understand it that day, though I would, and I eventually came to realize that my mother was right, and that my father was in fact a good and loving man, and that he was worthy of my mother’s devotion despite his weakness in the face of temptation. And, Sarah, I want you to think about John, and all the good he’s done for you and your boys, and realize that what you’ve found out about him isn’t even another woman like it was with my mother, we’re talking pictures here, videos of people he won’t ever meet or talk to. It’s an illusion, Sarah, just a cheap game that men play to feed the hunger inside them; I’ve met John, and I know he’s a good man, you can feel it just in his face. Whatever secrets he holds inside of him don’t mean a thing in comparison to the love he has for you, he doesn’t love his videotapes any more than he does water on an empty stomach, it’s just an unfortunate need of his, and he can’t control it anymore than he can his bloodstream. But it’s you that he loves, Sarah, can you try and understand?”

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Sunday. Rosie had prepared breakfast, eaten a little of it, and gone upstairs to shower and dress for church. Through the bathroom wall she could hear the muffled argument between John and their boys, running late as usual, insolent against the early-hour service as usual. They would be complaining about their tight church pants and the belt and having to tuck in their matching blue dress shirts, both wrinkled from having
been purposefully squashed in their dresser drawers after being washed. She tuned out
the familiar din and turned on the water, shedding her bathrobe. The water was as hot as
she wanted it, and she had soap and shampoo and conditioner to use, and a clean
washcloth. There was a bath towel to dry herself with, and then she had nice clothes to
wear for church. They would sit near the front, the four of them, John beside her. She
would feel the warmth of his presence and know his devotion; others, too, would see it,
and this would lend her self-assurance. Whatever the sermon, they would sit attentively
before its message, or as appearances would at least suggest. There could be a thousand
contradictory thoughts floating within both of their minds, and of course there would be,
for she could not focus for sixty minutes on the Reverend’s words, and there was no
reason to expect that John could either. His mind’s domain, that secret world, belonged
solely to himself, just as hers did to herself.

She turned off the water and reached for the bath towel. Her shower had been
brief, but the bathroom was comfortably steamed. She cleared the mirror, swept her hair
back, and considered her reflection. Her underpants were draped on the toilet tank and
she stepped into them. Behind her, through the wall, John’s footsteps entered their
bedroom and clumped to the bathroom door. He rapped twice.

“I’m just about done in here,” she said.

“I left my tie in there, would you mind passing it to me?” He turned the door
handle; it was locked, she had not been able to help herself.

She turned to the door and clicked the lock open. For a moment, she did not
touch the handle, keeping the two within inches but no closer. This was her husband, she
had to remember that. They belonged to one another, the good parts and the bad. She
could not expect to ever fully understand him, just as he was not ever to know all of her parts, Lynne was right about that. Rosie opened the door.
Commencement

We were at a booth, Martin, Jason, and I. When we started out, we were hitting the actual bar, but it was late and we were tired, Martin, Jason, and I.

Jason was to my left, Martin across. I was trapped against the corner. Above us, soft circles of orange hummed at regular intervals, glinting warmly off of our beer bottles. A familiar human vibration filled the room, not quite a crowd. The walls were paneled and dirty, and when my right arm glanced against wood, dry flecks of something would trail onto my skin. It’s a clean place, The Smoke, but the walls were dirty just the same.

Jason was cackling. “The thing about it, the thing about it—” he would begin, and then disintegrate into shards of brittle laughter. He was drunk. I was drunk. Martin might have been too, but it’s hard to tell with him. He was staring at Jason with a deadpan look, evidently not getting the point of whatever joke or anecdote Jason was trying to get out.

“What I mean to say, I mean, is that it’s always the small things, you know? Like, you’ll end up remembering these fucking napkin dispensers or the time you heard some new word for the first time, but you’ll have no clue what your friends’ faces were or even what your major was if it wasn’t embossed into your fucking diploma! You get it, you know what I mean?”

“Sure,” I said. “I know what you mean; it’s always like that, yeah? We don’t get to choose, or anything.” I had a coaster and was circling its edge with my fingernails, working up a nice little crease.
“I mean, it’s just weird, that’s all. There’s such a sense of *immediacy* here. Everything I see is just so familiar, it’s like I don’t even have to be looking at it to see it, yeah? And it’s just going to turn into shadows, you know? And maybe not even that.” It was hard to make out what Jason was saying; he was speaking more rapidly than usual.

