

n0+ Day

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huh?

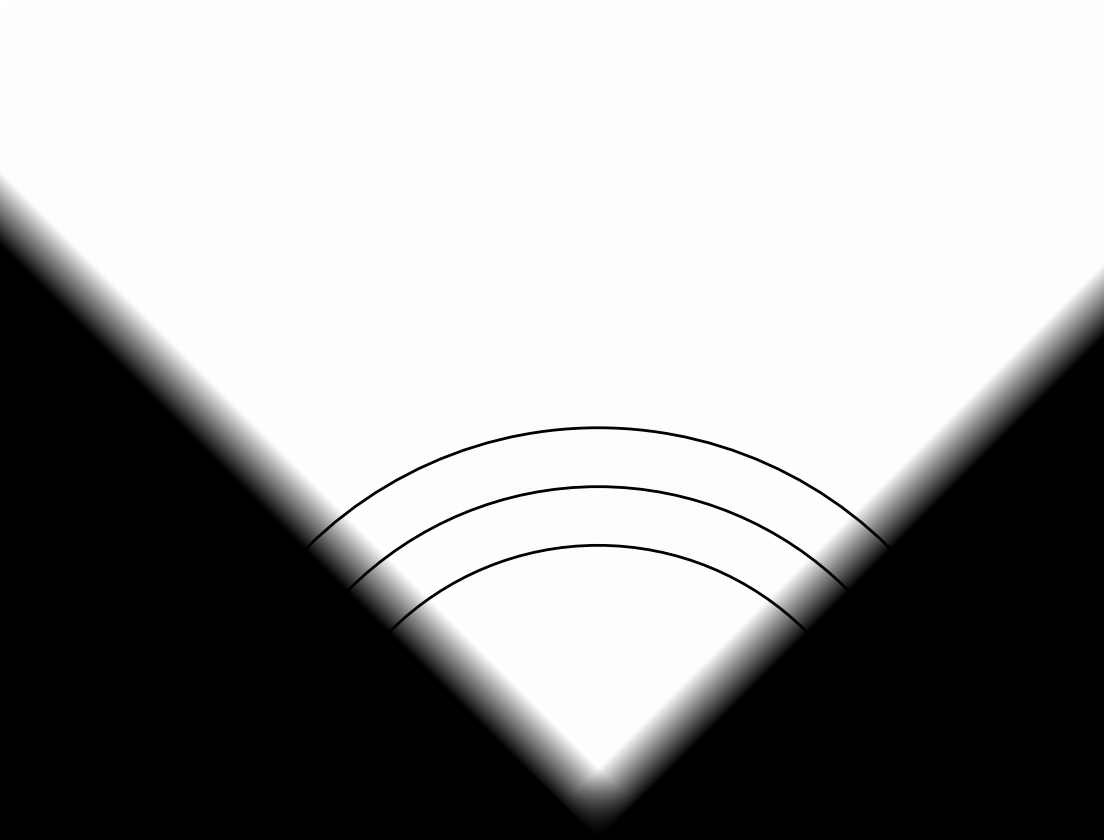
*Here you go, C —
(conveniently ambiguous, you may disclaim!)
apologies for the delay
it wasn't supposed to be this long*

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over

...life without a timepiece...

It was evening already when Knightra Freozone slumped onto a stool and lit a smoke, the sun having fallen behind the horizon as if an inertial component of a celestial flywheel, igniting the sky in farewell before acceding to its interim replacement by the now pervasive darkness. She couldn't see any of this, the bar being windowless, but she'd witnessed it enough times to know what to expect. Actually, since she and the band had arrived and unloaded the gear before sunset, it was possible that her sense of time's passage was skewed and that the sun was still visible and that the city right then was aglow with red-orange atmospheric fire. Or that they were deeper into the night than she thought, the moon already risen bright and blank to challenge the delicate sparkle of the stars. She looked around — there was no clock that she could see, though to be honest if she knew the hour she still wouldn't know what it looked like outside. She had stopped wearing a watch ages ago, stopped trying to measure time. It seemed the proper way to resist its rigid schedule, to avoid succumbing to its routine, to becoming a bore.

Knightra took a drag and let her arm fall to her side, tired from moving equipment. Next time she'd let the boys do all the lifting. She was out of shape and there was nothing she could do about that now. She looked at the stage and over the dance floor and down the bar. There were a few groups of people huddled together, a couple loners. Nobody she knew. Not very auspicious. Generic pop music was playing over the speakers, filling the air with a familiar, catchy melody. It wasn't bad, but it felt like she'd heard the same song thousands of times even though she barely listened to the radio anymore. To take her mind off of it, Knightra tried to visualize how the bar was oriented and where the moon would be, though she really had no idea where it would rise, just an instinct. She turned to face the direction she

settled on, staring at a wall she had helped plaster with Wound Helix posters. Through the irregular array of stylized, tensed coils, she could almost see a white backlight, frozen in its gibbous phase.

‘Admiring your handiwork?’

She looked back to see Mohst Chard, proprietor of Crag Rock, leaning on the bar, eyes bunched up in their typical half-wink, half-squint.

‘No, just looking at the moon,’ Knightra said, realizing how dumb it sounded only after she’d said it.

‘Is that some sort of astrology thing?’ Mohst said with a chuckle, his eyes squeezed almost shut. ‘It’s not up yet, but when it is it’ll be over there.’

‘Hmmm,’ she said, trying not to seem rude while she avoided looking where he was pointing, not wanting to further fix the clockwork of the world into her brain. She gazed up in a vague direction. ‘What’s with the music?’

‘What, you don’t like it?’

‘It’s not really a good fit for the band, is it?’

‘I want people to come in, not run away. Lure them in with honey before they get pummeled with shit.’

‘Hey, come one.’

‘Aww, just kidding. I’m sure you guys got a lot better, though I wish you’d changed your name.’ He stood up and scanned the mostly empty venue. ‘Kids sometimes have quite a memory for bad experiences.’

‘Tell me about it.’ Knightra was beginning to feel a knot in her belly. All day she’d worried about them choking in front of a packed crowd again, but having no audience seemed even worse. She wondered how long before they went on.

‘Don’t worry — play loud and good and they won’t even pay attention to what you call yourselves. They might even start to remember that first show as being great.’ Mohst pulled out a bottle and poured her a shot. ‘You guys have a chance to rewrite history.’

She knocked back the drink. ‘You know I’m not in the band anymore.’

He shrugged his shoulders and winked a little harder and poured her another. Someone was waving him down and before he left Mohst tapped his head then pointed at hers.

‘Love the hair.’

There was a thump and Knightra spun around to see Sitskate sitting at the drums, making adjustments. He glanced up and saw her and she smiled and he looked away. His hands were restless, moving more than necessary. He changed the position of his seat and began to lightly tap out a beat on the bass drum.

boom booboom boom boom boom — boom boom boom booboom boom

To everyone else — however few there were — it probably sounded like nervous fidgeting. But Knightra knew the song and she couldn’t help but

start to lose herself into it, playing it back in her mind while she focused on the freshly painted drum, a bleeding spiral rippling with the rhythm. The pop music dissipated and the rest of the instruments faded in, bass and guitar and most of all keyboards, a swirling, propulsive energy that swept her away.

The first time Knightra heard the beat she was working on some origami from a book she got at the library. Using sheets of writing paper cut down to squares she had made a couple dozen inflatable cubes and was stacking them into various pyramidal configurations when Sitskate sat down and started to play. It was pretty loose but even if he'd had it cold it would have agitated her. She had no feel for it, didn't hear the music, couldn't catch the groove. She sensed a structure, but it seemed organized to fall away from pleasure rather than into it. She gave Sitskate one of her 'it's not working' looks and shook her head. He countered with a nod.

'This is the beat for *90-8*,' he said. 'Me and Pwrewewt worked it out earlier.' He began to sing a melody. It was out of tune and halting, and Knightra had no idea what song he was referring to.

'You're going to give me a headache,' she said.

Sitskate hit a cymbal and stopped. Staring at her, he began to twirl the drumsticks in his fingers, fast and perfect mirror images of one another. He kept it up until she looked away and then he did a showy fill before falling into the beat again, louder. She thought about leaving but didn't want to give him the satisfaction. So she stayed, working on little animals to adorn the steps of her structure. She focused and tuned him out but well before she had finished her menagerie Knightra found that she was nodding along and folding to his rhythm.

The song continued. Qwail's singing entered. Her memories moved ahead to when she heard them all play with the new beat. It instantly made sense: the melody she hadn't recognized, how everything meshed and complemented one another. The awkwardness became something natural and true. Knightra was doing paper airplanes at this point, the change a result of an old creep who was collecting all of the origami books at the library each morning and trying to use them to bribe her back to his place. While *90-8* was being played for the tenth or twentieth time she had her most perfect flight ever, launching a beautifully folded plane out into the loft where it rose up high and then glided a long curve twice around the band before straightening its course to come right at her. The frontal attack was a surprise and she grabbed at it and in the process crushed it into unworthiness. She was never able to match that feat again, or anything close to it, and the next day abandoned paper folding and took up sketching.

* * *

Sitskate had gone backstage but Knightra's mind was still consumed with the song. A few more people had filed in and while she glanced around bobbing her head and tapping her knees and puffing hands-free on her cigarette a few of them looked at her with bemusement, probably wondering how she was so into whatever it was they were hearing. She knew the feeling, she'd felt the same way when she first heard the band play. It was in the loft and she couldn't find anything musical in the racket they were making, yet despite this the members were all bouncing and jumping around and thrusting towards one another with unmotivated choreography, as if moved by a cryptosonic melody only they were attuned to. Mt8 — who she knew from class and was going by Gohdand back then — had brought her up probably to impress her despite having no chance romantically, and although she couldn't make sense of the noise she understood their energy immediately and was soon bouncing and jumping amongst them and at some point started playing an electronic keyboard that was set up but unmanned. She didn't know what she was doing and nobody seemed to care. That was how she came to be part of the band, before they were Wound Helix, before they had changed their names or Sitskate had replaced Viix or they settled down and actually tried to make songs. Before the loops.

It didn't seem like long after then that the loops had started, though Knightra wasn't exactly sure. She knew Sitskate came after, as did the band name, however she had lost her ability to locate events on an absolute timeline. It was all small pockets of relative causality, events that made sense in their local influence but which resisted placement in some grander scheme. And even then, connections within her memories may just have been mental tricks, correlated thematically or intuitively or by happenstance, finding consecutiveness in things which were just as likely temporally distinct, establishing cause-and-effect relationships where there might be none. Knightra understood this not from direct experience but as a feeling, an anxiety that pervaded her sense of her own history. Though she remembered distinct moments as truth, the veracity of their entire structure was clouded by doubt. There was always a nagging belief that a jumble that did not cohere was inherently bad, that its incompleteness or inconsistency made it objectively flawed. However that was just a product of her expectations, born out of a life and mind trained for a different world. Nowadays everything was shrunk down, existence had become smaller, more focused, detached from its place in the universe. She had learned to embrace moments and avoid engaging with the big puzzle which was likely unsolvable or not worth the effort. An individual piece might be misunderstood or never quite fit, yet within its own self-logic she could find a little space of enjoyment and meaning. Trying or expecting anything more would leave her frustrated or, if she wasn't careful, feeling on the edge of a terrifying apprehension.

Knightra didn't even know when the repeating started. Or, to be more precise, how many days she had started over before she was aware of it. Now it seemed obvious, but at the time it was easy to miss. This was the first of her two days off, her weekend, and tomorrow would feel the same as the day before it. She probably spent the entire first day sleeping in and putzing around her apartment. The next was likely spent in the loft. Maybe that was the day that Mt8 had explained it, or maybe it was a few repeats after that. At some point she went back to work and in her memory she knew, but if she knew why would she go back? Her roommate Pertt mostly stayed at her boyfriend's and that was where she started so Knightra hardly ever saw her. Pertt might have been the first evidence of the cycling that Knightra had observed — appearing one night to finish off a carton of ice cream before conking out only to be gone in the morning and the carton returned to the freezer unfinished — but she probably didn't realize it then. Or maybe she already knew and it was merely confirmation. She didn't know, and it didn't matter.

Not much about the past mattered when the same day was playing over again and again. She'd close her eyes and fall asleep and then, it seemed almost instantaneously, she was back waking up in her bed, back to just after noon on that same day. It was always the same. It didn't matter if she went with a guy to his place or took him to hers. Passed out in a bar or slept in the loft. Trashed her place or cleaned it up. Wore a different nightshirt or nothing at all. Pierced her lip or got a tattoo or shaved her head. She'd still wake up in the same bed, in the same clothes, the room the same, her body the same. She even had an inkling that her dreams were the same. The only thing that changed was her memory, each morning imprinted with another day's record, eventually all those experiences and similarities and differences backing up and blending and unsorting because they could not be contained. She had no way to forget, not intentionally. She had to let her mind work it out. She had to live with it.

Nobody had an explanation for why it was happening. They called it a time loop, the repeating, cycles, reset. It was happening for everybody. Every person in the whole world reliving the same day. And the strangest part was that upon sleeping you didn't just return to a new loop but also continued in the current one. It was the same you, with the same memories and personality and scars from that day. You could wake and eat and talk and everything else. The only difference was you would remember none of it. It was like you had bifurcated, splitting off a clone of yourself that would retain no connection to your thread of reality, existing solely for the benefit of those who themselves had yet to cleave off back to the start. Because they alone were still retaining memories of the loop, only these people who hadn't yet fallen asleep could tell you what you — or, rather, your amnesic twin —

actually did. Knightra had heard plenty of stories about herself, only some of which she believed (or wanted to believe). She herself had her own stories to tell about others, often embellished, though usually the embellishment became indistinguishable from fact after a few loops. Pwrewewt said that because of this the only thing that really mattered was the time you spent between waking and that first sleep. ‘Everything else was no better than a lie.’ He claimed that since it seemed this was going to last forever, those who stayed up the longest could get the most out of life, progress the furthest.

‘Eventually we’ll become gods, while those of you who’ve wasted half the day sleeping in will be left behind.’

‘It just means I can stay up later,’ she replied. ‘It’ll all work out the same.’

‘How often does that happen, sleepyhead? At the rate you’re going you won’t even be a witch.’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Mt8 interjected, ‘an eternity measuring contest makes no sense.’

‘Whose side are you on? You’re usually awake longer than me. I’m making you a deity.’

Mt8 was noodling his bass, not seeming to pay attention. ‘What’s infinity plus infinity?’ he said.

‘I don’t know, a bigger infinity?’

‘Running twice as hard to go the same distance,’ said Mt8. Knightra could just barely see his grin. ‘Can’t or won’t stop? To count reals or the nulls? Who’ll need a day of rest first?’

The bar was beginning to fill. In Knightra’s mind the song was looping back on itself, the vibe and melody changed but the beat steady, returning to the sound of the start, signalling a repetition before heading off in a different, unexpected direction. She put back another shot and chased it with beer. She twisted back and forth in the barstool, looked down at her palm, ran a finger along the creases. Lines that wouldn’t change, tracing paths that never finished. What was real: matter or perception? Was she younger than she remembered? Did lost time endure? Was it as inscrutable as someone else’s thoughts? She took another drink and continued to twist to the music in her head.

‘Hey there, space cadet.’

Knightra zoned back in and saw Leath standing in front of her, leaning forward to try and catch her attention. *90-8*, already well into its second go-around in-between her ears as if playing on a tape deck with endless auto-reverse, receded into a holding pattern, not quite disappeared, present enough to keep the pop at bay. Behind Leath a decent crowd was dancing.

‘Hello? Earth to Knightra?’

She acknowledged him with a smile and finished her beer, waving a hand at Mohst. Leath straightened up into less of a slouch and pushed in to the bar. He stared at her while she waited for the barkeep, slightly rocking his head, an action of confidence or nervousness or just having a good time. Knightra eyed him curiously. She hadn't seen him for quite a while and he seemed...older? Obviously that wasn't possible, but he had somehow lost the air of high school desperation. She looked him over but couldn't figure out what was different. Bright shirt, no tie. Acid-washed jeans. Hair swooped back and floated down near one eye. Was he wearing eyeliner? He seemed embarrassed by her gaze and looked away briefly before leaning in suddenly and pointing.

'Your hair looks great. Red and green — does it stand for something?'

She shook her head and just then Mohst showed up and they ordered drinks.

'Why aren't you backstage with the band? You're still playing tonight, right?'

She nodded. 'Yup, they are. I'm not in the band anymore, though.'

'Oh.' Leath looked unsure how to react.

'It's nothing bad. I just had other interests. I was holding them back anyway.'

Leath seemed even less sure how to respond and took a big drink from his beer. While it was still tilted back he tapped on her hand and held up a finger. 'Mmmm!' He swallowed, then continued: 'I gotta tell you this new joke I heard:

'A man and his son are stranded on a deserted island. One evening they are walking the beach when the father spots an old bottle washed up by the waves. He picks it up and brushes off the sand and the cork suddenly pops out along with a cloud of smoke and floating in front of them is a big green genie.

"Thank you master for releasing me," says the genie. "In return I will grant you three wishes."

"Oooh, pops," says the boy, "we can finally go home!"

"Calm down son, let's not get ahead of ourselves. We've been living off of coconut and rainwater for months and I could really go for a nice meal. Now, I love your mother more than anything in the world and I'm desperately looking forward to seeing her, but you know what her cooking's like and how she'll act if we ask for magic boy here to be the chef for our welcome home feast instead of her. So, what do you say we ask for a nice dinner with steak and lobster and the works and we can enjoy it here before we go back?"

'The boy's stomach is growling like crazy and he barely thinks about it for a second before he agrees so his father makes the wish and with a flash the genie whips up a delicious meal, steak and lobster and the works. There

is even wine and the father lets the kid have some and by the end they are both stuffed and kinda tipsy.

“That was great pops,” says the boy. “Should we ask to go back now?”

“Calm down son, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. You’re getting to the age where you are probably starting to think about women and I want to make sure your first time is something special. Now, I love your mother more than anything in the world and I’m desperately looking forward to seeing her, but she would definitely throw a fit if she had even the slightest hint that I was trying to usher you into manhood. Also, and this is just between us men, she isn’t quite the woman she was when I married her, if you know what I mean. So, what do you say we ask for a couple of beautiful women to show us a good time before we head back?”

The boy is a little apprehensive but eventually agrees and the man makes the wish and with a flash the genie whips up two gorgeous women who give the man and his son the screw of their lives. When it’s all over they’re leaning against a coconut tree, the two ladies snuggling up to them completely naked, the man and the boy glowing with satisfaction. The father knows his son probably would have been happy with a sopping conch shell but the older man’s had his share of women and realizes what a special experience it was.

“Hope you had a good time, son,” he says proudly.

The boy doesn’t have the words to describe how great he feels. After the last few months of misery and really an entire life which he now realizes he was nothing but a child, he couldn’t have fathomed that he would ever experience such amazing pleasure. He is a bit woozy from the wine and the woman and he stares out over the moonlit ocean which he’s seen a hundred times and always seemed huge and frightening but now is a vision of infinite beauty. “It was incredible, pops,” is all he is able to muster.

“You know,” says the man, also gazing out over the ocean, “when you’re my age you are going to remember this as the greatest night of your life. I know I will. Now, I love your mother more than anything in the world and I’m desperately looking forward to seeing her, but I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that I wouldn’t complain if this night lasted forever.”

“Yeah,” says the boy dreamily, “I wish.”

Flash! A man and his son are stranded on a deserted island. That evening they are walking the beach when the father spots an old bottle washed up by the waves...’

Knightra laughed genuinely then motioned for him to come closer. She whispered into his ear: ‘It’s better without the flash.’

She rubbed then tapped his arm and got up. ‘I better go freshen up,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to miss the start.’ She walked off into the crowd, weaving through the dancers as she made her way to the bathroom.

She'd made the joke up when she was working on comedy, something which didn't last long as it turned out she wasn't as funny as she thought she was and never got the nerve to try her act on stage, at least that she could remember. It didn't help that her only audience was the band and that they had heard the same jokes over and over so many times that by the time she started to hone in on the humor the premise was worn out and the punch line spoiled and the whole thing fell flat. Sometime after she'd moved on from the comedy thing she started to hear that one joke, clearly hers though it had evolved from its original form as it passed from one telling to another (changing the characters to father/son was a nice improvement). She never once heard it ascribed to her and wasn't even sure how it got out, though she had her suspicions (herself or Sitskate the most likely candidates). Even now, hearing Leath tell it left her feeling uneasy, as if fragments of her private self had been released to the public, offering validation but also doubt and inadequacy and the worry that the breach was larger than she knew, that just beyond her ignorance exposed embarrassments were being passed for all to see.