“Shadows,” Martin said with that dark voice of his. He had a bit left in his bottle and he swayed it back and forth so that the beer silently bucked up each side of the glass.

“Here’s an example,” Jason started up again. “I had this guy I knew back in grade school, best friends for life, yeah?” Pausing for emphasis, Jason sipped his beer and coughed a little as some of the sharp liquid cut at his throat. “And now, ten, eleven years later, I can’t even tell you his last name, get it? Greg…Tomkins? Tom-something, I hope—I *think*, I mean.”

Martin spoke: “Right, shadows.” At the bar, a group of graying townies erupted into rough laughter at something.

“I think we should cut this shit out and get another round,” I said. “Not even that late yet.” I fingered the waitress to our table. She had a stud through her navel and a bolt of flame bounced from the metal to my eyes as she approached.

Drinks ordered, Jason had more to say. “It’s not like I even *regret* having built up something as temporary as this. I just can’t fathom—”

“Let’s talk about something else.” I looked over at Martin before realizing that I had said it. A lot can slip out if you’re not careful.

“Something else,” Martin rasped, agreeing. There was wary silence.

“Fuck, I’m sorry, guys. Can’t just turn this last night into some bitch-fest. This isn’t Philosophical Half-Assedness One-Oh-One, is it?” Jason giggled at something
clever he had just said. The waitress was back and Jason directed the tail end of his laughter towards her. Unsmiling, she gave us beers and a dollar-amount.

Jason pulled out his wallet in proud showmanship and threw a fistful of money at the girl. “Change’s a tip, honey. Buy something nice, yeah?” Jason started up his laugh again. Like a choked vacuum just before the grind.

She glared him into retreat, but scooped up the money regardless. Jason not-covertly peeked at her retreating black-denim buttocks. “Fucking cunt, what kind of job she think she’s holding down? I come back here in five years, let’s see her treat me like that.”

He threw back an inch of beer for something to do and added, “I was just kidding, anyway, it was just—”

“—the epitaph of a feeling,” Martin finished for him in the vaulted voice he used when quoting something famous. He had one of those grand majors, I remember, Philosophy or English or something arrogant like that.

“Stories,” I stated before anyone got a chance to talk. “Who’s got a story to tell? There’s gotta be some good ones we haven’t heard yet. Won’t get a chance to tell them any later, get ‘em out while you still can.”

Jason’s face lit up, but Martin was on it with uncharacteristic swiftness. “I can remember.” Martin paused, thinking. He’s not one for dramatic effect. “When my Dad taught me how to drive. We start out in the big empty parking lot near the county fairgrounds until I get used to the clutch. It takes me a few tries, but I start to feel it real nice pretty quickly, I’m a natural. So once I get that, we circle the lot quite a few times, let me shift from first to second to third, then downshift on the turns. Pull figure eights
around the light poles, just totally smooth, my first time at it. And Dad’s just proud as hell, I’d never seen anything like it, like I was writing symphonies on the weekends or something. Smiling and everything, not saying a word. And he’s proud enough of me that he just keeps on smiling and then after a bit asks if I want to take the car out onto the road, maybe fill the tank for the ride home.”

“Hey, this is a great fucking story, man—”

Martin didn’t stop his speech in the slightest, just let Jason’s words melt under his own. “So I leave the parking lot, and drive us down to the gas station. Traffic’s light, and I’m doing just fine, using my turn signals and checking my mirrors and all that. We get to the Shell and I pull into the slot just perfectly, parallel to the pump and aligned just right so that my door opens into clear air. And Dad’s grinning at me the whole time, just proud as you can imagine, almost excited even. He gives me his credit card, doesn’t even take off his seatbelt, and says ‘Fill ‘er up, Ace.’ Not like he ever called me ‘Ace’ before, but at that point it worked.”

Martin stopped then and took the first drink out of his new bottle. At the bar, the townies were at it again, chortling over some drunken nothing.

Jason dared to open his mouth again, but Martin resumed his story with precision. “I fill up the tank, and as the nozzle is hissing gasoline into the wagon, I even take out the squeegee from its little yellow bucket and flip up the wipers to clean the windshield. And I can see Dad through the window gazing at me and I can just feel his pride through the streaks of soapy gray water that I’m laying down. So we finish up at the station and I get back in the driver’s seat, and we head back home. And now I’m actually distracted,
because Dad’s love is just *choking* the inside of the car, it’s kind of terrible. That’s not really what I mean, but...”