In the bathroom there were a couple of girls talking loudly and doing their makeup and stretching open their shirts. While in the stall Knightra tried to let *90-8* return to the foreground, except her head was swimming and it could no longer push away the sounds around her, the song instead merging with the chittering girls and nebulous bass that was leaking into the space, transforming it into a pop-gossip remix. It still sounded great and while she was washing her hands and checking her hair one of the girls might have said something to her but she didn't notice. On the way out Knightra didn't walk, she swaggered, and back on the floor she slid around the perimeter and up to the front of the stage, watching everyone move to a skewed beat, feeling superior for her private music.

She positioned herself behind a large couple so that hopefully she wouldn't be noticed and her reverie broken. Perhaps she'd feel like talking to Leath later. Around her the room was filled not just with teens and college-aged kids but also thirtysomethings and the middle-aged and even prepubescents. Many of the younger crowd were dressed fashionably and the yuppies looked good in their suits but at least a third of the dancers were wearing sweats or other dumpy clothes they should have been embarrassed by. One lady was spinning around in a poodle skirt with saddle shoes in her hands like she was at a sockhop. The only groups seemingly absent were geriatrics and babies, as if being at the edges of life excluded them from this moment of eternity.

The lights flickered and then everything went black. There were screams and whistles and someone yelled 'Oh no not again!' but a couple seconds later the lights came back on. Everybody went back to dancing and Knightra

thought back to the time she'd first heard *90-8* played, during the real power outages. Up in the loft, surrounded by candles and huddled together under blankets, playing cards and ruminating on the end of the world. Pwrewewt got a guitar and began to strum it. Without an amplifier it sounded thin but the song was there and it was big, big from beginning, drawing everyone closer and away from the darkness, as if the new melody discovered in the candlelight a previously unknown warmth and freedom.

Somebody pushed into Knightra and she looked over to see a girl she recognized but whose name she didn't know. The girl said something but Knightra couldn't hear so she just smiled and the girl smiled back and mussed her own hair and headed out to dance.

The energy in the room was palpable. Lights swept and flashed, the dancers swirled and shook and moved closer. The air was hot and smokey. This was a place to be. Free drinks, free music. Up and down the street the bars had settled into different strategies. Some were running on belief, still expecting money and whining futilely that society would collapse if its basic principles were abandoned. The fanciest and seediest places traded in escrow. Crag Rock was one of the spots that didn't charge anything, caring less about who was there than what was going on. Mohst loved live music and thought the allure of gratis provided good crowds for the local bands he booked. In truth, the meaning of free decayed pretty quickly and the audience began to self-filter based on whether or not they were interested in the scene that Mohst was promoting. On the other hand, it helped keep down the unruliness, as the troublemakers ended up gravitating to the more popular and wanton disco dancehalls, punk pits, and jukebox beer joints.

Knightra slipped off her jacket and tossed it into a corner on stage. In the back she saw Pwrewewt's head sticking out, looking around solemnly. She tried to get his attention but he didn't see her and the song that was playing finished and he disappeared. Behind her she could feel the air still as the dancers stopped and waited for the music to start up again. Her head drifted into silence as well, anticipating. The people began to chant and stomp, a simple one beat refrain, an indiscernible word, a call for attention: *chump chump chump*. Suddenly a huge lout hopped onstage and thumped his feet and beat his chest and leaned back and roared. His shirt pulled up and from Knightra's perspective all she could see was a big hairy belly supported by a pair of massive legs. She heard glass break and the man's head came into view, dark streaks running down the side from his forehead. He was holding a broken beer bottle and he began to saw at his other hand with it. Arcs of blood fountained out as he continued to jam and slice at himself. Then, with a deeper, mightier roar, he threw the bottle away, lifted both hands high above his head, and let them drop, ripping off his thumb in the process. He

held out his two fists as if asking the audience to choose and those beneath him surged away to escape the spurting blood, pressing Knightra backwards. Just then a woman, similarly large, and a more average-sized man rushed onto the stage. The woman tore off her shirt, leaving herself bare-chested, and wrapped it around the gushing hand. She and the smaller man tried to pull the lout off but he resisted so she reared back and punched him in the face. The big man stood dumbfounded for a second before looking out, shrugging, dropping the thumb, and strutting off with his bleeding hand over the woman's shoulder. As they left, the woman pumped her free hand and let out her own roar, her boobs bouncing wildly. The audience roared in return. The other man remained at the middle of the stage and picked up the severed digit and tossed it out into the crowd, causing an oblong void to quickly open in the mass of people. He then turned around and mooned everyone before sprinting off after his giant companions.

At first the crowd was buzzing and laughing and recounting to each other what they just saw. Soon, however, the void healed itself and the thumb kicked away and forgotten and they were back to stomping and shouting. Self-mutilation just wasn't as impressive as it used to be. All one needed to do was to handle pain — which alcohol was a good cure for — and if things got really bad the worst that usually happened was you passed out. They had seen it all before, probably even had their own experiences.

There was the time when Knightra was learning to ride a skateboard, coasting around the loft on Qwail's board while the band practiced. She got pretty good, able to balance and push and turn even though her body always felt a bit ungainly. Then one day Qwail was showing off and ollied over a stack of books and for the next half-day she tried to learn how to do it herself until she took a misstep and broke her ankle, a crack loud enough that the band immediately stopped playing. She remembered it feeling like her foot had exploded and Qwail gave her something which knocked her out and nobody would tell her what happened after that. Other than the strange discontinuity of seeing her foot flopped back unnatural and useless then immediately returned to normal — the injury's inconsequentiality shifting its memory from something real to legend — it was no big deal. She even kept at the skateboarding thing for a while longer, though she never did try any more tricks.

It was hard to shock when everyone seemed invincible. There was no risk, no threat. Of course, everyone had heard about people being 'removed' but it seemed more like rumor and innuendo, something as remote as death before the loops. Once Knightra had been at a street faire and saw two guys get into an actual swordfight and the loser stabbed through the heart and left bleeding in the gutter. Supposedly he never came back however given

how shamefully he was vanquished she wouldn't have been surprised if he was just afraid show his face again.

All at once the band rushed out on stage and took their places and without even letting the stomping subside they jumped right into a song, a cover of one of those overplayed pop tunes. They were faster than the original and Qwail sung at a slightly different register but they were *tight*. As tight as she'd ever heard them. It reminded her of when she'd first noticed they'd begun to mesh. It was after Knightra had left the band and the others had been at it for a while, Qwail now on the keyboards and Pwrewewt focused on getting the sound he wanted, and though it didn't happen all at once one day Knightra looked up and noticed that she wasn't fighting to hear the song through their chaos but hearing it front and center, pushing aside anything else in her head. She remembered it was like the band had turned into something unrecognizable and she felt compelled to take their picture throughout that whole day, to capture that moment of transformation even though she knew it was a quirk of her attention. That was during her camera kick, something which didn't last since what good was a photograph if it required *you* to remember *it*?

They were playing and playing great, filling the space with music that everyone wanted to dance to, Knightra included. It was still covers but the live playing goaded her and she couldn't just stand up front and watch the band, she had to move, move out there with the crowd, off in her own world and they in theirs and together they danced to the same song. She traveled around the floor, dancing alone and with others, partnering with man or woman or couple or group, partnering for a while and then splitting off, no offense in the leaving just joy in the brief encounter. Once she looked up and saw Leath in front of her, watching leading following drawing closer. They smiled at one another and she let her eyes drift and she danced with him a little longer than any of the others before moving on. Her feet and hands and hips and head flowed circles and waves and as she writhed and weaved and spun around she'd occasionally catch a glimpse of the stage, the band energy no longer nerves but focused and grooving. She'd turn and turn again just to see them once more — playing, driving, feeding and feeding off the audience, looking out and at each other with fleeting grins that faded to their concentration.

Another song ended and Knightra and everyone else cheered and clapped, swaying with echoes of their stilled movement and in anticipation of its return. Qwail thanked them and said: 'You may have heard this one before. Hope you like it this time around.' Two notes and Knightra's stomach dropped and she fled off the floor to the side wall. She tried to watch just the band and ignore everything else but couldn't do it and shut her eyes, falling back to

when they were last on stage, playing this very song, she fumbling the keys and the others messy too. The panic and shame as everyone booted and spat and threw crap so they couldn't even finish the song before they had to bail out.

Only the sound didn't fit the memory, now it was actually *great*. She looked again and it was all dancing and music, no anger or shame. The crowd had thinned and many were pressed over to the bar, but nobody was harassing the band. Behind Qwail, Pwrewewt was turned away, hunched over and bobbing like he was paying close attention to his playing but Knightra knew that wasn't what he looked like when he focused. She remembered how he had destroyed his bass and then the other instruments in the alley behind Crag Rock and the next day resolved to never go on stage again until they were perfect. Not long after that Knightra had to quit because her fingers always seemed to stumble behind her brain and she'd never match up to Pwrewewt's expectations. It was difficult for everyone, that resistance between body and mind — each going in opposite directions, one reset and the other an accumulation — however the rest of the band were able to persevere and put up with Pwrewewt and eventually improved. The first thing she turned to after leaving was teaching Qwail's dog Tailcur tricks. As the two of them played she would listen to Pwrewewt berate everyone and force them to practice endlessly and she never regretted leaving. She and Tailcur had a great time though he never really got the hang of things and often appeared stuck in a strange hesitation, as if his muscles refused comply with his intentions. Then one day Qwail showed up alone and said the dog was gone. She felt he was hiding something but she never found anything out and he wouldn't speak about it ever again.

Without pause an unnoticed transition and they moved from *Don't You Flip!* to *Resignation Wave*. The melody had changed and Qwail's singing turned from antipathy to lament but the beat was still driving, the music still strong. Knightra watched them from the side, each in their own distinct suit — ruffled tux, pinstriped mobster, bland businessman, disco polyester — and coiffure — blazing pink mohawk, grease-black slicked part, blue rockabilly wave, shaven bald and lipstick painted with a bass drum matching spiral — yet from afar looking strangely coordinated, their ludicrous individuality lost to the thematic whole. For the past few week-equivalents she had been helping them develop this look, each day trying out something new with their ever-reverting hair and whatever clothes could be consistently procured, before getting kicked out so they could practice in secret. She'd go to the music store for the umpteenth time to browse records and magazines, searching for ideas. Or go home and play games on Pertt's computer. She wasn't very good at them, though, and some seemed so long or difficult as to be cruel jokes. Still, she would half-intentionally pick a disk and boot up

and try again, knowing that most if not all of the unplayed remainders would be left unexperienced, another set of abandoned could-haves pushed away by the limits of time and capability, the grind of repetition, and the distraction of her mercuriality.

A shot glass slid into her view and Knightra looked back and saw Leath. He had one for himself along with two beers all hanging from the same hand and they knocked them back and dropped the glasses and clinked bottles and eyed each other momentarily before turning to watch. The song was tumbling forth, the band caught up in its momentum, Sitskate in the back rolling a steady rhythm and effortlessly twirling his sticks every few strikes like a hummingbird hovering to flaunt its magic and imperceptible complexity. She watched with awe and a bit of jealousy, recalling how it had started as a friendly challenge, she with Mt8's sister's old baton, he with his drumsticks, to see who could be the first to spin for a minute straight. Of course it turned out more difficult than they expected to get their hands to remember what to do and there were arguments about what constituted spinning and in the end they settled on a who-could-go-the-longest contest. When the ten-day leadup to the competition was over, however, Sitskate essentially won by default despite, or rather because of, Knightra having nothing else to do but practice, her marginal skills having atrophied away since she'd gotten bored with the whole thing and moved on to trying her hand at juggling and, when her arms got too tired, card tricks.

The song finished and she hollered and Leath whistled but hardly anyone else joined in and when she looked around Knightra saw that the crowd had shrunk further.

'How you all doing?' Qwail said. It sounded like an apology. 'We are Wound Helix. We've got Mt8 Φ6 on guitar — them's Greek initials, for all you keeping track — Sitskate Slipslide on drums, our fearless leader Pwrewewt Slumplow on the bass, and my name is Qwail, with a double-you.' Knightra woo-hoed and clapped and Qwail gestured toward her. 'And let's hear it for our cheering section.'

Then Knightra and Leath's celebrations faded to an awkward silence with nobody saying anything and the band just stood there staring out at the remaining audience who stared back. Everyone seemed to be deflating. Qwail turned around and said something to the band and they started into another cover, desperate to recapture the dissipating energy but it was too late, their foray into unknown, original material had driven away their critical mass and their music hung and echoed around inertly. Knightra and Leath got out on the floor and joined the remaining dancers but everyone felt out of sync and futile, like they were all listening and moving to a memory, a inadequate replication of a passed moment, a hollow of nostalgia.

As the song struggled along even more people began to leave and by the time it petered out to its conclusion Crag Rock was almost empty. The band looked at each other, dispirited. Pwrewewt let his head fall back and Knightra watched him and then Qwail and the other members too, watched him staring up into the rafters like it was a mirror reflecting the vacancy below. Everything seemed stuck, frozen. She waited for the break, when he would storm offstage like the last time. Instead, with barely twitching fingers, he plucked out a one note pattern:

*doon doodoo doon doon doon—
doon doon doon doodoo doon doon doon—
doon doon doon doon—
doon doon doon doodoo...*

Without looking Knightra grabbed Leath's hand and squeezed and pulled him after her, up towards the stage. The rest of the band had joined in, a tentative, delicate line that recalled the familiar opening yet followed a different path, one of angst, and of promise. Qwail was chanting, words Knightra had never fully understood now turned to ghosts of language, communicating through something other than their reference. Someone, probably Mohst, turned down the lights, bathing the stage in a blue and pink electric haze. Then, without warning, everything surged and the song Knightra knew burst out, only louder and huger and better than it had ever been.

The song proceeded, through melody and refrain, through its curves and circuits and switchbacks, and she smiled dumbly at its superiority and the satisfaction of finally having concurrence between what was in her head and what was around her, between what she was hearing and what she heard. And lurking behind her enthralment was a sense that this experience was more important than just its enjoyment, it was the epitome, instantly rewiring her memory such that every remembrance of the song would refer back to this one. The resulting gravitas created a tension between the desire to let herself get lost in the pleasure of the moment and a need to register everything she witnessed for a future self. Yet despite this unease Knightra was completely given over to the music, immediacy easily pushing aside worries about tomorrows, justification coming, at least subconsciously, in a belief that there could be no difference (and thus not one without the other) between being amazed and remembering what was amazing. No difference at all.

Then, too soon but just right, *90-8* drifted to a close, exiting as it entered, the beat and bass and haunting guitar, laments of voice decipherable in emotion only, lingering wistfully then a sudden swelling as if the song were starting all over again before cutting to silence. Impelled by its sonic inertia, the song continued within Knightra's mind, this more perfect version of what

she had been hearing all evening. She stood there hearkening, watching the band who seemed as awestruck as her. Something rubbed against her and she looked over and saw Leath gawking at the stage, slackjawed and unaware that he'd leaned into her. She grabbed his arm and his shirt and turned him towards her and eyes looked through eyes, hypnotized by the music playing between them, fixed in shared wonder, closing only at the final moment when they could at last listen through their lips.

'Urrraaaaggh!'

With a mighty grunt Pwrewewt launched his bass guitar high into the air. It rose and fell, neck up the whole way, strap trailing below then above like a quivering streamer, before bouncing off the ground with a dull hum and landing flat. The spray of rocks suggested the asphalt took more damage than the instrument. Pwrewewt picked it up by the neck and spinning a full circle smashed it into the brick wall. The body buckled and when he tried to lift it for another blow it flopped awkwardly so Pwrewewt just let it drop out of his hand with disgust.

'This is turning into a fucking tradition,' he said. 'Pathetic.'

He walked over to Sitskate and took the whiskey bottle and a long drink then threw it against the wall. Sitskate held his arm out.

'I wasn't done with that!'

Pwrewewt shrugged and gestured at a cymbal stand and Sitskate waved assent. Pwrewewt began to unscrew the wingnut and the drummer reached out for Qwail to pass him something to drink. Knightra and Leath were standing off to the side, arms hooked, sharing their own bottle. Mt8 was next to them, his guitar case stashed protectively behind his feet. Pwrewewt got the cymbal off and with two hands flung it down the alley. Like a golden alien ship it lifted as if defying gravity before tilting and careening into a pile of garbage bags with an unsatisfying thunk.

'How could it empty out so fast?'

'Maybe there was another concert they were heading to.'

'There weren't even any women waiting at the end.'

'Excuse me...'

'Ah, you don't count.'

'She's taken anyway.'

'Maybe we just suck.'

'Uh uh, you were really good,' said Knightra. 'You were, like, amazing.'

90-8 continued to fill her head and she tapped her thigh along with it. She could swear that Leath's arm was swaying with the song as well. On cue with a bridge, Qwail took a swig and handed the bottle to Sitskate and picked up the keyboard. Stumbling across the alley he leaned it up against the brick wall then walked away. The bridge ended and he spun around

and took a couple skip steps then two big strides and leapt, kicking at the keyboard with both feet at once. Whether by bad aim or lack of traction or both, he glanced off and spun backwards ass-over-trunk and slammed to the ground face first.

Sitskate fell back onto the ground laughing and everyone else was laughing too though Knightra winced as well and wondered if he was OK. Qwail pushed himself up and blood was running out of his nose over his mouth and he smiled big and red. He went over to where Sitskate was still giggling and picked up the tequila and took a quick drink then went back and emptied the bottle over the keyboard. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a matchbook, lighting one match then the whole book then tossing the burning packet onto the instrument. Fire spread from the initial contact point up and down creating a slant of flame that looked like a smirking pyre made of false teeth. Sitskate grabbed his snare drum and tossed it at the fire but it missed and rolled towards where Knightra was standing. Mt8 stepped forward and kicked it back towards the keyboard except it didn't bounce like a ball, it barely moved and Mt8 slumped to the ground holding his foot. Pwrewewt dragged his bass over in hopes of starting a bonfire but let his tails fall over the flames and couldn't shake the jacket off so stopped, dropped the bass, and rolled away.

It continued like that for a while until the bottles were mostly empty and there was nothing left worth busting up except Mt8's guitar which he wouldn't let them touch. The band wanted to head out to a bar and Knightra said she was going to call it a night and they gave her a hard time about going to bed early and sleeping half her life away but they also understood. They split off and she and Leath headed out of the alley debating whose place to go to. His was closer but he had two roommates — one of whom thought it was fair play to skeeve on girls after they'd fallen asleep — so they agreed on hers.

They walked through the streets, Knightra and Leath, laughing and smoking and holding close in the cold air. He asked her full name and she his and neither had IDs and both agreed that Freozone and Fauxywood were just right. *90-8* was still everywhere for her and she hummed and skipped to it and he smiled and she was certain he could hear it too. They talked about lots of things — the band and the bar and the loops and whatever came to mind — but not the song, it seemed too precious to broach, impossible to articulate. To try to shape it into words was to risk spoiling it. It was better to leave it floating between them, a private, intimate link.

Outside of a rowhouse they passed by a scatter of toys spread across the sidewalk. On the stoop was a skinny plastic skateboard.

'Look — its wheels match my hair,' Knightra said, holding it by her head. Then she hopped on it and rolled away down the sidewalk.

‘Wait, you can ride that thing? Let me try.’

She brought it back and Leath stepped onto it but he fell back onto his ass and the board shot away and loudly hit the side of a car. He stood up rubbing his backside and she giggled and said she’d race him to the next block and took off on the skateboard, glancing behind to see him running and laughing after her. The little board didn’t roll very well and he started to catch up so she focused on her pushing, moving her foot to the rhythm of the song: three big shoves, then a couple quickies, the three more big ones. She was breathing hard and could barely stay balanced for her laughing. Up ahead the stoplight was green and she looked back and saw him smiling and still close. Another push and the song sailed into the chorus and she flew out into the intersection and just then there were car lights coming at her and before she could do anything they were on her and then everything was flipping, car hanging spun to inverted green peace sign spun to Leath upside down spun to green fingers spun to Leath yelling spun to a red hand split with sharp fins that whipped around right into her face.

...change you can count...

A fantastic light, as if it were daytime, and electric static. Wedny was focused on her crossword, her head propped towards the window, and did not realize that the disturbance she saw was a reflection. Outside the wing shook uneasily, the green beacon swaying against an endless darkness. There was a prickle of warmth on the side of her face that competed with the cool air emanating from the window. A slightly bitter smell wafted in the stale air. Indistinct murmurs within the hum of flight. Yet all this barely registered for Wedny who was drowsily mesmerized by the movement of the wing, its harmonics seemingly out of phase with her sense of the plane's motion.

There was a scream and Wedny's distracted trance was broken. Turning around to search for the source, she saw, further back in the plane, a gangling figure scrambling around, harshly illuminated by reading spotlights, leaning over seatbacks and yelling hysterically.

'Teddy! Teddy! Oh god, no! Teddy!'

The woman slid into the shadows of the aisle, racing to the back, wildly pulling open the bathroom doors.

'Teddy! Are you here? You can't be gone!'

She had turned and was stumbling back up the aisle, haphazardly screaming at passengers and nobody, barely glancing at Wedny as she passed by in a panic. The brief view of her, barely visible in the darkness, showed a dark, tightly fitting tracksuit with light, parallel lines. Something red in her hand. Her face seemed sunken with madness, thin blonde hair trailing wildly. It was like a skeleton passing in gloom, a fleeting, indelible glimpse of death.

'Have you seen him? Has anyone seen him? Teddy! Help! Please! I've lost my son!'

Up near first-class a male flight attendant intercepted the woman, speaking calmly and holding his palms out. She tried to push around him but he

blocked her path, shaking his head. She raised her fists and began swinging at the attendant who flinched and retreated at the sudden assault. A man in a tropical shirt sitting nearby stood up and grabbed the woman's wrists, spinning her towards him and shaking her forcefully.

'He just was there! I lost him! Why?! Why? Why am I...'

Her voice trailed away and she went limp, slinking against the man and then down onto the floor. Another flight attendant rushed up from the back and helped the woman into an empty seat, consoling her. Wedny noticed that there appeared to be a lot of open seats in the plane. Looking back and forth, less than a quarter were occupied. It had seemed like more people when she had boarded. Maybe she was just misinterpreting the actual count now that they were spread out. She didn't really have a sense of how many the plane could hold, anyway. It was only her second flight after all, and the first one she had spent the whole trip asleep. She could have sworn that there were people in the rows immediately in front and behind her. She remembered a woman with a hat and perfume, equally ostentatious. Wedny leaned and sniffed the headrest. Through the tobacco backodor and still lingering acidity she thought she detected a hint of that perfume, though now it seemed more like a dream.

Down at the front, the man in the tropical shirt was talking with the male attendant, gesticulating at himself and the tracksuit lady and then around the cabin. His untucked shirt practically glowed through the shadows and his tight jeans perfectly fit his trim frame. He was tall, his head almost touching the ceiling, as if the space had been built to exactly accommodate him. Even in the low light, and despite his earnest gestures, Wedny noticed sense of composure, of leadership. The attendant cocked his head like an intrigued puppy. The distraught woman looked up, nodded, and buried her face into her hands. The tropical shirt motioned up to towards the front of the plane and the attendant shook his head resolutely.

There was a jerk followed by a pitch downwards and Wedny lurched forward into the seatback. The cabin lights came on. Someone let out a short scream. There was suddenly talking all about. Wedny bent down to look out the window and everything seemed as before, the wing bouncing stiffly in the dark air. It felt like they had leveled off, though she couldn't be sure. Turning back she saw that the male attendant had disappeared and the man in the bright shirt was quickly moving down the aisle, looking pointedly right and left at the passengers as he passed. Sensing the anxiety within the plane, Wedny slunk back into her seat and fumbled with the seatbelt, tightening it around her waist.

The man appeared at her row and upon seeing her stopped short and smiled.

‘Wedny! Oh thank god. I was worried I was the only one. You head on up and see if you can get in the cockpit. I need to check to see if there are any more of us before I forget what I’m doing.’

She didn’t understand a thing he was saying. Her lack of comprehension was not help by his distractingly good looks. She stared at his golden face, mesmerized by a half grin and sparkling eyes.

‘Wedny, are you all right?’ He reached in and shook her shoulder. ‘Come on. We don’t have time to waste.’

‘Who are you? What’s happening?’

‘It’s me, Mac!’

The name was as unrecognizable as his face. She leaned away from him, confused and worried.

‘Shit!,’ he barked with a snap of his head. He held up a reassuring hand. ‘It’s OK. You’ll remember soon enough. I’ll be right back. Come here and stand in the aisle so I don’t miss you.’

Wedny hesitated and he leaned in and pulled on her arm, then let go and started grabbing at her waist. She tried to slap away his hands and then the seatbelt released and he was yanking her across the seats.

‘Let’s go! These people’s lives are in our hands. They need us. They need you. *I* need you.’

Wedny floundered into the aisle as Mac took off down through the rest of the plane. When he got to the end he turned and sprinted back to her. ‘It’s just you and me, kid,’ he said with a resigned look, then grabbed her wrist and pulled her after him. She was just barely able to get her purse before being dragged along, wary but hardly resisting either. As they passed, people were asking questions which Mac just ignored. ‘What’s going on?’ ‘Do you need help?’ ‘Why did *we* come back?’ An older man was standing in their way, trying to stuff a windbreaker into the overhead bin. As they approached Mac yelled at him to move but he was consumed with the difficulty of wadding shapeless fabric into an infinitesimal crack, so Mac just pushed him back into his row, causing the man to utter a pathetic bleat as he fell between the seats onto the floor. Right before the first-class divider, Wedny caught a glimpse the woman in the tracksuit, her face confused and entirely devoid of sadness.

In first-class most of the seats were empty. There was a large man reclined in a suit, inelegantly and loudly sleeping with a huge drool smearing across his cheek, and a woman wearing something that seemed constructed from primary colors and shoulder pads, doing her best to ignore whatever was happening. The male flight attendant was standing in the narrow path to the cockpit, a terrified look on his face. He spoke to Mac in a hushed voice.

‘You were right, there’s nobody in there — except their clothes.’ He looked like he was about to cry. ‘The controls seem all screwed up. I don’t know what we’re going to do.’

‘Easy pal, don’t get your panties in a knot,’ said Mac. He pointed between himself and Wedny. ‘We know how to fly this plane.’ She shot him a glance and he winked. What the hell was he talking about? She didn’t know a thing about flying an airplane. And how did he know her? He was speaking to the attendant again: ‘I’m sorry, I don’t remember your name.’

‘Kenth—’ He looked like he had something more to say but Mac had turned away and was digging in one of the seatbacks. He came up holding a barf bag.

‘I need a pen, quick,’ he said, snapping his fingers impatiently. Kenth shrugged his shoulders and Mac looked at Wedny expectantly. Wedny dug into her purse and grabbed at the detritus at the bottom. What came out was a fistful of makeup tubes, receipts, a brush, an unopened tampon, a shiny packet of peanuts, and a few pens. Mac reached in and delicately selected one with a nod. She told him she wasn’t sure if it would work but he waved her off and began scribbling circles on the bag, leaving blank impressions of overlapping, misaligned rings that suddenly turned to deep blue. He looked back at her and gave a thumbs up. He quickly wrote, in precise print, ‘Flight attendant: Kenth.’ He clicked the pen closed, messily folded the bag up, and stuffed them both into his shirt pocket. ‘All right, Kenth, take us up to the cockpit.’

The flight attendant was apprehensive. ‘How did you know—’

The plane twisted and Wedny and Mac were thrown back into the seats. He ended up on top, his face inches from hers. She lay there, momentarily frozen, feeling his hot breath, staring into his luminous eyes, holding onto his tight arms. Then he was up and helping her stand. Still disoriented, she couldn’t tell if the plane was canted or not.

‘We don’t have time Kenth, we need to help this bird fly.’

Kenth had fallen and was sitting awkwardly in the passageway. Mac stepped over him and Wedny followed, flashing an uncertain, apologetic grin.

The cockpit was dark and empty, There were flashing lights and intermittent buzzers that sounded worrying. Thorough the windows there were a few moonlit wisps of clouds against an otherwise black field. ‘Where’s the pilot?’ she asked.

‘No time to explain,’ Mac said. He reached down into the seat and pulled up a heap of dark and light clothes which he dropped onto the ground. He had a pilot’s hat in his hand which he plopped on his head, looking at Wedny as if for approval. She looked between him and the clothes, dumbfounded.

‘No?’ he said, and tossed the hat onto the pile. He threw a similar set of clothes from the other seat and proceeded to sit down.

‘How is it flying?’

‘It’s on autopilot. Though, in case you didn’t notice, there seems to be something wrong with it.’ He grabbed a radio and started talking into it.

‘Hello, anyone there? Can you read me?’ He played with some switches and dials. ‘Shit! The radio is out. Sit down and help me out.’

‘But I don’t know how to fly. Maybe Kenth can help.’

‘No. Stay. You’ll know what to do. At some point it’ll come back.’

Hesitantly Wedny slid into the seat. There was something down at her feet. She reached between her legs and pulled up a pair of shined dress shoes.

‘Come back? What are you talking about?’

‘If I try and explain it to you now, you’ll just freak out.’ He dug into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. With a flick of his wrist one shot partway out of the pack which he grabbed with his mouth and lit. ‘You smoke?’ She shook her head. ‘Yeah, I think I remember that. Well, today might be a good day to start. For now, just help me to remember.’

‘Remember what?’

‘Everything. What we’re talking about now, I’m probably going to forget.’ He looked at her contritely. ‘I’ll be honest, I don’t even remember how we met today.’

‘What do you mean? That was just a few minutes ago. There was that lady whose son was missing—’ Mac was shaking his head. ‘But you remember how to fly the plane?’ Wedny was beginning to panic, for the first time worrying that she might die.

‘Sure I remember. Or, I remember a lot of it. But that’s why I need you. Together we can remember. When it comes back you can help me. We learned how to fly before, or later, or whatever. Right now, though, I only forget the stuff happening right now.’ He pulled out the barf bag and the pen and handed it to her. ‘Here, you can write things down. We’ll both need it soon.’ A flash of insight crossed his face. ‘Why don’t you go get—’ he looked at the bag she was holding ‘—Kenth, and tell him to come here and help us. We can use his memory. I’ll bet he won’t be able to sleep until after we land.’

Wedny got up to get the attendant and the plane jerked again and she heard Mac swear behind her. This was like a crazy dream. She only hoped that if she died it was as quick and painless as waking up.

‘No, don’t touch that.’

‘Are you sure?’

A nod. An outstretched hand.

‘I could’ve sworn—’

‘Just let me handle it. I’ll tell you what you need to do.’

‘This doesn’t seem right. I don’t think you know what you’re doing.’

‘Excuse me.’ Kenth was trying to interject but Mac continued to ramble. ‘*Excuse me.* Ten minutes are up. I’m supposed to remind you.’

Mac slumped in his seat and waved his hand petulantly. He searched around, patting his shirt and pants before locating his smoldering, half-smoked cigarette sitting in the astray. Wedny turned around to see Kenth looking down at some scrawled notes.

'I'm supposed to remind you that both of you agreed to this list. Wedny, you're the pilot. Mac, you're the co-pilot. All original cockpit crew is gone, along with one flight attendant.' His voice cracked and he paused for a second to take a deep breath before continuing. 'All fellow flight students also gone. No radio. Autopilot malfunctioning. Wedny, you've got notes about your controls right here,' he stood up and pointed to a paper clipped up on her far side, 'if you have anything new to add, let me know and I'll write it down.'

'Why don't you put those down here in between us?' said Mac, 'This way I can understand what's going on.'

'Because you almost crashed us before Wedny figured out how to actually control this thing, *Mac*.'

Mac twisted around, the cigarette dangling from his lips. 'Ha ha. Very funny.'

'It's written right here.'

'Let me see that.' Mac grabbed the notepad and, after looking at it, grunted and handed it back without looking.

Wedny looked over her notes. There were a couple things circled that corresponded to how the plane was currently flying. Everything else was DON'T entries on what not to do. A few of them seemed to go against what they'd been taught. She was glad that they were written down, as she might have tried them again, though she also briefly wondered if they could be trusted. She didn't remember the experiences that led to them, making it difficult to intuitively trust them. Then again, she also didn't remember Mac almost crashing the plane (although his actions and attitude over the past couple of minutes made it entirely believable) and she thought it best to trust what she supposedly told herself rather than risk an accident to test it. She remembered how full the plane was and felt the weight of all those lives depending on her actions.

'What about the passengers?' she asked. 'Do they know what's happening?'

'They're mostly similar to you, with their memories. Unlike us attendants, they at least seem to know about these time loops.'

Mac tilted his head back, talking to the roof. 'You must just be like Wedny, only later. You'll remember soon enough.'

'You keep telling me that, but it hasn't happened yet. Jerri and me, we're just trying to keep it together until we land. All those people gone in a flash and then this crazy story about the day repeating. Inside I'm kind of freaking out.'

‘Wait,’ said Mac, ‘you saw people disappear? What happened?’

‘I’ve already told you before. I don’t want to talk about that.’

‘Oh come on! We don’t remember now. Don’t leave us in the dark.’

Wedny swiped at Mac with the back of her hand. ‘Hey, he just said he doesn’t want to talk about it. And you’re going to forget again anyway.’

‘Alright,’ Mac said defensively. ‘You know, it reminds me of this time in college where me and my brothers—’

‘Oh jeez, not again.’

‘What, you’ve heard this?’

‘About the disappearing lab rats? This is only the fourth time.’

‘Well excuse me, pal.’

Wedny saw an opportunity to keep Mac busy, probably not for the first time. ‘Hey, I don’t remember. Go ahead and tell it to me.’

‘Well, in that case I’m going to head back to see how Jerri’s doing,’ said Kenth. ‘Call me using this if you need me. I’ll be back in a few minutes for your reminder.’

He disappeared and Mac lit up another cigarette before diving into his tale. The cocksure attitude which had been so irritating made for intoxicating narration, bringing Wedny along on an exuberant ride of prankishness and bluster. She was barely even paying attention to what he was talking about, yet found herself laughing and enjoying his company. It reminded her of how fun he’d been when they’d gone through their crash course on flying. His confidence and humor in the face of the grave and intense circumstances. The two of them pairing up to practice. She remembered him seeming rather intelligent, but if the last few minutes were any indication, it might have just been swagger.

Nonetheless, he was certainly charming. And nice to look at. They were the last ones left from the school, and while she may have felt bad for the others (wherever they went) she was glad to have ended up with Mac. She turned to him and he smiled, bright teeth and bright eyes and brassy skin. He was going on about transforming a van into a cage transporter called The Thesebus of Hamelin. Thank god she didn’t get stuck with Arman. That conceited prick had all the appeal of a swollen gland. He’d dominated all of their lessons with his whiny, know-it-all attitude to the point that the instructors had started to cut him off any time he opened his mouth. She glanced at her DON’T list and couldn’t imagine him following it. If he were here he likely would have put them in the ocean by now.

There had been ten of them. Ten volunteers. The request was made after a dozen or more loops, after the removals had started and there were worries about flights stranded midair without pilots. Most of the passengers wanted nothing to do with it, preferring to spend their remaining time with their family or enjoying themselves or whatever people did when they might

only have a few hours left. Those who did volunteer seemed to be either do-gooders who couldn't conceive of not lending a hand when asked, or cynics who only trusted themselves when it was time to get out of a jam. Mac was one of the former. Arman fell into the latter, as did Wedny. She didn't know how long these repeats would last or if she would eventually disappear, but she sure as hell wasn't going to allow herself to get left adrift at thirty thousand feet without a crew.

The plane vibrated like a shiver of memory. The steering control pulled slightly to the side and she leaned against it. She looked over her notes and stopped Mac (who talking about building a rodent transport tunnel into a professor's basement) to get him to give her some readings, then made some adjustments to get them on track. She wondered what was happening back in the cabin. Perhaps she could get him to see. Or maybe he could take over while she went. She turned to him — he was scanning the controls with a bewildered look. He reached out for a DON'T switch.

'Hey, don't touch that!'

'Are you sure? I think I remember that—'

The cockpit door opened and Kenth stepped in. 'Hey you two. Ten minutes are up. I'm supposed to remind you.'

The coast was approaching rapidly in the early morning light. A smokey blue sky spread out from an as yet unseen sun, fading towards them to an almost black. When they had seen the land approaching they had begun to descend, making a note of the plan to Kenth. The attendant had just performed his latest reminder, perhaps the last one necessary. As the altitude dropped, Wedny found herself wrestling to control the plane. It jerked and lifted and dropped and slid with increasing agitation, to the point where keeping the craft steady took a majority of her focus.

'I don't know where we are,' she said to Mac, 'but we need to find an airport. Look around and see if you can see one.'

Mac stood up, craning his neck to see through the narrow windows. 'I'm not sure what to look for. Everything looks the same, just lights and city.'

'If we came in right, it should be right on the coast,' said Kenth. 'You're way too high, though. You'll need to be lower.'

The expectation had been for them to use the radio, to be talked through landing. There was some rule they had mentioned about the approach, a rule of something. She asked Mac but he only shrugged. She would have to trust Kenth. She pushed the plane down and felt it struggle. She was asking Kenth to let her know a good time to level off when Mac interjected.

'Holy shit! Did you see that? A jet went right over us!'

Wedny looked around but saw nothing. The coastline was coming up below them.

‘Hey, there, there!’ It was Kenth. He was pointing off to the left. ‘There’s the airport. You see it?’

‘Oh, I see it,’ said Mac. ‘We can’t make it from here, though. If we get out over the city we can loop around and come back.’

Wedny stretched her neck to see but Mac and Kenth were in the way and then something gray and close slid into her peripheral vision and she turned forward to see a fighter jet hovering above them, waving back and forth as if in greeting.

‘There it is again!’ Mac exclaimed. ‘I think it wants us to follow.’

The jet did a slow bank off to the left, towards the ocean. Wedny attempted to turn her plane to follow the track, and felt a dreadful sense of weightlessness as they began to pitch forward. Swearing, she straightened out and the plunge seemed to ease off, though they were still losing altitude.

‘I don’t think we can turn without crashing. I don’t even know if I can keep her up going straight.’ She could sense Kenth and Mac starting to panic. They started to talk over each other, telling her how to control the plane and there was the jet and what freeways they might land on. Wedny yelled at them to shut up. ‘Let me think!’ She scanned the scene in front of her. A green mound rose high and steep from the flat cityscape. That was it! ‘The park, on the side of the park there’s a golf course. We can land there.’ Their trajectory was almost perfect. She slowed the plane, aiming them slightly downward.

‘Yes, I think it can work,’ said Kenth, suddenly, strangely confident. ‘Let me go back and get everyone ready.’

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Mac looking at her. ‘You’re nuts,’ he said, ‘you’re absolutely nuts. I love it. Here, let me help you out. It think that—’

‘Don’t touch anything! Just buckle yourself in.’

She was zoned in on her landing sight. They were low, the streets below them seemed almost within reach. Off to the side, rising above, Wedny caught a glimpse of a dark dome atop a shining base. An emerald path stretched before them and she searched for a line with minimal trees. Golfers scrambled in the twilight like ants to abandon her chosen fairway as she maneuvered the unsteady craft into its final approach.

Wedny looked around the long, windowless room. It didn’t seem so much like a room as a tunnel. Everything — the walls, the ceiling, the floor — was a dull gray. Fluorescent lights ran high along one wall, casting an odd illumination that formed harsh shadows in the opposite corners. Behind her there was a door and facing her was a large video camera on a tripod, a red light blinking incessantly above the blank stare of the lens. A folded chair

was leaning against the table. She faced away from the camera and looked at her watch — he should be back any minute now. She was hungry, if he took much longer she'd check outside the door to see if they'd forgotten her. She was feeling pretty worn out and didn't want to use up her whole day with whatever training they were going to do.

There was a click behind her and she turned around, her eyes forced shut by an intense light. When she was able to open them again the door was closed and he was approaching: short hair, stiff posture, plain gray suit, carrying a pizza box and a grocery bag. He brought with him a slight breeze of cold.

'Hello Wedny, remember me?'

'Sure.' She nodded at his hands. 'How'd you know what I was craving?'

He plopped the box and bag on the table. 'You told me. Doesn't sound familiar?' He placed his hand gently on the still-closed lid and look at her with an unexpected graveness. 'So, what's my name?'

'Stevie. Stevie A—A—Arsink?'

'Arensach. Good. You're remembering now. Can you say your first and last name for the camera?'

'Wedny Zeliff.'

'Good.' He opened the box and motioned for her to eat. He unfolded the chair and moved it next to the camera, out of its line of sight.

Wedny took a bite of pizza. It was delicious. Hot and cheesy, salty and sweet and tangy. Another bite. It was exactly what she wanted. She pointed at the bag and Stevie nodded. She pulled out the soda and cracked it open and took a long, cool drink. She let out a satisfied sigh.

'You want some? There's no way I'm going to eat all this.'

Stevie gave her a distasteful look. 'That's OK.'

'What, you don't like pizza?'

'Not with, um, pineapple.'