Martin trailed off, staring at his beer. He rotated the bottle along its bottom edge, circling a mark over the glossed tabletop. “Anyway,” Jason prompted. He was not smiling, and I knew that he too saw what was coming.

“Anyway, so just as we reach the last big intersection before the turnoff home, I’m too slow with the brakes and slam our wagon into the back of this massive pickup truck that’s waiting at the red light. I was slowing down, so it was just a little dent in the guy’s bumper, but the guy jumps out of the cab immediately. Like he’s been waiting for me. Dad says, ‘Stay here,’ and gets out of the car calmly, walks around to the guy. He explains how I’m just a kid and that this is my first time out on the road and that they should both pull into the next parking lot so that they can figure out insurance and stuff like that. But this guy—and he’s a monster of a man, exactly the kind that drives a truck like that—keeps interrupting him with all these obscenities and threats and stuff, just screaming at him so that the sinews on his neck are bulging out against his blistered red skin like roots or something. By now, the light’s changed, and we’re making a scene. And my Dad’s scared, you can tell, I mean really. He’s not shrinking back or anything, but he’s stammering his words and not even daring to make eye contact with this fucker. Horns blare from all around, and I can’t hear everything that’s being said, but eventually I hear the words ‘this little faggot you’ve got here’ and he points through the windshield at me with a finger the size of a sausage. And I’m scared for my father now; I don’t know what he’s going to do.”
Martin took another drink. “I’m not sure what I was expecting to happen, but I know that it didn’t. Dad just pretends to stare at the hood of the wagon. Runs his fingers along the dented fender and takes out his checkbook. And all around us I can hear the hysterics, the traffic. It was plenty loud by then.”

Something shattered at the far end of the bar and a hail of laughing profanity showered the room. Martin flinched a bit, but tossed back what was left of his beer to cover it. He upended his empty bottle on the table and let it balance like that, weak suds spreading out in an uneven ring. Jason pretended to bite at something on his thumbnail. It was evident that Martin saw this as his conclusion.

(I had met Martin’s parents for the first time earlier that day, they had flown in with for our commencement ceremony. I had shaken his father’s hand, joked around. I distinctly remember summoning his face then, in the bar, but I can no longer see him.)

I spoke up, I couldn’t help myself. “What happened then? Martin?”

“Nothing. We switched seats and Dad drove us home. I don’t think he told my mother, no. About what he said, I mean. He had to tell her about the accident, of course…”

He trailed off like that, like he was losing interest.

(I had actually experienced something similar to what Martin had related, also with my father, and in the face of similar antagonism, though at a younger and weaker age. Leaving a baseball game, with my parents and younger brother, a group of lowlifes huddled around an open cooler in the dim asphalt evening. “Shame t’see a piece like that go to waste,” one had spit, and though I was too green to understand his words, their significance could not go under; the men’s laughter chewed at my stomach. “Ignore
them,“ my father had said, and we could not, so that the ride home was silence, my head a terrified confusion, with only the words “But she is our mother” emerging from time to time, and at other times to come.)

Betrayal and its pain, that was the point of Martin’s story. It was what he was trying to expose, and he had succeeded, it was only up to us to take it in our hands, to show it back to him so that he could see our understanding. The simplest thing, but a challenge unmet.

I don’t mind saying that I was grateful when our waitress showed up and asked us if we wanted another drink. Just so somebody would say something.

Jason was on it, real excited as if he had something to make up. He asked the girl for six beers and three shots of something expensive, vodka I think. “Big tip in it for you again, honey,” he said when he finished the order, but she didn’t react this time, just slid over to the bar to get our drinks.

When they arrived, we were more at ease, though conversation had not resumed since Martin’s vulnerability. He had closed, and it was this closing that set us at ease, plugged the pressure back inside so that we could breathe.

“Here we go,” Jason said. He hoisted his beer high in the air, a toast ready. “Fuck life in the ass, gentlemen, it’s the only way she deserves it,” he yelped in forced triumph. I wanted to slap him then, but what right did I have? What had I said or done that was anything nobler? We clinked bottles and my skin vibrated with a frantic chill after only a sip; it gets like that when I’ve had too much to drink sometimes. The shot glasses sat forgotten, invited to the party but drawing no attention.
“Okay, I’ve got one,” Jason said. “A couple of months ago, I was drinking over at Bryce’s apartment, and a bunch of people started dropping by, including this chick with—get this—a glass eye. So she’s not all that bad-looking, you know, except for the eye—hey, get it, bad-looking?—and as the night gets on…”

I had heard this story before, though not from Jason. Someone else had told it to me, though it had occurred at a different apartment on a different night, maybe on a different planet. It begins improbably and ends obscenely, a tall tale that gets thrown around against boredom. Jason spoke with desperate overconfidence, a tone that I would have known to support a lie no matter the story. I phased out.