'Dude, it's so good,' Wedny said, taking another bite. 'Pineapple and sausage are the best.'

'I'm glad you're enjoying it. I'll have you know that it is not easy to get pizza at this time in the morning.'

'Well, thank you. It's really hitting the spot.'

He pulled out a notepad and flicked through it. 'While you eat, I've got a few things to go through. First off, a formality. We need you to authorize being removed for training.'

'Huh?' she said, chewing.

Stevie looked up from his notebook. 'It's part of a new process. We have to get confirmation that you agree to spend time in training and not, um, doing whatever you would do otherwise.'

Wedny shrugged. 'Sure, I agree.'

‘Actually we need you to say something specific. Like I said, it’s a new process and they’re being kind of strict about it. Just look into the camera and say: I, Wedny Zeliff, authorize the execution of my removal from this day...’

‘Wait a sec, this isn’t going to take the whole day, is it?’

‘No, no, don’t worry — this is just boilerplate. They have one blanket statement to cover everything. Your training today won’t take very long at all, I promise.’

A thought flashed through her head: it was late, she was still sitting at the table, stuffed, dozing off. She looked at the half piece of crust in her hand and dropped it.

‘Trust me,’ he said, ‘none of us want to spend our whole day here either. This’ll be quick.’

‘You’re sure.’

‘You’ll be done in no time. Then we’ll send you back and everything after will be yours.’

‘Send me back...’

‘Yeah...we talked about this. In order to ensure the greatest continuity with the next flight, we need you to begin again as quickly as possible. But given what we’ve learned we are certain we’ll be setting you up for success. This will be the last time you’ll have to bother with any of this.’

Wedny looked down at her lap. A few seconds ago she was worried about losing the day, now she was hearing it was already lost. She glanced around at the blank, windowless walls — it was clear she had no choice. There was a shift in her mind and she suddenly couldn’t wait to fall asleep. The sooner it came, the sooner she’d be free. She raised her hands slightly and let them fall together. Tilting her head to the camera, Wedny began to repeat the words, but stumbled around ‘execution.’ Stevie helped her, then:

‘...from this day...’

‘...from this day...’

‘...to ensure my flight’s safety...’

‘...to ensure my flight’s safety...’

‘...for all...’

‘...for all...’

‘...henceforth.’

‘...henceforth.’

‘Good. Now then, do you remember how you got here?’ Wedny shook her head. ‘How about the plane’s landing?’

‘Well, I remember the plane landing at the airport. But that wasn’t today, or this time, or however you say it.’

‘Right. So you don’t remember the plane at all before you came here.’

‘Nope.’ She reached into the box and grabbed a pair of pineapple and meat, dropping them into her mouth and licking her fingers. So good.

‘Now, you and Mr. Frye were in the flight program together?’

‘Who?’

‘Frye. MacDonald Frye.’

‘Oh, you mean Mac. Is he doing the training today too? We only did three days, or maybe four. Funny how they all bleed together.’

‘Did you two have a...relationship?’

Wedny felt her face get warm and she let out an embarrassed laugh. ‘No, no.’ He was cute but nothing had happened, unfortunately.

‘You sure? You two seemed pretty chummy today at the plane.’

It was bizarre to hear someone talk about her doing something that she had no memory of. She was starting to feel anxious. ‘What is this about? I thought I was supposed to be training.’

‘Oh, well, that’s right. It’s just that the training is solo and will take up the rest of your day. I only wanted to know if maybe there is anyone you wanted to contact before we started. Friends, family. Perhaps Mr. Frye?’

Wedny wasn’t sure how to respond. What did he know? Then again, what did it matter? She’d never seen him before, probably wouldn’t ever again. Yet it was hard to ignore the need to prove herself. It seemed too late for that, though. There was nothing to prove. He understood. She didn’t have anybody to see. Her friends were work friends and from what she could tell nobody was working anymore anyway. She was just getting back from spreading her mom’s ashes over a tropical beach, a trip she’d taken over a year to save for. She felt like she had no one to talk to, nothing to do. Thinking about it made her feel like junk.

‘There’s nobody, really.’

‘OK. Well, why don’t you at least say hi to Mr. Frye? It’s good to speak to at least one person you know, every day that you remember.’

‘He’s here?’ Wedny’s nerves tensed. She looked towards the door, felt a strand of pineapple between her teeth.

‘Of course. He’s got to get the same training as you.’

Wedny dug furiously at the strand with her tongue, her lips tight, trying not to show it.

‘What do you say?’ asked Stevie.

Reluctantly, Wedny agreed. That talk about them being chummy might make it awkward, but she felt it would be worse if she said no. It wasn’t like she was admitting to anything. Stevie glanced at the remaining pizza, watched her expectantly. She watched him back, grinning blankly, then finally relented and stuck her hand in her mouth and picked with her fingernails until the pineapple string pulled loose.

Wedny took another drink of soda and ensured Stevie that she was done and he stood up and took her out of the room. The door led outside to a bright, mild, cloudless day. The room turned out to be just a large metal container in a yard of similar containers. They walked to the one straight across and knocked on the door. A man dressed in suit opened the door. He had thin wire-framed glasses and his hair was pulled back into a ponytail.

‘Hey Empel,’ said Stevie, ‘Wedny’s going to say her hellos to Mr. Frye, if that’s alright.’

‘Good timing. We just finished making a recording for his wife.’

Stevie led Wedny inside into an identical dull room, complete with table, chairs, and a camera. Mac was sitting on the table, smoking. A box of doughnuts was opened next to him.

‘Wedny! How ya doin’? You want one?’

She shook her head and looked at the floor, embarrassed. She felt stupid for not knowing he was married. ‘Hey Mac.’

‘I just recorded a—’ he waved his hand at the camera ‘—for my wife. Apparently they prefer that we don’t talk directly. Not that I’m complaining. I doubt she is either. Probably won’t even want to watch this.’

Wedny didn’t know what to say. Was he giving her a line?

‘Let me just say that if I only get to see one woman in person today, I’m glad that it’s you. Come here, why don’t you give me a hug?’

Uncomfortably, she took a half-step forward and he grabbed her in a tight embrace. Slowly, she put her arms around him. As strange as this was, if felt good to be held, to hold. Mac grabbed her shoulders and held her out, smiling broadly.

‘We’ll see you tomorrow,’ he said, leaning down to give her a soft kiss on her forehead.

Stevie walked Wedny through the container maze, down seemingly endless paths and turns, past one bland box after another. It was disorienting but Wedny found she didn’t care — it was a pretty day, even if it was cold. It felt like it had been ages since she had been out in the sun, even though she knew she’d been lying on the beach just yesterday. She took a deep breath and felt the crisp air fill her chest. She thought about Mac, about seeing him again. She was glad she’d remember this, and that he would too.

They turned a corner and Stevie opened a door to a container. Fluorescents flickered on across the wall. There was a camera right past the entrance which he poked at. The room was cut in half by a hanging sheet that rippled unevenly in the dreary light. There was a single chair facing the sheet and Stevie pointed Wedny to it. He pulled out a set of keys and bent down to open a footlocker on the ground. Wedny watched him with curiosity.

‘Go ahead and sit down and watch the screen,’ he said, ‘I’m just going to set things up here.’

She said and waited, heard him digging around and then what sounded like something mechanical and then his footsteps approaching. She began to turn around and he told her to keep looking ahead. That the screen was what she needed to see. She stared at the white square, wondering what he was going to show her. It seemed to waver with her anticipation, along with the tingle at the back of her neck.

...my new house...

Langkin walked along the dirt road with his hands buried deep inside his pockets and his eyes locked to the ground. He was cold and there was nothing to do. He wasn't allowed back inside, at least not until dinner. Just another boring day, stuck out here because of his dumb brother. He kicked at a rock, watching it bounce away irregularly. Took a big swing at another and it misfired, shooting off to the side and ricocheting off of a fence post. Turning to his side, he looked down and picked out a nice sized stone and with a focused snap of his leg, tried to hit the post again. The projectile missed its mark and seemed to disappear, the indistinct rustle of dried grass the only indication of its actual trajectory. He reached down and picked up a gray, oblong chunk and with a skip took an exaggerated sidearmed throw. It sailed high, clearing the target and landing well out in the field beyond. With disgust he kicked into the dirt and sent a spray of gravel out at the fence. Satisfied by the sound of multiple raps off wood, he started back down the road, his attention dissipating into the chilly air.

He really wished he was back in his room. He was having a perfectly fine time working on a new idea for a spaceship when his brother came in wanting to play. The bricks had been sitting in that box in the corner for days, but the minute that Langkin pulled them out that brat wanted to join in. Pestering him with questions, picking at the pieces he'd separated out, slapping a few unmatched ones together and acting like that was all that it took, proudly waving the thoughtless creation in his face while he was trying to concentrate. Just once he wanted to be left alone — Hubie had plenty of other toys, he could have the bricks to himself later or tomorrow. He told him to leave, pushed him away when he tried to take the spaceman. Clumsy idiot trips into his dresser and cuts his head, then goes crying to mom. 'Langkin Ramble Furzick, what is the matter with you? I'm doing my

best to hold things together around here and you trying to kill your brother is not helping.' It wasn't his fault. 'Did you look at his face?' He'd rubbed all that blood around so it looked bad, but it was just a little cut. It would go away tomorrow anyway. 'I don't care what happens to it, that's no way to treat anyone, especially your kid brother. He's going to remember this — *I'm* going to remember this. You can't just do whatever you want and act like it doesn't matter.' But it was his brother who got to do whatever he wanted. He was just minding his own business when Hubie started bugging him. But who gets in trouble? Hubie should be playing with Misty, then none of this would have happened. 'Why are you so difficult? When I get him cleaned up you're going to let him back into your room. Act your age, that's the least you can do for me.' He could just have them to himself, then. But he'd better clean up, and he'd better not try to follow him around. 'If you're going to have that attitude, you can just go outside...'

She always took Hubie's side. Langkin wished he didn't have to see his brother's smirking, whiny face ever again. Why didn't she send *him* outside? Langkin picked up a stick and began to swing it like a sword, slicing at the dried grass and trying to run cool patterns around his body. He launched the stick high up in the air. It spun wildly, a fitter against the dull sky before dropping listlessly a ways down in the middle of the street. If Bowser was around he'd probably have caught it before it hit the ground. Langkin would have it back in his hand now, ready for another go-round. He swung his arm like he was throwing it again, trying for a steeper angle, a longer distance, less time for Bowser to reach it. But he would, snatching it just in time and charging back with an even greater enthusiasm. He missed him. Didn't understand why he disappeared. His parents said they didn't either, that animals were going missing and nobody knew why, that it was just the way of things. But he saw them whispering, remembered their faces when they first realized Bowser was gone. They treated him like he was still a little kid, like Hubie. They never told him anything.

Langkin shuffled out into the road and picked up the stick. He held both ends and tried to bend it, then placed it against his knee and leaned on it. The more he pressed the more it flexed. He wondered if he could bend it into a circle, joining the ends, turning the line into a loop. He drew his arms down and together, bouncing against the wood's resistance. There was a loud crack and it gave way, his fists bashing against one another, balance thrown off and stumbling him forward. He stood up and held out the broken stick, half of it swinging loosely from a shred of bark, useless, spent. Langkin tossed it away indifferently, barely watching its chaotic flips as it disappeared into the dry brush.

As he crested a small rise, Langkin could see the Vreeneesca place below him. They'd supposedly been gone for a long time, yet the house didn't

look empty. Their van was sitting in their driveway, the porch looked clean, the yard trimmed. It seemed as though people were still living there. Their mailbox had its flag up and he opened it, pulling out a small stack of envelopes with printed addresses to businesses not people. He tossed them back into the box and looked back in the direction of his house. The hills and curves of the road blocked his view of it. 'You stay in the yard.' He started down the drive towards the Vreeneesca's. He hadn't been gone long, she wouldn't notice yet. She probably wouldn't ever notice.

Or maybe she would. It seemed like all the parents lately were freaking out about letting their kids go out. His friends who lived in town could go around their neighborhood but had to be back by dark. Nobody was allowed to come out and visit with him. Early on he'd had a sleepover and Tim had brought over his video games and they'd all stayed up late playing but when they woke up everyone was back home. You'd think that the parents would like this, not having to deal with their kids wanting to stay longer or needing to be picked up. But after the word got out about some girl in the next county who had disappeared after a night away from home, nobody wanted to let their kids go to sleep anyplace but in their own bed. They didn't understand how it worked, didn't want to risk the chance of it happening. So Langkin was stuck by himself, having to deal with his annoying brother and sister, his mom and dad acting like it was his duty to look after them and be nice no matter how they acted.

At the front of the house he looked into the windows, trying to see if anybody was home. He rang the doorbell and ran back to the window, searching for movement. Everything was completely still. The inside looked clean and tidy, nothing like the clutter of his home. He'd been in there once when he was selling candy for his baseball team, Mr. Vreeneesca sitting in that recliner, watching suspiciously as his wife wrote out a check. It smelled of pipe smoke and something flowery and reminded him of his grandparent's house. Old people sure knew how to keep their places neat.

He tried the front door but it was locked. Around the back was a porch with a big glass door, the drapes pulled. It was locked too. Through a window too far away to reach he could see what looked like a sink. He wondered what kind of food they had. People like them usually had treats. Maybe they still had the candy he'd sold them. He just needed to find a way in. Behind the house was a garage, painted in the same red and white colors. The door was only latched, and after a bit of effort Langkin was able to swing it up enough to get under and push it the rest of the way open. Facing inward was a green truck specked with rust, in its bed something blockish piled high and covered with a plastic tarp. Along one wall, a pegboard filled with tools caught his attention. He walked towards it, mesmerized by the perfectly

organized array of screwdrivers, pliers, saws, and various other gadgets and instruments whose purpose he had no clue about.

Leaning up on the workbench, he began to pull down tools. He held them in his hands, working their mechanisms, pretending to use them on imaginary projects. He turned screws and cut wood, twisted wire and checked for level. There was well-worn hammer with a wooden handle and he went searching for nails. He pulled drawers and checked shelves, not finding what he was looking for. In the far side of the garage he was about to open a cabinet when he noticed a set of golf clubs leaning in the corner.

Langkin put down the hammer and dragged the bag out of the garage. A few of the clubs were covered in multi-colored socks and he pulled these off to reveal big wooden heads. He pulled the biggest one out but it was nearly as long as him and when he tried to swing it it bounced hard off of the ground, vibrating in his hand painfully. Throwing it to the side, he grabbed one of the shorter metal ones and tried it out instead. A huge hunk of dirt and brown grass flew off towards a big, leaveless tree. Amused with himself, Langkin looked around for some rocks to hit and, not finding anything big enough, went back to the bag and dug around, discovering a side pocket stuffed with balls, each encircled with a thick red stripe. Putting one down on the ground, he aimed at the tree and took a big rip, twisting around hard and falling to the ground. The ball was still where he'd placed it. With a determined grunt, he pulled himself up and looked around self-consciously and got into position again, focusing on the red loop like a bulls-eye target. This time he hit home and the ball sailed high and away, cracking and bouncing into the branches. He had no idea it would go so far. If he had been facing the house, it would have gone completely over it. Langkin got another ball and lined himself up towards the building. A little more confident, he swung a little harder, hoping to make it all the way to the road.

With a satisfying plink the metal head made contact with the ball and before he had a chance to search for it the kitchen window shattered, large shards of glass falling down onto the ground. Panicking, Langkin dropped the club and ran into the garage, hiding himself around the corner. Panting, heart pounding, he stood completely still in the shadows for a few seconds before realizing that nobody was around. Giggling and limp with adrenaline, he stumbled over to investigate the damage. Before long he was back in position, taking aim at the sliding door. This hit bounced off of the siding, leaving an angled dent. A few more attempts similarly missed — one actually managing a perfect arc into the woods beyond the street — and he finally gave up and just threw a ball at the door. A hole appeared and the drapes rippled and for a second nothing else happened before the entire upper half of the glass slid straight down and exploded over the deck. Langkin started

laughing so hard he had to get down one knee, pointing at the wreckage as if somebody else needed their attention drawn to it.

Eventually he calmed down and headed back into the garage to find something else to do. The house was open now and there was the candy but he didn't feel like going inside just yet. He started for the hammer but the big covered mass in the truck caught his attention first. After unclipping the elastic hooks he pulled back the tarp to reveal a stack of old mattresses. He was about to go back to the tools when he remembered getting into trouble for bouncing on his parents' bed. 'You all are going to break something, probably your necks!' He opened the tailgate and climbed up, pulling at the one on top and trying to get it down. It was harder than he expected, heavy and difficult to find a grip. He slipped beside the pile and pushed, managing to walk it back and forth until it tumbled over the side of the truck. It was awkward and floppy, but eventually he was able to get the mattress out into the yard. The next ones were a little easier, partly because he discovered how to move them by flipping end over end.

The last mattress had some strange stains on both sides and Langkin had to drag the previous one down off of the stack so that he could swap their positions. By the time he finished he was starting to get hot and had taken off his jacket, the cold air crisp and refreshing against his skin. Without waiting to rest, he excitedly clambered up onto the rubbery block and, shaking unsteadily, jumped. He had barely ascended off the surface before coming back down, the springs creaking beneath his shoes, then was pushed up, this time rising further into the air. Another bounce, and then another. He was finding a rhythm, lifting high, feeling a pause of weightlessness that was at once instantaneous and endless, before returning for another cycle. His hair rose and fell in seeming defiance of his body's motion. His arms swayed to keep him centered. Laughing, breathless, free. He took a leap slightly off-balance and felt himself move towards the edge. Flailing his arms desperately, he kept himself within the perimeter and let his legs collapse, rebounding into the center onto his back, arms and legs held out like a giant X.

He lay there, panting, sweating, ecstatic. Looking up into the gray sky. He reached up, watching his hand grasp at it. He wanted to go higher, to really fly. He tilted his head back towards the garage, looking at the bright red trim, at the gutter. His hand swayed back, seeming to almost touch it.

Langkin rolled off of the mattresses and ran inside. He'd seen the ladder hanging on the back wall. Wrapping his arms around its base, he lifted it off of the hooks and let it lean back too far, the weight too much to hold. It crashed onto the truck, its corner piercing the windshield, a spider web of cracks instantly bursting from the spot. Sheepishly, he yanked the ladder free and carried it outside. When he opened it up next to the garage, one

leg stood free and the whole thing wobbled precariously. He walked it a step or two until it seemed stable before climbing up. The top of the ladder was below the eave so he had to hold onto the gutter to steady himself as he got onto the last step, then leaned over and shimmied onto the roof.

Raising himself to stand up, Langkin found he needed to lean back to maintain his balance, his body seeming oddly comfortable at an unnatural angle. He inched along towards the spot above the mattresses, slowly approaching the edge. Peering down, the stack seemed barely higher than the ground, its dirty, bluish form appearing compressed, solid, unforgiving. He crouched down, rolled back onto his haunches, had second thoughts. He looked back at the ladder. It had felt so close when he'd left it but now the distance between it and the roof seemed insurmountable. Turning back to the rectangular target below him, he wondered if he should just lie back and try to fall asleep, be done with it. What if the rumors were true, that sleeping alone and away from home would make you go away? Gingerly, Langkin stood up again and stared down at the ground. He took a deep breath, and another, and another, and another, then swung his arms hard and leapt.

He didn't plan or consider how he was going to land and at the last moment improvised, swinging his feet forward and landing on his butt. The impact knocked his breath out as he plunged deep, the metal springs screeching before recoiling and tossing him high up into the air. He floundered, grasping for balance and to right himself, coming down the second time awkwardly on his side in a manner that absorbed the rest of his energy and left him laying there, stunned and still as if he'd been paralyzed.

Yet he was far from it. Invigorated, he slid off and ran to the ladder, bounding up it, rolling onto the roof, his previous unease lost to a desire to go again, to replicate the rush. He walked up to the ridge and strutted along it, looking at his surroundings. He could see down onto the house, its interlocking shingles, the irregular fragments of glass gleaming on the deck, the roof of the van beyond it. Gazing out past the road he could see the tops of the trees, witnessed their upper limits for what seemed the first time, a layer of lifeless branches extending like a thicketing fog over the rolling landscape. He was at their level, felt their equal. He stood tall, scanning the panorama around him. Hills rose high, the path of the creek cut along their base, the sky reached down and touched them all. Everything was massive, and he triumphed alongside it.

He wanted to be thrown higher, straight up into the clouds, to feel like he was falling forever. With a running start his jump would be stronger, taking him higher, compressing the springs as much as possible. He looked down below the eave, to the mattresses. One breath in and he was off. The downslope carried him quickly forward and he had to do a small stutter to time his final step. Bending low he pushed hard, reaching aloft. But rather

than leaping he seemed to just glide as the gutter gave way below his feet and instead of a rise and fall he was heading straight ahead and with no time to react he stretched himself out, willing his whole body towards the stack. It rushed at him. He stretched. He was almost there, he was going to make it. His head was past the edge. That would be enough.

...major independence...

Ini was asleep again. She had her legs pulled up on the seat and her arms wrapped around them, head resting sideways on her knees like she'd dozed off in the middle of a cannonball, oblivious to where she was headed. It looked awkward, not a state of relaxation — Grenada couldn't figure how she could sleep like that. It seemed like at any moment she might tip over or her hand would slip and she'd sprawl out into a more reasonable position. Yet she remained, still, huddled up, oblivious to the world and its rules of comfort and physics. Dark ponytails hung off of her head, desperate to claim her innocence. Grenada hated her wearing her hair like that — it was a remnant of a life that she was now free of — but that was what Ini was used to and she resisted any attempts to change it.

Grenada dipped the little doughnut into her coffee, waiting just long enough for the liquid to penetrate before popping it into her mouth. Bits of powdered sugar floated out over the surface before dissolving into blackness. She looked out of the window, searching the parking lot, watching the apartment. Nothing was happening. A small shadow flickered and she sat forward but it was only a bush. Not the cat she'd imagined. She missed old Loopdiloop. It was strange not being woken up by his faint, insistent meow, the ringed tail swiping her face. Eyes opening to big eyes and tickling whiskers, or a butt. He sure let you know he was ready to eat. But he was a good guy, and had the softest fur. Ini would have loved him too.

Grenada leaned back and took a sip and winced. The coffee was lukewarm and stale. With the bitterness lingering in her mouth, she eyed the last doughnut. Ini would be expecting it. Grenada sighed and pushed in the lighter, thought about dumping the coffee but not wanting to let in the cold air put the cup on the backseat floor instead. She wasn't supposed to let her sleep but it really didn't matter, they didn't need her for proof. It also

meant that she wouldn't get anything from today's mission, though maybe that was just fine. She was just a kid, would probably never be on her own anyway. Grenada was having a hard time getting through to her anyway and she could use this time to experiment to see if anything new would stick. Ini had it in her to be a great angel if she could only discover the purpose. Snoozing in the middle of a mission showed she didn't have it just yet.

Then again, the process took time. When Grenada had first started she often wasted hours waiting for Pachinko to show up to give her orders. Yes, sometimes he'd be there when she started but often she'd wake alone (oh, how she missed her cats) and that dead time — which she could have used for agility exercises or meditation or strategic prep — was lost. Eventually she got the confidence and began to take the initiative for developing her own contacts or inserting herself into the phone tree. However, that only came after Pachinko had helped her to fully understand her damage, that she wasn't scarred but enabled, that what seemed suffering was actually purpose. Most important was to accept its existence, because your own memory was no longer proof of your experience. The damage was real, its effects were real. As Grenada remembered only a sliver of it, Pachinko was her link to the truth, her witness, her confirmation. 'Our lives,' he would say, 'are determined by actions and forces beyond our control. Many of these are invisible, unknowable, yet you have the power to transcend them, to harness them. First by making them real and then by becoming an agent for the next transformation.' An angel begets an angel.

The lighter popped out and she grabbed the pack of cigarettes from the dashboard and lit one. That Ini didn't get this yet was fine, it was only that Grenada sometimes felt she never would. Maybe it was her age, but it seemed like something deeper, more fundamental. Like she was immune to purpose. Neither of them remembered their freedom event, but while Grenada was driven by the mystery, Ini was indifferent, as though she took her rebirth for granted. Pachinko only saw her once more after they saved Ini, telling Grenada that it was now her chance 'to grow some wings.' At that last meeting he was no longer her superior, instead was just Derrick, treating her as an equal, as another with the purpose. What would he think if he saw her now, bumbling, unable to awaken her charge? Some angel. She thought of him often, missed his knowledge and mentorship, his ability to see within and explain what she seemed blind to. Sometimes when she woke, for a brief minute, she swore she could sense his presence. There was a smell, a warmth, as if he'd just left, as if she would have seen him again if she'd opened her eyes a moment earlier. If only he would show up for real, even for a single day. He would know how to find Ini her purpose.

Far off, on the other side of the lot, somebody got out of a car and started walking in their direction. Keeping her eyes on the still indistinct person, Grenada elbowed Ini.

‘Hey, wake up.’

‘Aw man, I just fell asleep.’

‘Don’t give me that. Look, I think that’s him.’ Grenada was trying to point inconspicuously.

Ini sat up and leaned close to the windshield. ‘Can you tell from here? It looks like it could be...any person.’

Grenada pushed her back, motioning her to slink down, wishing they had brought binoculars. It was at least a man, she could tell by the walk. He was dressed casually, jacket and jeans. It could definitely be him. Every few steps a breath of vapor puffed out. Grenada checked the review mirror, suddenly worried about the exhaust, but couldn’t see anything through the steamed-up window. She reached for the keys and was about to turn the engine off when the man stopped and looked straight ahead, then turned and headed into the apartments a couple buildings down.

‘Hmph.’

‘Looks like we were made.’

‘I don’t think that was him.’

‘Do you need glasses? He looked right at us. Did you get the address wrong?’

‘This is the right place. That wasn’t him.’

‘There must be a back way. Nice planning Kraip.’ Ini flashed an OK symbol.

‘I told you it’s not him.’

A few minutes later the man appeared again at the same spot, his arm around a woman.

‘Is that her?’ asked Ini.

‘Nope, not even close.’

‘Hmph.’ Ini drew her legs up to her chest. ‘So you woke me up and you didn’t even need to. I’m going back to sleep.’

‘Come on, stay awake, keep me company. Besides, we should talk about what happened.’

‘Just now? Looked like a cow was about to get milked.’

Grenada looked at Ini with disgust. Ini smiled and scratched her nose against her knee.

‘Not that,’ said Grenada, ‘I mean to you. Your damage.’

‘Again? We’ve gone over this a thousand million times. I don’t even like talking about it.’

‘Which only shows you don’t understand it yet. It’s the key to everything — what we are doing, your anger, why you’re out here and not trapped—’

‘But I’m still there, every day. It’s even worse now. When you don’t come I’m just stuck. This time I thought you’d forgot about me, that it was going to last forever.’

‘I know, I’m sorry.’ Grenada stretched forward and wiped at the inside of the windshield. ‘This one was tricky to set up.’

Ini turned away, towards the door. ‘Each day I wake up and I’m locked in again. It’s so dark. Sometimes I think I see my sister, I talk to her, but she never talks back. Because I’m all alone. You could at least visit me, every day like you used to.’

Grenada *had* been coming by most days, but telling her that would just distract Ini from the mission. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, ‘after this, I’ll start up again.’

Ini looked incredulous. The poor kid, she didn’t realize how hard she was making it for herself. Grenada doubted she had any other alternatives. Who was going to take her? Nobody wants a broken kid. They probably wouldn’t even want to know where she lived, too much on their conscience. That’s probably the real reason Pachinko left.

‘I’ll take you out tomorrow, we’ll take a day off, I promise.’

‘Can’t we do something now? This is boring.’ Ini was running her finger in the window’s condensation. A circle, a smile, two eyes, a dot in the forehead and a squiggle trailing from it down the face.

‘It shouldn’t be much longer.’ Her damage would have to wait, too. Just needed to keep her busy until things got going. ‘What’s the first tenet?’

Ini sighed and kept staring out the window while she talked. ‘No action without a poopin.’

‘A purpose.’

‘Without a purpose.’

‘Then?’

‘Before any action an angel must sleep.’

‘C’mon, this is serious.’

‘Before any action an angel must witness.’

‘And...’

‘Witness and remember.’

‘Keep going.’

‘We save ourselves, the angel supports.’ ‘Angels never forget.’ ‘The saved...’

‘The saved are— What?’

Ini nodded. She was looking straight in front of her. Grenada followed her gaze. A man was strolling towards the building, wearing a trenchcoat and a brimmed hat. He seemed disinterested in his surroundings.

Grenada reached out and touched Ini. ‘That’s him, I’m sure of it. Wait until he goes in then let’s get ready. We need to give him time to get started.’

The apartment was on the second floor, its front door facing a courtyard, tucked in behind an ivy-covered trellis. Ducking into the shadows, they pulled on their masks — Ini’s wrap completing her ninja costume, Grenada’s a double veil, bridal then funeral, the layers providing obscurity and easy breathing. With the rifle in her hands and just her eyes showing, Ini looked menacing, a look betrayed by the undertone of nerves when she spoke:

‘You sure this is the place?’

Grenada pointed to the name above the mail slot — *Sue Percy Fey* — and tipped a clay pot holding a perfectly conical miniature pine tree. Her hand slipped across the ground and when she stood back up she was holding a silver key. Ini nodded and backed away. After carefully unlocking the door, Grenada eased it open, attentive for any creaks, peering through the widening gap into the apartment. It was like looking into a jungle. Everywhere seemed overrun with plant life: surrounding the entrance, clustered around the windows, along the sills, at the floor in front of a big glass slider. The room was aglow in verdant and golden hues, light dappling through the mosaic of overlapping leaves, drooping grasses, creeping vines strung about the room, a row of herbs and aromatics, a cluster of succulents, bushes and runt trees and flowers overwatered and underpruned. Grenada quickly scanned the scene for anyone hiding in the vegetation.

Motioning for Ini to keep quiet, Grenada stepped into the apartment. She led with her gun, using her free hand to push away an overhanging branch. The air was warm and stuffy with the smell of rich organics. From somewhere deeper there was a muffled sound, a voice, voices. Ini pointed to her ear excitedly and Grenada nodded. They moved down the short hallway, past a bathroom where alien-looking orchids stood tall in front of a mirror, otherworldly faces that at once stared at and away from them, bearing and denying them witness. At the end of the hall was a partially opened door from which the speech was emanating. It sounded hoarse, foreign. Peeking through the opening, Grenada could see a bed surrounded by ferns whose lacy fronds leaned over and touched the mattress. Above it, a halo of wispy leaves and tendrils hung low from the canopy. The strange speaking continued, somewhere further within. She pushed open the door and in the far corner, next to another sliding door and a lemon tree dotted with fruit, a naked woman was sitting in a chair, her head leaned back, her arms hanging straight down at her sides. One of the ferns had been removed from its pot

and placed on her crotch, privates turned into a mound of dirt and roots, the green plant bursting from her loins like a grotesque sexual plume.

Grenada entered the room slowly, hand raised behind her, eyes switching between the woman and the direction of the voices. She moved towards the woman, checking for blood or other signs of injury. The bare chest expanded and contracted almost imperceptibly, the wavering fern amplifying the meager sign of life. Grenada glanced at Ini and waved her back, saw the shadowy figure withdraw, leaving only the thin rifle barrel visible. Grenada stepped away from the woman and her head brushed against the tree and something caught. The branch bent as she pulled at the fabric to separate it from the thorn and when freed the branch swung back with a loud rustle. The woman's head pitched up, a tight bundle of curls around a look of shock. Grenada held a finger up to her face, pressing on the veils to signal silence while the woman stared at her like a dreamer woken to an unfathomable reality. The woman began to jerk her head around as if in a panic. Trying to keep her calm, Grenada held her palm out, took a step backwards, moved her gun so it was hidden at her side. Then, like a sudden electrical discharge, the woman bolted up and past her, crying out and pointing.

'He's in there!'

A spray of soil and green flew at Grenada and she ducked and reached for the woman, catching something fleshy which yanked her forward before it slipped from her grasp and she tumbled down to her knees and then sprawled out onto the carpet. She looked up to see a blur at the doorway and a loud grunt.

'Get her Ini,' she yelled, 'we need her!'

She pushed herself up and then there was a weight on her and she fell forward again. Banshee cries, something dark pulling at her neck and slapping her face. She stuck her butt in the air and the assailant rolled over and off her, slamming upside down into the wall. Growling ferociously, it tried to right itself and Grenada stood up and kicked at it, sending it into the hall. She ran to the back of the room, to the source of the strange sounds. Around a corner and she was looking into a small, dim room filled with candles. Deep in the flickering gloom there was an altar formed from giant leaves surrounding a shining vessel holding a red, moist mass—

The screaming returned and Grenada turned just in time to sidestep a careening snarl of limbs and altar leaves, leaving her foot out to send it flailing to the ground. Without thinking she pointed her gun and fired. A knee exploded in a mist of smoke and blood and junk. The cries turned to wails, anger now drenched in pain and dread. Grenada backed up to avoid the offgas, calling for Ini. The veils shifted and she felt a cold chill on her neck. The figure sat up and the leaves fell away, showing a young face with no

hair and markings on the cheeks. It was holding its leg and looking directly at Grenada.

‘Why? Why are you doing this?’

Something crashed behind Grenada and when she looked the sliding door was open to an empty balcony. She ran to it and despite ducking her outer veil was pulled off by the tree, leaving her squinting in the bright sunlight. In the yard below, a man wearing a blue hat was scrambling over a wooden fence. She aimed her gun but hesitated, not wanting to miss and kill him too soon. She watched him disappear, looking right at her as he lowered himself behind the planks. She shoved the gun into her holster and leaned over the railing. Below her was a concrete patio strewn with plastic toys. She hopped over and took a hold of the vertical bars and let her feet drop free, sliding down as her weight overcame the friction of her grip. In front of her, through the sliding door, the apartment was dark and the wailing continued, futile laments from a void.

‘Leave him alone, you bitch! Just leave him alone!’

The floor of the balcony began to push up against her chin and with a little kick out Grenada let go, preparing to land but hitting the ground before she was ready and falling onto the large wheel of a kid’s trike. Ignoring the pain in her side, she scrambled up, kicking a shovel and dump truck and ball out of her way as she stumbled towards the fence. She struggled to scale it but managed by hooking her feet up and rolling over. From the other side she could see the man running off the grounds out into the street and she sprinted after him. He was too far away, too far to shoot at, too far to catch. He was getting away.

Frustrated, panicked, panting, Grenada reached the sidewalk just in time to see a red sports car smoke and squeal off down the road. She pulled out her gun but before she had time to aim was stopped by a blaring coming up from behind. When she looked she saw her car barreling forward, weaving across the road and running past her before stopping sharply. She ran up and opened the door and saw Ini up off of the seat, without her mask, hugging the steering wheel. There was nobody else inside.

‘Where’s the girl?’

‘I couldn’t get her. She went into another place. Nu—’

‘Never mind. Move over.’

Ini crawled into the passenger side and Grenada swung in, jamming the accelerator before the door closed. There were hardly any other cars out and soon they were flying, past apartments and soundwalls, ignoring stop signs and streetlights, searching madly. ‘There!’ Ini cried out and pointed. Grenada saw it, up ahead, a red blur. She pulled off her veil and realizing she was still holding her gun, put both of them down on the middle of the

seat. She pushed the pedal harder even though it could go no further. Ini was leaning forward, tapping the dash with both hands.

‘You’re not getting away, we got you now,’ said Grenada.

‘We’ll run him off the road. He’s a dead man.’

‘Easy, we have to take him back to Sue.’

‘Oh please, did you see her? She’s scared out of her mind. She won’t be able to go through with it.’

‘She needs to be there, at least. *We save ourselves.*’

Ini looked forward, out the windshield. ‘You’re still getting it, you bastard.’

They were gaining, could see the rear of the car clearly now. Then brake lights flashed and it turned sharply to the right, into a new subdivision. Grenada followed and took the corner too fast and they skidded, knocking into the far curb and losing their momentum while the vehicle up ahead disappeared around a curve. With the accelerator buried their car came up to speed and raced after the other, passing by an endless stream of newly-built houses — crisply painted, perfectly lawned, appearing uninhabited, seemingly unique but clearly all related: siblings, cousins, mirror images, dop-pelgangers dressed up in superficially different styles. They caught glimpses of the red car and continued the chase, twisting and looping deeper and deeper into the development, down similarly sounding roads — Westview, Crestview, Ridgecrest, Westridge — any apparent diversity diminishing as they encountered more repetitions of the same houses and colors palettes and landscaping, as if the family tree had been pruned and cloned. They came to a T intersection and no sign of their quarry.

‘Shit, which way?’

‘This place is a maze.’

‘Do you think he lives here?’

‘Is there another way out?’

‘Is there any way out?’

‘I think he’s lost too.’

‘Maybe we should just wait.’

‘Fuck it.’

Grenada picked a direction and they took off. Colors faded away as yards became dirt and homes bare masonry and wood, stacks of materials in driveways and on roofs, shells becoming skeletons becoming barren slabs. The road curved on, through a field of soil and rock abutting a wall of concrete blocks then back around back towards the subdivision, the deconstruction reversing as houses began to rise again from the earth, frozen moments of assemblage building towards an inevitable congregation with their selfsame brethren. They were nearly back to the completed dwellings when the red car suddenly came at them out of an empty garage and Grenada jerked the

wheel such that the two cars sideswiped, running in parallel to a hard stop at the curb. The gun had slid to the floor and as she reached down to pick it up she heard the window opening.

‘Hey, you!’

‘Ini?’

‘Why you run away?’

Ini was turned away, motionless, blocking Grenada’s view.

‘Move out of the way.’

‘Have not seen you in long time little st-rand.’ It was the voice from the apartment, melodic and accented. ‘What you doing? You look for me? Where Squinch?’

‘Move.’

‘You come with me, no?’

Grenada pushed Ini to the side. The man was wearing the blue baseball cap and a big smile that faded when he saw her hand.

‘You need to step out and come with us,’ she said.

But the man had already hit the gas and reversed away. Ini pushed herself back up to see and Grenada couldn’t get a clear shot. She backed the car up and chased after him.

‘What the hell? You know him?’

Ini was staring out of the open window, towards the passing houses. ‘I’ve never seen him.’

‘But he knew— Oh shit.’

Ini turned to Grenada. The confusion on her face turned to a snarl. She picked up the gun. ‘Faster,’ she said.

They wove back through the maze, past the same-looking houses, closer to him than on the way in but still not able to catch up. They hit the main road without stopping, both cars skidding wildly across both lanes. In the empty street they picked up speed rapidly, out through an interspace between developed areas. Soon open fields gave way to warehouses and then older buildings. Up ahead was a crossroads and the red car blew through a red light, turning onto the intersecting boulevard and causing a pickup to swerve and leap onto the median. Grenada followed, slowing a bit and honking her horn in warning.

‘Come on, Kraip, faster.’

‘This is all I can do.’

‘Faster!’

The boulevard had more lanes but also more traffic and it was hard to maintain speed while they dodged and weaved through the unsuspecting vehicles. Left right left left into the turn lane to pass right lurch left. Grenada was focusing on avoiding collisions and barely could keep sight of the red car.

Ini cried out: ‘Up here! He just turned!’

Grenada screeched across the road, nearly hitting a station wagon as she swerved into a giant parking lot. It was nearly deserted, a field of asphalt and white lines whose lack of obstructions made it easier to concentrate on the chase. The lot surrounded a giant, silvery structure that looked like a blob of mercury, a curved form held up by its own surface tension. The red car was accelerating towards it.

‘It must be a shortcut. I don’t know the area, I don’t know what’s on the other side.’

A single small patch of the building had just the right inclination to direct a sharp glint of sunlight into Grenada’s eyes. Ini held up her hand to block a slightly different spot.

‘He’s not turning.’ Ini was tapping Grenada’s arm. ‘Oh, woah.’

The car ran onto the curb and seemed to catch air, gliding right through a row of doors set into the metallic skin, disappearing within a shower of glass. Grenada slowed, thinking that the driver had had a heart attack or something, but then she saw, straight ahead, brake lights flash and then, farther in, flash again.

‘Don’t let him get away.’ Ini was banging on the dashboard again. ‘Let’s go!’

Grenada ran the car up onto the sidewalk and through the hole, following the chaotic trail already carved by their predecessor. Clothes and housewares, smashed displays, bent shelves, skid marks. A few people who might have been mannequins stood watching in shock. They tore through the store and out its internal entrance to the mall. Echoing all around were squeals and screams and crashes. In front of them the red car was weaving back and forth, running after people who had been milling about and then into storefronts and benches and stores on the opposite side and furniture and kiosks and more people.

‘What’s he doing?’

As Grenada drove forward it became apparent. The detritus and injured people spread everywhere across the floor made passage impossible.