He finished and the three of us laughed in an even way that wouldn’t have convinced anyone. Jason was ashamed.

“Fuck the story-idea, alright?” Jason looked at me with some kind of accusation. “I think we’re all storied out for tonight, Gabe. But I should say something, you know, now that we’re almost done and all.”

Gabriel: my name, by the way.

“I’m just sorry, is what I mean to say.” Jason seemed sober then, articulate. “I’m real glad that you guys, you know, put up with me. I guess that’s what I mean to say. I know that we don’t have anything in common, really, but…”

Martin interrupted, flinging the three as-yet-unnoticed shots down his throat in frantic swallows. A couple of guys at another table—younger kids from our school, I recognized them—hooted their approval. Jason laughed and reached over to give Martin a clap on the shoulder. Martin didn’t respond and violently wrenched open his second
beer. I averted my eyes from the scabs of flesh that he had stripped off on the bottle cap’s harsh edges.

Jason didn’t resume the speech he had started, he looked almost relieved as he nuzzled his beer to completion. I was quite drunk by then and I wanted to touch him, both of them. I wanted to give something for once.

Instead, I spoke. “I’m with Martin on this one, man. Fuck sentimentality and such. Let’s finish these drinks and get our asses to bed. Big day tomorrow. And the day after that, I hope.”

We drank our beers until the orange lights showed through the bottle bottoms like blurry stars. Martin finished ahead of Jason and me. He sat tacit, tearing a paper napkin into strips, now he was drunk, I’m sure of it.

The bar had emptied out without my having noticed. The bartenders had turned on the last-call lights and our waitress was collecting discarded drinks on a tray and wiping down the tables. We got up and stumbled to the door. When you drink sitting down, walking can be frightening. It was cold outside and none of us had brought jackets. We wove our way through the familiar downtown streets, none of us speaking, our skin sweating alcohol and absorbing cold. The sidewalks were strangely empty, and no cars passed. Occasionally an engine rumbled in the distance, but that’s it. No voices, no nighttime clamor; it was late.

Jason wordlessly ducked into an alley for a piss. I followed him and leaned my head and shoulders against his back as he finished. Before he could check his balance, the two of us collapsed to the cement. Jason gave a mock shriek and kicked himself
away from where he had been urinating. We helped each other up, laughing and cursing at each other.

“If you wanted to have a quickie in the alley, you could have just told me. At least waited for me to put some lipstick on.”

“Martin, man, you want in on this action?” I laughed and turned to the opening of the alley; he had slipped away, or perhaps he had never stopped in the first place.

“Where’d he go off to?” Jason’s voice was slurring, a combination of beers and exhaustion. He began blinking frantically. “Shit, man, I lost a lens.”

“We’ll find it.” And for a few minutes, we tried, standing on bent legs, motionless, swiveling our heads in a vain attempt to locate the lens in the shadows of the alley.

“This is pointless, man, we’re not finding shit here. Especially not now.” Jason moved towards the street. I remained.

“Come on, Gre—Gabe, I gotta whole fucking crate of them at home, let’s get on.”

“Just a little longer, man, I can find it.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me, man, there’s no way you’re going to find it in the dark, and I don’t even want it back in my eye if you do.”

I didn’t say anything, and after a few more minutes of searching, I found that he too had slipped away. I stayed: I could have been there for hours, I don’t remember. I searched methodically, peered across every surface, exercised every measure of caution so as not to catch the thing under my boot. The lens was the size of a dime, transparent, an impossible find given the circumstances, but I wanted it. I wanted to bring it back to
him, show him that I had cared enough, that I was stubborn enough. I wanted to hear his incredulous laughter, his gratitude.

But, of course, I did not. It was the size of a dime and without the sheen. It took me a while, but I did give up, and it was getting light as I neared our apartment, what I no longer saw as home. That’s how it ended, with the three of us walking back alone, together—alone, though; that’s what I meant.