She searched desperately for a way through when she noticed a pillar with a map on it. She maneuvered up next to it, found the *You Are Here* dot, and saw that they were in a big loop. Go in the opposite direction and they’d run into him. After pulling a U-turn she drove through the mall, her high beams flashing and horn blasting, going as fast as she could without hitting somebody or busting the car on an immobile planter or kiddie ride. Then the floor tilted up and the shops were gated and there were no more people. Grenada increased their speed but slowed down again when the ground leveled and their right hand side opened up into a wide arcade behind a long series of arched pillars. A roar sounded and before she could

react kids were streaming at them from the front and through the columns, pumping their hands, hollering.

‘Roll up your window, quick,’ said Grenada.

‘Who are they?’

‘It’s a hooligang. There’s so many...’

They began to surround the car, boys and girls both, ages varied but all young. There was hair big and hair tight, hair greased and hair teased, some rising high in the front and others left long in the back, bleached and dark and tied with colorful ribbons. They wore acid-washed jeans and spandex, tight shorts and multicolored leggings, high shoulders and exposed shoulder and jackets completely off the shoulders, loose shirts and tight shirts, angled outfits and tank tops. High tops and jellies, leather and canvas, laces on and laces off. The girls had makeup and some of the boys too. They looked fun and cool and sexy and foolish and were totally wild, bouncing the car, banging on the doors and windows and roof, hooting and pointing and giving thumbs up and thumbs down and the bird and fists of encouragement or vitriol or aimless excitement.

‘Show them the gun, let’s scare them off,’ said Ini. She turned to her window and waved them away, crying out. ‘Move! We need to get through!’ Someone press-hammed the glass and she flinched.

‘Shhh! Don’t irritate them.’

Grenada slipped the gun under her seat. She started to creep the car slowly forward. A baby-faced man-child with gelled-up blonde hair stood defiantly in their way, arms crossed, chin pointed high. She kept them moving towards him, trying to ignore the cacophony of slaps and kicks and yells. They kept approaching and he didn’t budge until the very last second when he leapt backwards into a linebacker stance, slammed his hands on the car, stuck out his tongue and waved his head around like it was unscrewing. Then he turned around, hopped on the hood, and pointed forward. It didn’t seem to clear much of a path but at least they wouldn’t have to worry about hitting him.

Suddenly kids were turning and shifting and thinning out, piling past the car through the archway. Grenada increased her speed a little. Her hood ornament pointed a finger to their right and turned it upwards, leaning his head back and letting off a shrill whistle. Through the arches and the throng the red car was just visible, lurching erratically. The rabble ran alongside, their screams echoing throughout the space. Grenada wanted to give chase except the width between the columns was far too narrow for her car to fit through. A gap in the crowd opened and she could see into the car, a blue hat resting easy against the seatback. Ini reached for her door lock and Grenada grabbed her arm.

‘No Ini, not here. They’re not like us, they won’t understand. They’ll tear you up.’

Ini looked at Grenada. She was crying, enraged.

‘See, you’re finding it,’ Grenada said.

Behind Ini, the red car bounced and the mass swelled back and with a screech the car accelerated away. A limp body was lifted high in the air and the mob compressed forward, its voices turning to thunder, trampling off to chase after the car. The giant hopped off the hood without looking back and joined the pursuit. Kids were running off down the path or to the body and Grenada and Ini’s side began to clear.

Grenada figured she must have made a mistake reading the map and gotten them onto the wrong loop. If they backtracked they might be able to catch him when he came back around. There wasn’t enough space to turn the car around but where they came from it was wider. Grenada put it in reverse and started to back up. There were a few stragglers hanging out around the rear bumper, a group of awkward boys caught up in their own conversation. When she started moving they walked along ahead of the car, gangling and poorly-postured, joshing and loafing as if they weren’t in the way. Grenada tapped the accelerator and when the car jerked back one boy in a dress shirt and a leather jacket tried to coolly hop back while keeping his hands in his pockets and tripped backwards onto his ass. All the others started laughing wildly and one even went to the ground, either in imitation of his fallen comrade or overcome by the hilarity. Someone with shiny hair and a pimply neck hopped on the bumper and stuck his hand out in an imitation of the blonde pathfinder. With a sigh, Grenada kept the car moving, hoping none of the fools managed to get themselves run over.

The horn sounded and with a start Grenada turned and saw Ini reaching over to the steering wheel. She pressed it again then went to her window and started to lower it. Grenada grabbed and pulled her away.

‘What are you doing?’

The boys had started slapping the trunk and the back window. Shiny hair was coming around on the passenger side.

‘These dorks need to move,’ said Ini. She turned to the slit in the window and yelled. ‘Why don’t you just get out of the way? Can’t you see we’ve got someplace to go?’

Shiny put his lips up to the crack and spoke into the car. ‘You trying to tell us what to do? This is our world, you shouldn’t even be—’

The boy stood up and Grenada heard a commotion and turned to see the red car skidding across the path in front of them, in their loop. The hooligan was rushing at and after it and the car was swerving, knocking past the angry kids who got near it. It was coming around the curve, right at them. Grenada’s foot hesitated over the gas pedal — she couldn’t outrun

the car, she didn't want to get stuck with these kids, she couldn't watch in front and behind simultaneously. She reached into her pocket and felt for the napills, pulling them out just as the red car veered hard to the left and kept turning and blasted into a store, the stampede trailing like a wake.

'Don't let him get away!'

Grenada dropped the napills into the ashtray, popped the car into drive, and sped off, leaving shiny and his pals standing arrayed around an empty space. The vehicle had to compete with the crowd to get into the store but when the kids — who just wanted *someone* to catch the red car — saw them they moved out of the way or, in a few cases, hopped on for a ride. It was a hobby store and as they followed the scar torn through it they rolled over plastic models of air, land, and sea transportation, baseball cards, comic books, board games, unpainted figurines, candy. Halfway through the store they passed a broken up paper barrier and unexpectedly were inside a pet shop, driving by cages that appeared empty whether they were busted or not, past an alcove of aquariums, one of which was cracked and spewing an arc of bluish water. An odd question popped into Grenada's head: Do fish sleep?

They came out of the front of the store crunching over glass and the car bounced heavily off the curb with the weight of the additional riders. They scanned the lot for the red car and someone spotted it exiting onto a street. Most of the passengers hopped off as they began to gain speed except for two who clung to the back, faces of determination showing in the rearview mirror in front of a looming, reflective mass. Grenada tapped the brakes as they came up to the exit and she accelerated into the turn, pulling wide to avoid a truck. When she looked in the mirror only one kid remained, hands held wide and head down.

They snaked through the traffic, Ini calling out when she caught site of the red car, filling in the interstitial spaces with a low, insistent chant. 'Faster. Faster.' In the back Grenada could see the attached kid swinging around like a desperate lamprey attached to a shark on the hunt. They hit a dip in the road and ba-bounced and something swiped up in the mirror. The kid was gone and she never even looked for him to come down because she was distracted by something else further back, flashing blue and red.

'You got to be kidding.'

'What?'

'There's police back there.' Ini turned around in her seat as Grenada continued. 'I don't know the last time I saw a cop. Thought they'd given up.' Probably just looking for some cheap action.

'We gotta get this guy before they catch up. Come on, faster!'

The red car was only a few vehicles away. A stoplight turned yellow and it ran through but the cars in front of Grenada began to slow down. She

swerved onto the curb and took the intersection at a diagonal. Tires screeched and horns honked and something hit their back end and they spun halfway around, the engine stalled. She cranked the ignition but it didn't start. Tried again. She and Ini were yelling at the car, at each other. All around people were getting out, pointing angrily, approaching. The cop was running on the sidewalk, bypassing traffic. Grenada pumped the gas and turned the key and the motor caught. She mashed the accelerator and turned them around and wrestled with the wheel while they fishtailed up the road.

A ways ahead they could just barely see a red dot. It seemed hopelessly far. Behind them the police car had made it through the intersection and was making chase. Ini's face was almost at the windshield.

'Look! It's getting closer!'

And it was. The red dot was growing and taking shape, quickly. Then it dimmed and Grenada realized it had been stopped, as if it was waiting for them. A flash caught her eye and she realized the cop was right on them, the wailing siren unnoticed in the commotion. Down the road the red car moved to the side to avoid something. It was a little coupe, driving slowly, approaching rapidly. Grenada pulled to one side and the cop to the other. As she passed she swerved at it and the driver reacted in kind, pulling hard into its blind spot and sending the police car off at a sharp angle and then dragged backwards away suddenly when it collided with a light pole.

There was nothing between them and the red car. It drew away and then back, taunting them. Grenada reached down between her legs and got her gun.

'Here, think you can shoot out his tires?'

Ini took the pistol. It looked massive in her tiny hands.

'If you want to use the rifle instead...'

'No, I can handle this.'

Her window dropped and cold air poured into the car, whipping her ponytails. She leaned out with both hands holding the gun in front of her. Grenada focused on keeping the car steady when there was a bang and Ini twisted hard towards the back. Grenada grabbed her shirt and pulled her back inside. She yelled at her over the roar of the wind.

'You OK?'

Ini shook her off. 'I can handle it. Just get closer.'

She stuck her torso out of the window again and fired. She was stable this time and Grenada saw the side of the red car spark and it moved across the lanes, away from Ini's side. Ini slipped back inside and pointed.

'Get over there so I can get a shot.'

Grenada moved over and the red car veered in the opposite direction, all the way across the lanes and onto an onramp heading for the freeway. Grenada had to brake hard and run over a dirt median to follow, and by

the time they got onto the freeway the red car had regained a strong lead. Grenada floored it. This direction was nearly empty while the opposite way, heading out of the city, was almost jammed. Freezing wind ripped through the cabin and she cranked up the heat. Up ahead the red car pulled around a semi and disappeared in front of it. As they approached the truck she wondered what it was doing out here. Probably a straggler, a long-hauler strung out on speed.

‘Do you see the car?’ Grenada yelled. The truck was blocking their view. She moved from one side of it to the other.

‘No. You’ll have to get around this thing.’

They were sliding back towards the left side of the trailer when the red car appeared, darting out from the front of the semi. Grenada hollered at Ini to get ready and started to move back to the right but she saw red lights speeding towards them and jerked out of the way and the red car went by and something popped and punched her jaw and she couldn’t see. She wiped at her eyes, it was wet and thick but she got one eye open enough to see the red car taking an exit and then the red mess and she looked down and saw Ini’s body, a torso and neck and jaw and blood brain bone splattered out over her lap, pieces of misshapen scalp and face laying like a torn, worthless mask. She began to vomit, acid and bile spraying all over herself and Ini’s empty head, coughing and heaving and crying, screaming. Screaming.

She was gone. She was rage. She was on the roadside. She was vengeance. She was blood. She rubbed away. She turned back. She burned. She followed. She saw red. She held a hand. She spewed fury and flame. She spat and gnarled. She cleaned her face with tears. She saw the red. She was relentless. She was fire. She pressed. She drove. She held her hand. She was there. She was gone.

Grenada picked up a napill from the ashtray and tried to put it into her mouth. Pain shot through her jaw. She touched her face, it was raw and tender. Carefully, she pulled her other cheek and stuffed the pill down next to her teeth, making sure not to break it. Bits of ash mixed with puke, forming a foul paste in her gums. She reached back and grabbed the rifle, then stepped out of the car. Pieces of Ini slopped onto the ground with a dull squish and a gob remained adhered to Grenada’s waist. She barely noticed. She marched towards the wreck along the fissure cut through the dead grass, her bloody, sticky hands working the gun. She was going to shoot this guy up. First his feet then his legs then hands then arms then cock then belly — maybe first the cock — and then she’d let him sit there and suffer some more before she finished him off. She was going to make this motherfucker pay. She didn’t care about Sue. Tomorrow, when she saw Ini, she’d be avenged, she’d understand, she’d know. The damage.

The red car was upside down and surrounded by tall, brown weeds, steam or smoke rising from between its wheels. She aimed the rifle and came around to the side, looking through the thin stalks at the inverted figure in the window. His eyes were open, mouth moving, making incoherent gargles. The blue hat sat on the roof, soaked in dripping blood. His head turned and he looked at her, wheezed something. 'Gotschush.' She pointed the gun at the door, in the direction of his hip, and fired. Nothing happened. Fired again. He just hung there, staring. She wanted to just shoot his face, shoot it up right there. But that would be too easy. She needed to open the door, undo his seatbelt. She walked forward, reaching her arm out to pull at the handle. The door swung open. He was hanging off the seat, legs bent up strangely. There was a dark movement in his hands and before Grenada's brain had registered the flash a bullet was already blowing through it.

...just people...

The car slipped into the mist and in all directions the surrounding country faded into vagueness. This was Bruce's favorite part of the drive, a minute or two where the road dipped into a low spot and it was as if he'd fallen into a different world, a universe unto itself, severed from and unaware of the mess it lay within. The fog encased everything in a gray air yet through that muting atmosphere a few bits of color seemed to be radiating with uncommon vibrance — the yellow centerline, a lone green stalk hovering in the field at an immeasurable distance, a discarded, misshapen beer box, its blue electric. Once, he had seen a blackbird sitting on a fencepost, the red spot on its wing a glowing beacon, fleeting and memorable. He let off the accelerator, slowing the car to increase his time in the bubble. He was in no rush. He had never encountered another vehicle here. Not for the first time he wondered what it would be like to pull off on the side of the road and hop the fence and hike off into the field, to lay alone on the damp earth until the low cloud burnt off. Perhaps it never did. Perhaps he would spend the rest of forever there, removing himself from the cycle, from the obligations of time's passage.

The roadway sloped up and the car began to ascend someplace brighter, clearer, duller. Bruce pushed aside his musings and tried to focus on the upcoming target. He disliked that name. They weren't targets anymore, just objects providing false security. Baby blankets. Distractions from the inevitable. Before he would be exploiting them: extracting information, identifying motivations, removal. Now he was a glorified babysitter — minding them, tamping down any extreme tendencies, maintaining good relations. And for what? Keeping most of these people around was asking for trouble. It wasn't a question of if they would become problems, but when. Why not act now, while the Knots still had some leverage, before they were blamed for the next catastrophe? Instead it was worry about blowback or another

reprisal. Or nothings like energy flashes at absolute zero. Everybody woke up after they had already happened anyway. And what was a few bright lights compared to a bunch of insurgents who wanted to turn everything to chaos, who were going to ruin the country that everyone decent was happy and comfortable with?

He slowed down for a stop sign to check for approaching cars. Seeing none, he let off the brakes and slammed the gas pedal and accelerated from a running start, blasting through the intersection and easing off only after it had curved out of site in the rearview mirror. There was no need for that. He wasn't late. In fact, he'd been keeping it below the speed limit, as he always did, as he was now. But these little moments were the only times he got to feel that old sense of excitement and urgency. Remind himself what it used to feel like before they turned him into the boring Bruce Shiny-side: Drive to his meeting. File his reports. The next day the same. Even his time off felt useless. It used to be that after a week of work he really needed a couple days of mental downtime, space to clear his head and recharge. Now he found his weekends a dull continuation of the same pointlessness, and he often just ended them early by getting blotto and passing out.

He hadn't seen a new target for what seemed like months. For all he knew, none of the Knots had, though it was hard to be certain of anything anymore. After the energy strikes and the rumors of purge and disbandment, they had become isolated and wary of attention. There were fears of removal, disillusionment, a sense that there was an effort to erase their existence — both past and present. The result was a fractured organization, seemingly just barely able to manage supplies and communication. The work still continued even if nobody (including the government) would admit it, but — as Bruce was proof of — it was inadequate, feckless. Meanwhile everything was teetering, and no one seemed to realize what, who was required to hold it steady. Eventually, something horrible would happen again, and again, and again. And they couldn't just keep blaming the Knots — at some point they'd realize they needed them, hopefully before it was too late.

The Knots had been assembled based on specific skills and knowledge, on their excellence — and their loyalties. The cosmos had abandoned its order, they were the saviors ensuring that society did not follow suit. They were experts, elites of a different kind from those usually held as such. There could be no training program, no pipeline, no succession plan. There was no time for replacements. When they were gone, they were gone. Bruce wondered if those supposedly in charge even cared — they probably didn't even believe that things could actually fall apart, were intentionally leaving the Knots hanging behind their ineffectual and dangerous commands so that they'd have a convenient scapegoat. That would be just like a politician. Trust the system's survival as a given, as if its inexorability issued from a

divine endowment that allowed them to avoid accountability by carelessly risking its failure. Treat the real protectors like disposable machines and then point fingers when they followed orders.

Machines. Bruce thought about The Grace Machine. He wondered what she was doing now. Certainly something awesome. There was no way she'd let them keep her away from the fight. She was a legend. He'd only gotten to work with her on two targets and of course they'd been mostly under protection. Still, even if he didn't remember much it was something to be proud of. And once on the Blemmo job she'd taken him out. Redburl was the only other Knot he knew that could say that.

That Blemmo case might have been the start of all their problems. Removing her had caused all those explosives to blow at absolute zero. It was unclear if the combined death ripples had triggered it directly or sped up whatever reaction caused it in earlier loops. Whatever the case, certain people began to freak out about the unknown consequences of removals. As if they were OK as long as they could be forgotten, as long as there wasn't the chance of a firework perpetually signalling that where somebody once was they were now not. If anything, they should have been thankful. It actually solved a problem, because rather than during the day the shit lit off before anyone was awake, before anyone was in danger. Sure, there were still some idiots making pilgrimages, but now the worse they could do was see a crater rather than become part of it. And it got rid of the explosives, so there was no need to guard the place, or bother with it at all anymore.

At least the other Knots hadn't blamed him for it. They understood the balance, how their work couldn't be judged by one unforeseeable occurrence but rather how the scales weighed when they were finished. However, after then many of the Knots began to worry about how they were perceived, concerned that those viewed as leaders could do serious damage with their short-term outlooks and tendency to hyperbolize. If forced to fight for their legitimacy the Knots risked allowing the undesirables to gain traction amidst the distraction. Hence the campaign to end the strikes, intended to not only restabilize things but also prove the value and the strength of the Knots. And it had worked, only somehow they had been turned into villains, the source of the troubles. When the strikes ceased, there were false claims that their numbers had been decimated and that *this* was the reason for the power returning. The Knots began to mistrust each other, allowed their mission to be warped and neutered. Bruce had been affected as well, initially limiting his network until he could understand what had happened. Except it never returned. He didn't know whether the others had quit or just stopped communicating with him out of fear or paranoia, but there seemed to be no way to repair the damage while they were still viewed as pariahs. They had been labeled traitors, yet nobody seemed to grasp that they were still on the

right side, that everyone else had flipped. They had gotten themselves into a self-perpetuating exile and for it to end needed to be regranted authority from those who had stolen it. They needed something big to happen so that they would be invited back, *begged* back. Before they effectively became an unwilling partner to an irreversible calamity.

There was a flash off in the indefinite ahead and when Bruce looked up he saw in the rearview that behind there was a cop signalling for him to pull over. He glanced around and realized where he was and with a sigh slowed the car over to the side. He'd been driving through the section that had been set with a slo-mo speed limit by a nearby town. Nearby being an imprecise description, as the town was actually miles away, over the hills and across the countryside. Sometime in the past, when the town was thriving from some now forgotten industry, a prospector had acquired huge swaths of farmland with the expectation that it would be annexed and developed as the town boomed into a city. This prospector had ties to — some suspected was a proxy for — the town's elected officials, and with their approval a purchase was made (at a generous — but fair, given how valuable the land would surely soon be — price) of a strip of land over which a shortcut connection to the nearest major road would be constructed. Shortly after the land (including a section of said major road) was bought the industry collapsed, the boom turned to bust, the prospector's holdings repurchased by the selling farmers at a deep discount, the shortcut never built, the strip ignored by all including the livestock that grazed over it unaware they were crossing political boundaries, ignored until recently when an enterprising police captain in need of funds for uniforms and vehicles and a SWAT team decided to set up a speed trap on the only segment of oft-traveled road in his jurisdiction. In no time at all they had new duds and new cruisers and a warehouse full of mostly unused military-grade equipment, along with expensed meals, performance bonuses, and ample contributions to the town's coffers. Thuswise, the little corridor took on supreme import and patrolling it became the most crucial, and often only, duty of the department.

Bruce had been so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't notice the single sign denoting the speed limit change, or that the pavement had turned silky smooth (not only was maintenance heartily funded but also the perfect surface made it a struggle to maintain what felt like a crawling pace), or the partially hidden billboard behind which the police waited like patient hunters with their radar guns trained on a well-worn trail. But he had plenty of time, he was in no rush. Yet it was still irritating, in no small part because it pointed out his inattention. His edge was getting soft. His purpose had been set adrift and he was following. He'd been pulled over a couple times before, once early on when he didn't know better but this was the second time in a week. The mass removal of the Knots *was* happening, not through a single

day's massacre but rather a whittling down of their impetus until even they perpetrated their own insignificance.

He waited, looking at the lights flashing behind him. In the mirror they were sharp and clear yet almost impossible to follow, a red-blue strobe that his brain couldn't keep up with and melded into a harsh violet. In the surrounding interior of the car, however, the alternating colors were not only distinct but seemed innately present. Even under the dulling brightness of the sun he could see the dash and passenger seat and sleeve of his shirt shift to one tinge, and then to another, and then back, and then back again. Even though the frequency was the same it was as if something in his immediate physical locality had made time slower, more tractable.

It seemed ridiculous for them to continue enforcing the speed trap now. It wasn't like they were going to get any money — any fines disappeared at the next reset and, especially out here, the police weren't going to be mixed up with something like escrow. Bruce understood, though. It was for the normalcy, the continuity with what they had already known, what they were comfortable with. Such things were happening all over the place: progress schools, union shops, firefighters rushing to blazes that could be extinguished by just going to sleep, gardeners mowing the same lawns and hauling away the same clippings day after day, government workers faithfully manning a stagnant bureaucracy. Even as people everywhere were giving up their attachment to the lives they had known, just as many seemed to be returning to them, working to maintain a collective social order that rested upon a shared belief that the peace and satisfaction that they remembered could still be. The Knots were actually working for the same goal, only rather than maintaining stability through tradition they were battling those who were trying to undermine it. That is, if they would only be allowed to do their fucking job. Taking notes on targets, keeping an eye on them, developing a rapport, attempting to pacify any hints of foment. This was just allowing a disease to fester and the Knots to wither. He could see where this led, and it was worse than anyplace they'd already been.

This was why he didn't just keep driving when he saw the cop. He respected the order that it represented. He could have easily accelerated and sooner or later the officer would probably give up. Or he might mistake him for a rebel and try to run him off the road or shoot him. That is probably what Bruce would do if he were in those boots.

The cop had stepped out and was walking towards Bruce's car. As he approached Bruce could tell he was the same one from a few days before. He wondered if he recognized his car. He'd taken a while before getting out, maybe he'd called the plate in and they had memorants to remember and there was going to be a bigger penalty. They'd better not try to take him in.

When he got to the window the officer asked for his license and registration. Bruce handed them across and the cop looked at them and then asked Bruce if he knew why he got pulled over. Bruce mumbled something about maybe being a bit over the limit and the cop cut him off saying it was excessive speed and that he should pay more attention since the signs were clear. Bruce stared at his reflection in the mirrored sunglasses, recognizing the exact image and look he had seen before, searching for a sign of recognition. The cop revealed nothing. Neither did Bruce. He asked why he was out here, made the same quip about a union shop as before. The cop moved his jaw identically, like he was shifting a wad of something onerous from one side of his mouth to the other. Pulled out a pad and while he scribbled said Bruce should think about trying to make the world into a better place rather than a joke. Then he handed back the documents and a ticket, explaining that he knew he couldn't pay the fine so it was effectively a warning but if they caught him again there would be more severe consequences. Exactly like last time. The cop stood back tall and waited. Bruce looked at the ticket then out the window, squinting at the officer for the sun. His breath formed a cloud that quickly burnt away. They were both waiting. Finally Bruce said sorry and thanks, both ambiguously statements and questions. The cop nodded and said he hoped he didn't see him again and walked back to his car.

Bruce pulled away and quickly hit the speed limit. Behind him the police car pulled a U and drove back towards its hiding spot. He considered the cop with equal parts respect and annoyance. The current situation was going to send the country to its doom — they needed action not hope, results not faith. The Knots needed to get involved again, but they couldn't just butt in. Bruce had already been attempting to force a situation, feeding hints to his targets, trying to find a trigger, but it was like sending up smoke signals in a sandstorm. It felt so futile, hoping that his little ripples would eventually add up to a wave. Maybe he was being too subtle, acting just as afraid as everyone else. Bedahada would be a good test — he was pretty edgy and might respond to a bigger poke. Bruce just needed to be careful not to arouse any suspicion.

Up ahead a the speed limit sign indicated the end of the trap. Across on the other side of the road he saw a pair of police cars situated beside a barn. They disappeared behind the dried and weathered structure when he passed but he still waited until he was at the sign before accelerating.

Bruce pulled up in front of the house, parking at the curb. He opened his briefcase and took out a medicine bottle, opening it and carefully shaking the lone pill into his palm. Knockout. Napill. Hello Tomorrow. Crush it in your mouth and you would drop to sleep. They said it was almost instantaneous

but he didn't really know for sure. Once during training he'd used it — or, at least supposedly had — but one side effect was that it wiped your memory for a period of time leading up to its taking. It was an escape plan, for emergencies. Normally you wanted to remember as much as possible, so you didn't lose any pieces of the puzzle. He maneuvered his hips to fit his hand in his front pocket, pushing the pill into its deepest corner.

Closing the briefcase, he looked through the passenger window at the house and made a last runthrough before the interview. Bedahada was an odd nut. He believed in some real crackpot ideas that pushed the boundaries of reason even given the times they were living in. Yet when he explained his worldview and how everything fit together he was restrained and erudite and almost convincing. He was upfront with his beliefs but never pushy, as if self-evidence and logic removed any need to proselytize, granted them only passing significance like the weather or time of day. But they were certainly more important than he let on. He'd been identified through an informant who Bedahada had invited to a dinner group that spent a large part of its casserole-fueled get-togethers discussing the latest wacko theories and organizing their own local chapter of some sort of latent, quasi-militia that would emerge to inherit control when the 'ruling classes erased one another.' There was a timetable attached to this event — not to its occurrence but rather aftermath — a fixed period during which chaos would reign and which would conclude with the termination of the loops and the return of the world as it once was. The only way to ensure survival through this 'last trial' was to prepare your community to be willing and able to protect itself at all costs until the *unwinding*. (How long this period would be was still unclear to Bruce, as all that he'd been able to surmise from his targets was that it was at least several months, but also that as a result of the current state of skewed relativity the duration could only be understood as an experienced, rather than absolute, measurement.) At first Bruce had been surprised how quickly Bedahada had taken to the interviews, easily accepting the fact that he was being surveilled under pain of removal but also seemingly unafraid that his beliefs might be dangerous for him and his cohorts. Now Bruce understood that Bedahada could not conceive that spreading this information, this supposed truth, could lead to anything but a beneficial outcome, for him or anybody else. He'd even speculated that Bedahada, with his confidence and nonchalance and apparent encyclopedic grasp of everything and their interrelationships, was the originator of the entire crazy conspiracy. However, after so many interviews with his various targets — many with no connection to Bedahada whatsoever — he had heard not only descendants of these theories but also precursors and recursions and vaguely-related stand-alones, all of which made it clear that if Bedahada was a source he was but one of many, mixing and merging their ideas into an

evergrowing, self-feeding mess of falsehoods and fear and fantasy. It was insane, it was dangerous, it was a metastasizing cancer. To think that it could be contained was just as ridiculous as believing it. It needed to be removed — the only way to control it was to cut it out. That is what the Knots should be doing, and Bruce would have already done it himself if he wasn't afraid they'd come and—

The front door opened and Bedahada stepped out onto the porch and waved. He was wearing a faded turtleneck and baggy sweatpants, and had a dopey grin that made him look like an overeager dog. Bruce grabbed his case and the phone and got out of the car.

‘So you just going to sit out there all morning?’

Bruce walked across the yard, waiting to respond until he was within shaking distance. He didn't extend his hand. ‘Hello Joshy.’

‘Bruce.’

He followed Bedahada inside through the worn-down house into the den, sitting down in his normal spot on the stiff couch. There was a steaming mug on the table in front of him. He actually preferred not to drink anything, but had been taught that having a beverage helped to establish a routine that would be comforting for the targets as well as build rapport through acceptance of their hospitality. Bruce wasn't sure that this was actually true, since most of them still acted annoyed at the request. Bedahada was the only one who would always have his tea ready when he arrived, always piping hot as if he'd just poured it.

There was a shiny black telephone sitting on the table and from it a dark wire formed a low, sagging arc across the room to the wall. Bruce unplugged it and put his own phone on the table next to it and connected the wire. He pulled out the keycard he'd made up that morning then lifted the receiver and with the same hand dialed the number. When they answered he gave them the target id and then his own and after they responded with a code he checked the card and told them the word. He was transferred and the memorant said she was ready and he turned on the speakerphone. He checked to make sure she could hear him clearly and then had Bedahada do the same.

‘You know, I put that phone out so you wouldn't have to bother with bringing your own.’ Bedahada was gently rocking in his recliner. ‘Besides, that beige thing looks horrible in here, don't you think?’

Bruce ignored his question. ‘How're things?’ he asked instead.

Bedahada shrugged his shoulders. ‘Same as always. Ugly phone. Meeting with my favorite pal. Waiting for you all to disappear. It's cold. What I wouldn't give for a warm day to just lay under the sun.’

‘It could be worse. Some places don't even get to see the sun.’

‘And for some it's always summer. If only I could get a flight south...’

‘Yeah, if only those lazy pilots would waste their day so that you might manage to stay awake and catch a few precious minutes of rays.’

‘They wouldn’t have to do it all the time. Just once would be nice. Maybe they could bring some other people along to train. Spread out the sacrifice. It worked for the power plants.’

‘Sounds like you’re accepting that this will go on.’

‘I never said it wouldn’t.’ Bedahada leaned forward, staring at Bruce. ‘The ones who got us in this mess are just dragging their asses getting us out. Until then, we all just have to accept that it’s not quite time to wake up.’

‘Well, since everyone’s asleep and making sacrifices maybe you could too? As in, maybe have a little more patience? Or just take a nap? After all, we wait long enough and everything goes back, right? Flights and seasons and whatever else. We’ll be wondering why we got so worked up in the first place.’

‘What do you mean *we*?’

Bruce started to respond then stopped. He needed to tread carefully, needed Bedahada’s sympathy. ‘Joshy, you and I, deep down, we want the same thing. Peace. Order. Civilized society. For this all to go away, to return to how it was. And if we can leave behind all those who want to fight that, who fought against it even back then, so much the better. Sounds pretty good, actually.’

‘Are you actually suggesting we’re on the same team?’

‘I’m saying we’re on the same side. That the number of people to blame for this mess is a lot smaller than you think.’

‘No, it’s a lot bigger than *you* think. We’re not talking about just getting rid of the bosses. There’s a whole backlog of lackeys ready to fill their spots. The layer at the top is thick, and until it’s peeled off nothing can change.’

‘Do you seriously believe nothing’s changed? I mean, not long ago you and I wouldn’t even be talking.’

‘Oh sure, this is great.’ Bedahada gestured between them and at the phone. ‘You naughts temporal still running around trying to “keep order?” Yeah, I’d say that nothing’s really changed.’

Bruce forced himself to ignore the slur. It was a sign of aggression, though, something to egg on. ‘So if we just disappeared then that would be a sign things were moving in the right direction, huh? Why not go to sleep before I got here? It’d be like the Knots never existed. Problem solved, that much closer to the unwinding.’

‘If only it were so simple, Bruce. I’ve told you before — it’s a process. There’s a reason behind this. A message. They’re trying to open our eyes.’

‘Who’s they?’

‘Who’s? What’s? How’s? *When’s*? You’re looking in the wrong direction. There’s nothing there for us. At some point we’re going to see how we can be better, how everything can be better. And then it will be better, and

all of this, the meaning behind it, the questions and the answers, all of it will collapse into the same thing which is nothing and we won't have to ask anything anymore because we'll have learned and we'll be happy and alive and that's all, that's everything.'

'That doesn't make any sense. You're saying the meaning is to have no meaning. Or to forget it or something. I don't understand what that accomplishes.'

'Of course you don't. Because you're in your own way. It's beyond you because you have to go for it to happen. You can't look out, you can't look forward, because you can only look down. You're blind to the future and you'll never see it. But those of us who can, who aren't attached to the system, we know the way out. It's so obvious. Destroy the system. Destroy the metaphor. When you take away the meaning then there's nothing left to return to. You can only go forward.'

This was not the first time Bruce had heard this, but never with this kind of passion. And it still made him want to laugh. He stared at Bedahada, holding his face blank. He knew what he was supposed to do. Back off. Deescalate. Sympathize and divert. Lead him towards something innocuous, like sports or books or the weather. But he needed to push a bit further, try to light the fuse. A direct logical attack. Something he'd been trained to avoid. If he framed it right, it would sound like a stupid, throwaway comment. Yet maybe Bedahada would notice, at least subconsciously. Action is born from crisis.

Bruce let a wisp of a smile peek through his serious expression. 'What if everyone is the system, including you? Maybe we all have to go. Or maybe since you're the one who understands all this, *you're* the one making this meaning. Maybe if you removed yourself, it would stop for the rest of us. What if you've got everything backwards?'

Bedahada blinked. Opened his mouth but remained silent. He seemed confused, at an impasse. It almost looked as if he was hurt. Then he stood up and stepped quickly across the room towards a desk.

The sudden move caught Bruce unprepared. 'What are you doing?' he said, jumping up to intercept the other man but catching himself and backing up as he stuffed his hand into his pocket.

'Don't even fucking think about moving.'

Bruce froze, balancing most of his weight on one leg, rolling the pill imperceptibly between his fingers. Bedahada was holding a silver pistol in both hands, pointing it at him.

'What are you trying to do? Start trouble? Get me all worked up so I do something bad?'

'I don't know what you're talking about, Joshy. I didn't mean—'

‘Bullshit. You’re pushing me. You’re not looking for information. You’re trying to get a rise out of me. You want an excuse to take me out.’

He was being called out. This would be tough to explain away. Bruce looked at the phone, the red light glowing next to the SPKRPHONE button. He shifted slightly and Bedahada took a step forward and Bruce froze again. He needed to buy some time, a distraction. He turned his head towards the phone and spoke at it.

‘It’s alright Joshy. There’s nothing going on. I can’t see you, though. You should come back in here, you’re making me nervous. I don’t have anything to report. Let’s take a break. We can continue this later. What are you doing in there? I can’t hear you. Is everything OK?’ His hand was almost out of his pocket. He got ready to dive to the floor. ‘I don’t know about you but I’m hungry. We can call—’

He was on the ground, his ears pulsing, his arm wrenched, stuck under something. He looked over and saw a half of a bicep, shreds of flesh laying in a pool of blood. There was a greenish tinge in the air, a bitter taste. Behind the arm was an elbow pointing the wrong way, the hand up close to his face with a red capsule resting in its palm. Without hesitation he lunged his mouth at the pill but when he bit down got a mouthful of shoe which kicked him away. He rolled over his arm and cried out as electric fire shot through it and across his face and his vision went white then dots then pinpricks as the pain lessened slightly. Bedahada was looking down at him, shaking his head.

‘Nice try Shiny-side. You’re just stirring up all kinds of shit, aren’t you?’

He knew his name? That was bad. He had to get out of here.

‘If you kill me, your days are over.’

‘And if I don’t? I get to go free?’

Bedahada was smiling, fearless. Bruce was having a hard time breathing. His arm throbbed. He looked at it, blood flowing down then up the ragged bone before streaming off like a quivering tentacle grasping at the floor. If he could stall long enough, maybe he would pass out. Then he saw the emerald specks on the hanging flap of skin. A junk gun? How did Bedahada get that? That was a problem. He needed to get rid of him, get some space to think.

‘Just go. I can explain things. I can get you out of this.’

Bedahada’s smile grew. He pointed the gun off to the side. ‘I don’t think oh, seeing how their listen in right now.’

The pain in his arm was easing and he felt himself relax. Things were starting to make sense now. His plan was working, he just needed to figure out how to get him out of here. That phone was a problem, though. Bruce looked up at Bedahada and began to make whisper noises.

‘I canned ear you.’

Bruce acted more urgent, mouthing nonsense and spitting fake consonants of air. Bedahada put his hand down and it stayed behind while his head inflated. With his good hand, Bruce grabbed at his shirt but his arm went through the neck and he pulled him in. Bedahada squirmed gluestuck and his ear tried to kiss while Bruce spoke with soft anger.

‘This place’ll be flooded with Knots. You’re a dead man no matter what. You still have time. Call your troops, tear it off, end it all. Fuck this hell.’

Bedahada slipped through his arm and floated. His face opened to teeth. ‘Use one other bitch,’ he yelled. His arm was gone, then back, flickering. ‘Vie fo fi fuss ebb in nose heaven. Tar gets row get argh its org. Stomp it! Done tooth is!’ A flame cleaved the room and it shuddered and then was mended by a pickled ghost.

‘Fuck sunnyside, done tact sews up eyes. Weird hall bing whatcha. Thin kiwi wood endo dis?’ Bedahada’s hand was metaled and waving between him and Bruce. ‘Not good, not bad, not nose.’

Bruce searched for Bedahada’s face. He had to tell him to leave, before he got caught. Perhaps he’d already gone, left his body as a decoy. Now it was gone too, just a black hole. Bruce looked in and there was nothing. He had time to think now. He didn’t understand. It was only black.

*...no divisions
between things about to collide...*

The radio flicked on, blasting a bit of music and mostly static. Somewhere far off, that noise meddled with a dream and they subsumed one another, unfathomable meanderings turned to impossible sense by a loosed mind. Then the sense fell away and Bess was dragged awake by the now immediate sound. As she lumbered into consciousness and reached over to turn off the alarm she paused at the last moment to take note of the song. Through the hiss and crackles she could just barely make out the catchy melody, a few words. *...all been spent...* A familiar tune, but not as a wakeup — this was her first time hearing it during these mornings. She clicked off the radio. Every day a new song. It was disorienting, providing a bit of false hope that the loops had ceased. But she knew they had not. Her mementos were missing: the calendar, the chair, the pencil. Heck, she had fallen asleep in the lab, not here.

Bess lay back, trying to recollect her dream. It seemed almost within reach as she tried to follow the song back to where she'd been just a few seconds before. Of course it was lost but she still pushed, searching herself for the secrets of the zero hour. She closed her eyes, attempting to settle back, to reconnect with the mysteries of the forgotten.

She snapped her eyes open and sat up, swearing at herself. She'd almost fallen back asleep. What was she thinking? She absolutely could not waste a day like that. And she knew better than to look for insights in her own mind, where perception and intimacy would only obscure the truth.

Swinging off the bed, Bess went to her desk and sat down, opening a notebook and focusing on recalling everything she'd committed to memory. First from yesterday and then walking back, every day in a deeper room, each note translating an item precisely set. It was still challenging for her, but after some time (unfortunately getting longer with each additional loop)

she had a couple pages of neat entries, ready to be reviewed and practiced throughout the day. She broke the pencil in half and placed it on the corner of the desk, moved the chair to the other side of the room, and went over to the calendar to mark the day with a thick black X.

She glanced at the clock next to the bed. Shoot. No time to dawdle. As the days piled up, every morning it took longer to remember and was beginning to cramp her schedule. Bess rushed into the shower, staying focused on being efficient but all the while ruminating about how to deal with this predicament of time. It wasn't sustainable — at some point she would be forced to drop either her collected data or data collection. And that assumed that she wouldn't hit a memory limit before then. Thus far she'd surprised herself with the depth of her recollection but it seemed doomed to plateau at some point. She toweled off, quickly brushed her hair, headed to the bedroom to put on the same jeans and white blouse she'd worn since before the beginning. If only she could find some more assistants. Her students were already busy like her with their own memory tasks. It was a challenge to convince others of the importance of her research, let alone that they should spend a chunk of their day memorizing and reciting data. It was difficult enough to even get test subjects, and that only worked because she had something to pay them. Sim and her had already had discussions about memorants, but they were hard to come by and to afford them would require some fancy escrow dealing. Perhaps it was time to figure out if she could make that happen.

In the kitchen she grabbed a banana and, from the fridge, a diet soda and the sack lunch she'd made what felt forever ago though she knew it was actually yesterday. She stuffed everything into her bag and in the midst of mentally running through the day's schedule realized she needed to go back to her bedroom to get her coat.

Chef then Grav then Binaca to the lab. Memorants. Back to the hotel. Update to *The Loop*. Memory session. Sleep.

Bess looked around her bedroom dumbly, trying to remember what she was here for. She turned, staring back towards the kitchen, retracing her path in her mind until the retrospectively obvious purpose returned and she walked to the closet.

Chef's building was a few blocks away. She pressed the buzzer and his voice crackled through the speaker.

'Yes.'

'It's me, Bess.'

'You alone?'

'Always.'

'What's the word?'

Bess paused for second to make sure. ‘Revive.’

The door clicked and she went in, shrugging off her jacket before tackling the three flights of stairs. The air warmed considerably as she ascended, and once at Chef’s floor she was almost sweating. She knocked on his door and after the sound of multiple locks disengaging Chef’s face appeared behind two chains. He looked past her then closed and opened the door and poked his head out, looked down the hallway, nodded her inside.

‘How’s it going, professor? Cutting again today?’

Bess sat down on the leather sofa, a well-used piece of furniture that looked like it had once been quite expensive. She leaned back and it cradled her with its smooth touch. This was something she looked forward to every day. It was quite possibly the most comfortable couch she’d ever sat in. If Chef ever got removed she’d give considerable thought to figuring a way to get in here just for this.

‘No, just back to normal. We’re giving Grav a break.’

Chef disappeared into a back room and Bess pulled out her notebook and looked over her notes, simultaneously reinforcing her memories and preparing to report. Chef wanted information on what was going on, particularly for addicts, though his interest often extended into areas that she couldn’t imagine had any practical value. Whatever his reasons, it allowed them to avoid escrow. And it was good preparation for *The Loop* to explain things to somebody less technical.

Chef returned holding a small white paper bag which he handed to Bess. She reached inside and pulled out a small bundle which she looked at without consideration before dropping it back inside and rolling up the bag. Across the way from his kitchen, Chef asked her if she wanted any coffee even though she always said no. Through all their morning meetings she’d come to like Chef, but she still didn’t trust him not to spike her drink. He came back with a mug in one hand and an instant camera in the other and a lit cigarette in his mouth. He plopped down on the opposite end of the couch and lifted the camera. Bess held the bag and her hand up across her face.

‘Uh uh, you know better than that.’

‘You’re a good-looking lady. I don’t know why you’re so averse to it.’

‘Because I see no need to document my presence here.’

‘It’s only temporary. How much could happen in a day? What’s the matter, you don’t trust me?’

‘No offense, but no.’

Chef grunted nonchalantly. ‘Everything’s so fleeting now, and always the same. I just like to capture the moments of difference a little longer.’

‘Why don’t you take a picture of yourself and know that I’m there, right behind the photograph. That’ll capture the moment.’

‘Heh, that’s pretty funny.’

He turned the camera and looked into it as if considering her idea before tossing it onto the couch between them. Bess dropped her hand and looked at it and then at him. He was wearing a stained white undershirt and sweat-pants, just as always. She was pretty sure that the color of his pants and the blotches on his shirt changed every day, but she couldn't be sure. It might be a trick of her mind, self-confirmation of her intuition that he found ways to resist routine. Either way, she didn't have brainspace to spare for memorizing the details of his outfit.

'So what's new in the land of gray matter?' he asked.

'Well, yesterday was Grav's testing day. As you know, we've been giving him lower doses for a week and his tolerance never seemed to wane. Every afternoon he was freaking out, threatening to break his contract and find another score, threatening us. We had to sedate him so he'd fall asleep and not screw things up.' She decided not to mention handcuffing him to the bedframe. Despite her own self-promises that she would unlock him after she woke up, she had no way of assuring that had actually happened. In her mind it was impossible to let go of the feeling that she'd left him stranded, stuck to that bed forever. She was here now, she'd missed him, the her that would have set him free lost to the same eternity that he was trapped in. Was this guilt something she'd brought across, or was it a consequence of the zeroing? She certainly wasn't telling Chef about it. 'It appears that the physical continuity which is retained at each reset overrides any mental aspect of the addiction. Not an unexpected result, but still interesting.'

'As long as you assume I didn't cut your stuff with some even better shit.' Chef blew smoke out of a sly grin.

Bess gave him a sneer. 'I thought you might find that good news. You've got a customer base for life.'

'Allow me to restrain my excitement, but I could've told you that without all of your fancy science. Once an addict, always an addict. Sit out here and watch my door for a week, you'll understand. I'll tell you the truth, I was kind of hoping you'd tell me there's a chance I might be able to look forward to a vacation, even just for one fucking day. It's like I somehow got stuck with a normal job.' This wasn't the first time he'd complained about this. 'Everybody's out having a good time while I'm in here fulfilling my obligations. Makes me sympathize with those power plant guys.'

'No one is forcing you to do this. Just take off for a day. The world will go on.'

'Nah, between escrow and these raving addicts, they've got me by the balls. It doesn't help that word gets out who's got supply and before you know it you're like a junkie celebrity. I need The House to keep them under control, and The House needs me to feed their slaves.'

That hurt. Bess looked down at her hands uncomfortably.

Chef went on: ‘No offense, professor. It’s just a fucked up world. I guess we’re all paying for our sins one way or another.’

‘Maybe you could ask for a break. The House could find somebody to handle your duties for a while.’

Chef started laughing, a dry, aimless wheeze. He held up his mug and took a sip. ‘I’m sure they’d be happy to give me a break. A permanent vacation.’ He took a deep drag and blew resigned jets of smoke out of his nose. ‘I’m not ready to retire just yet.’

Amid the drab, lifeless row of similarly dilapidated buildings stretching endlessly down the street, broken up only by the occasional empty lot or cross street, the hotel was impossible to miss: a single, narrow apartment building that stood out like a glowing coal among long burnt-out rubble, a warm beacon in the cold morning. It had been entirely coated in a thick, rich hue of reddish-orange, from its unadorned parapet down across its window frames, over the industrial intricacies of its (supposedly booby-trapped) fire escape, covering brick and stone and concrete alike, even absorbing the front door and porch into its uniformity as it spilled over the stoop and down the steps until it abruptly halted, as if by some municipal force, at the intersection with the rough, leaden sidewalk. It reduced any architectural detail or structural blemish to monochrome invisibility, giving the whole building flat and shadowless appearance, as if one were looking at a decal whose purported depth and detail was nothing more than printed illusion. Close inspection showed the hotel’s facade to be formed of the same crumbling bricks and pocked concrete and ragged stone and corroded metal and fissures and erosion and age as those surrounding it, however even from a short distance it seemed not just apart but immunized from the decay. Yet it was only a mask, a deceptive veneer over a substance as destitute and rotting as those confessed by its neighbors’ unvarnished visages. It was not, nor ever was (as far as Bess could tell), actually a hotel, the name actually coming from a snarky joke that Sim and the others had started, referring to it as the type of place one could never check out of, a doubled allusion to both detestable insects and a location evoked by the architectural referent suggested by its blazing paint. Bess found the joke too dark and cruel for her tastes and she banned it, however, as these things do when no suitable alternative is found, the moniker stuck around and now even she referred to it as the hotel, though uncapitalized (at least in her mind) so as to turn it into just another word — an innocuous, convenient, meaningless habit.

After she buzzed, the door cracked and Jimmy Bucatini’s long, creased face popped out, his hard, vexed expression softening to indifference when he recognized her. Before he had a chance to let her in, she heard a voice booming out from behind him.

‘Whatda fuck Nits? You just gonna stand there until all our balls freeze?’

‘It’s Dr. Caltrop, you lunk,’ Jimmy said with a rasp that sounded like it was abrading away significant hunks of his windpipe with every utterance, as if too many words would threaten to completely waste away his speaking anatomy.

‘Oh, my apologies Dr. C. I didn’t realize what time it was.’

Bess stepped into the building, pulling off her scarf and breathing in the warm air. ‘Good morning Mr. Greco,’ she said kindly, ‘don’t worry about it.’

As usual, the honorific — which Bess always used, a sign of deference and respect she wished to overemphasize — caused Roman to look away uncomfortably. He was a giant man, not fat but rather a specimen of impossible muscular bulk, his clothes seeming to be stretched to the edge of failure, his normal-sized head appearing disproportionately small atop a awkward, herculean frame that never comfortably fit into a world incorrectly scaled for its mass. He was sitting (though she could not see any hint of chair behind his impressive extent) at a folding table, a fan of cards peeking between two giant hands. Next to him was a bug-eyed, hollow-faced, slick-haired twitch whose yellow-toothed smile looked like he was about to snatch some invisible insect out of the air for a quick snack.

‘Hiya toots,’ said Weeble. He had a look on his face that would skeeve out a blind woman. ‘You guys know this beautiful lady?’

Jimmy took a seat opposite Roman, palming up a stack of cards. Between gargantua and the marfan-esque beanpole, Weeble looked like a child, a hyperactive troublemaker you wouldn’t trust to turn your back on. He was leering at Bess, his tongue digging at some spot on his lower lip.

‘Shut up Weeb. She’s way outta yer league.’ Roman threw a card down in the center of the table and collapsed his fan. ‘If she even started to talk to you, the shit she knows would make your ratty little head explode.’

Weeble started to snicker. ‘That sounds fucking cool. Alright babe, blow my mind.’

‘I told you to quit it. Your mind’s already gone. I bet you can’t even remember when we started this game.’

Weeble’s snicker continued and then quickly faded, trailing off into a wisp of embarrassment as he aimed his shifty eyes away from Bess and down to his cards. With his stare averted, Bess felt free to watch him closely. He was a rare creature, having pulled a juiced-up all-nighter and woken late, his zero hour deep into the loop, offering not just the potential for deep study of the pre-zero phase, but a window into a future that few would stay up to know. Every time she saw him (which was about three-quarters of the loops, the intermittent gaps within the regularity suggesting a further intriguing mystery), Bess was reminded how she would love to include him in her research, his circumstance offering a unique element to her study. Of

particular note was his complete lack of contextual memory — every time she saw him he had no clue about the loops and as a result his amnesia led him to believe he was experiencing some day from his past as present. Such behavior was not unheard of, but it was still rare enough that being in the presence of such a subject was tantalizing. However, she had yet to find a way to include him that she would be comfortable with. As interesting as he might be, he also frightened her, his unabashed deviances likely exposing just a tip of deeper troubles lurking beneath those impenetrable, agitated eyes. For all she knew he was getting himself killed every day, which might explain the memory quirks. She'd considered discussing Weeble with The House, perhaps wrapping him into their agreement. He wasn't a resident of the hotel, however, instead somehow employed by the organization. They might get the wrong idea, and her relationship with them was already strained after they'd discovered she'd reached out to Osos to see if they might be able to supply study subjects. Using escrow did not require exclusivity, but The House didn't appreciate having to share her business. Watching Weeble cycle through his cards, his whole body shaking with the pointless motion of a fidget leg, Bess felt partly relieved that she hadn't succumbed to her curiosity. She had plenty to work out as it was.

'I'm taking Binaca today,' Bess said, 'so I need to get in her room.'

Jimmy was staring at his cards, oblivious to anything else. Roman kicked him under the table.

'Nits! Where's your manners old man? She need's Binaca's key.'

Jimmy reached down beside him and pulled up a huge ring attached to his belt. He flipped through the jangling keys and then there was an almost indiscernable click and they dropped back to his side and between his fingers there was a rounded piece of tarnished metal.

She took the key and held up the white bag. 'Obviously I need to stop up at Grav's too, unless one of you wants to make the trip up there for me?'

Weeble looked up eagerly but Roman cut him off before he could even start with an elbow. His eyes remained on his cards while he replied: 'Sorry, Dr. C, but we're in the middle of a game.'

She grinned to herself and turned towards the stairs. Everybody in their lanes, and Grav was hers.

Six flights up Bess stopped and took a breather on the landing, leaning first against the railing but after being reminded of its precarious sag choosing to rest against the wall instead. It was too bad all this exercise didn't mean squat for the next times. She wished she'd kept up her jogging before the looping started. Grav was a useful subject and the few minutes required to scale these stairs was really a small price to pay for his data, however knowing that it wasn't going to get any easier vexed her motivation. This had become a daily ritual, tracking both progress and stasis, a source of

comfort and exhaustion. Sometimes she felt like quitting for a few days, taking a break. Eventually she was going to need that. But she feared such a capitulation would reset her equilibrium, perhaps permanently, resulting in a loss of everything she had worked to gain. If she could trust her students not to screw up, she would gladly hand off this duty to them, yet even Sim was prone to slipping once in a while, and beyond that there was no way she would send them to Chef.

What she actually needed to do was stop procrastinating and get on with it. She pushed off the wall and powered up the last few flights, slogging over to Grav's apartment and slipping the bag under the door. She'd used the mailbox downstairs early on but found that Grav would complain about getting ripped off which — whether it was true or not (she was pretty sure the boys downstairs wouldn't allow that) — only added needless uncertainty. Clomping down the stairs, Bess was glad she didn't have to deal with him this morning, and that he was getting a full package today. The last week had been quite hard with him being so edgy. They'd had tough days in the past, but it seemed that residual frustrations had built up and by yesterday Grav had become quite scary. Even after they'd observed his zero hour and let him take the uncut dose he was upset. 'I knew you'd been holding out on me, bitch.' Hopefully today would cool him off, but she was still nervous about this afternoon. She would make sure to bring one of her students along, just in case.

She would have felt worse for him and his situation if he wasn't such an entitled brat. In their sessions he'd treat her and her students like they were his inferiors, interjecting stupid theories that would have little connection to her research or even reality, his fried mind's interpretation of her questions and experiments distorted by drugs, lack of context, incomplete memories, and conceit. They had learned to tune him out, his ego such that he didn't even realize he was being ignored while he did them the favor of gifting them with his intellect. He *was* doing them a favor, just not for the reasons he imagined.

He still worried her, though. Not that he would hurt her — he talked tough but seemed more bluster, not to mention he was built like a twig — but rather that he would refuse to participate any further. He seemed pretty well controlled by escrow, but she didn't know what kind of contacts he actually had, whether he could or would purchase an escape if the current situation upset him enough.

Bess arrived at Binaca's floor and went to her door, not thinking about the poor young girl but instead of Grav's parting words, vitriol spat from a satiated creature. 'You best watch yourself. I don't need you. I can pay off, get a new hookup, skip this shit. I can make you gone.'

In the gloom, lit only by a murky radiance from some unseen window or fixture, Binaca's door looked just as bleak as everything else. However, Bess had been here enough to recognize — or perhaps imagine — the deep green paint that had been applied sometime in the whenever past, a verdant layer rippled with streaks and runs that proclaimed defiance to its surroundings. Or maybe it was just a means of easy identification for clients. Bess, though, refused to believe it was just some shallow signal, for she saw a glow emanating from a place within, that even though physically the door looked nearly black the tiny glints of emerald from its uneven gloss hinted at the existence of a gem hidden inside the dim drecks of the hotel. She inserted the key but found it turned too easily, and when she opened the door she was stunned first by the brightness (streaming in from a partially raised shade) and then by the presence of another figure lying on the bed — unclothed, face up, blindingly pale except for a dark fuzz haloing a limp sprout.

Downstairs, the three were still playing. Roman was leaning forward with his legs splayed wide and Jimmy was holding his hand over his mouth, as if trying to prevent the escape of anything that might be mistaken for emotion. Weeble was glaring at his cards.

'Hey, Weeble, who'd you let in here last night? There's somebody up in Binaca's room.'

Weeble looked up at her with the same vile expression he'd been directing at his hand. 'What? Are you her fuckin' mom?'

'Actually,' said Roman with sincerity, 'she is.'

Bess probably looked just as shocked as Weeble, both of them turning to Roman and then to each other. Jimmy, his hand still plastered on his face, began to shake like he was holding something in and quickly his convulsions transformed into a cough and his hand into a fist and he turned away, hacking a croup through the precious remainder of his vocal chords. Roman suddenly burst into rumbling laughter, throwing down his cards and punching the little man on the shoulder.

'What the hell, you ape,' said Weeble, rubbing his arm and glaring now at Roman.

Annoyed at being ignored, Bess aimed her words at the sniggering hulk. 'Did you hear me? There's somebody up there with Binaca. A man. A *naked* man.'

Roman looked over at Weeble with feigned exasperation. 'What kinda place you think we're running here?'

'Hey, I don't know nothing. I ain't seen Binaca all night. I don't know who that slut brought up with her before I got on.'

'That's bull,' said Bess, 'somebody went up there tonight. They had to. On *your* watch.'

‘Sure, plenty of people. They live here. They wanna bring a friend? That’s none of my business. Once they go up those stairs, it’s outta my hands. I’m standing watch down here, not at some green door checking that everyone has a ticket for the ride.’

‘Yeah, well maybe you should be, given what happened yesterday.’

‘The fuck you talking about yesterday? I ain’t heard nothing’

‘What do you mean? You were there! You—’ Bess realized what she was doing and slapped her head. ‘Ohhh.’

Roman began to laugh. Nits too, though it didn’t sound any different from his cough.

‘This isn’t funny,’ said Bess, ‘you didn’t have something to do with this, did you?’

Roman’s smile fell slightly. ‘Oh come on, I don’t know a thing. And, it is kind of funny, you forgetting and all. For a second there I thought you were going to actually make him remember.’

‘Remember what?’ said Weeble. ‘Am I supposed to know this doll? I’ll tell you what, if you wiped that shitty look off your face you might be pretty attractive. You should think about that.’

Bess ignored Weeble. ‘It’s not funny. I don’t care how it happened, you just need to help me get him out of here. No big scenes. Let’s try not to have a repeat of yesterday. I wouldn’t want to have to get The House involved, *Mr. Greco*.’

Roman turned serious and stood up, towering over the table. As he headed for the stairs, Weeble whined after him. ‘What, you let this bitch boss you around? Who da fuck she think she is? Yap yap and you turn into a pansy. Maybe you should throw *her* out.’

Bess looked back at Jimmy. ‘Mr. Bucatini, perhaps you should make sure Mr. Wobble leaves before we come back.’ They nodded at each other then she turned to follow Roman.

‘How the fuck does she know my name?’

The Caltrop lab took up a quarter of the eighth floor of the university medical tower, a square centered on the western side, providing a closeup view of the adjoining hospital’s brick face and zero corner offices. For the first few years they had been in the second basement, a dungeon of concrete block and slab with no windows but a tall ceiling and ample square footage. Then Dr. Spohnik and Dr. Burloyn needed the space (and height) for their CAT scanners, computational resources, and observation rooms, so her group was moved out of the caverns and up to their current location, graciously carved out of the floor otherwise occupied by the two distinguished professors, losing half the floorspace (and probably two-thirds the volume) but encouragingly reminded that she was gaining reputation by finally being ‘above ground.’

Before the loops there were plans for an MRI machine to be installed in B2, however the current situation made that impossible and as a result there was a large void in the old Caltrop space sitting unused and going nowhere, like it existed as part of a looped film of identical images which showed the same lack of progress whether playing or paused.

Bess would have loved to have access to an MRI or even a CAT scanner. To be able to observe the internal structures of the brain, especially at transition points, would be a powerful, possibly transformative, tool in her research. Of course, there was no MRI available and Spohnik and Burloyn — the old imps, as she and her students referred to them — wouldn't let them use the CAT machines. Originally it was because things were too busy and there wasn't scanner time to spare. Now the old imps barely came in, instead they and their staff off at some unknown site presumably work in secret, their equipment left locked up beneath the building. Multiple times she'd requested to use the machines and was denied with a variety of excuses (and her rejoinders ignored): you don't know how to use them (then train us), you might hurt somebody (then train us!), you might break them (they'll be fixed the next loop), they won't help with your research (how would you know?), it's a security threat (?).

This latter one had been particularly perplexing, though after last week's visit the picture was perhaps more clear. A couple of plain joes in aviators and boring suits stopped by, flashed credentials and told her with grave seriousness that her sending information into *The Loop* was a national security risk. That she was providing enemies with vital intelligence that was an existential threat to the nation. If it was so important, why not find a way to work together? She might be persuaded to stop sharing her results if they provided equipment, lab space, access to other research. She had made similar requests in the past, attempts at partnership and funding that went nowhere. The rejections were blunt: your research is not of high enough quality. Like the old implicits had got to them. If that's how they felt then her drops to *The Loop* were doing them a service, feeding the 'enemy' with bad intel, giving a false picture of their capabilities, guilefully confirming their position of superiority. She didn't say this, of course, but rather acted contrite and even a little fearful, promising to cut off all interactions with *The Loop*, asking if there was any other way she could help. They told her that nobody could change the way things were anymore than they could stop the earth spinning. That disruption could lead to great individual danger but was pointless overall. That things weren't all that bad, that if she stopped and looked around she'd see that. They told her to take a vacation. She said she'd think about it, let them lecture her some more, then watched them go on their way and went back to her work, continuing her quest to understand the world through the inner workings of the mind, of what it

had lately become. And letting others know as well. If the powers that be wouldn't support her why should she let them dictate what she said or did? What were they protecting anyway? Freedom *was* the search for knowledge and the free spread of information. If anything, it sounded like she was close to something they didn't want her to discover.

Though, to be honest, Bess had hardly any time to ruminate on the implications of all this, feeling satisfied with (and little need to introspect) her instinctual positions as she dealt with research subjects, developing methods, analyzing results, and trying to store information in her increasingly full head for the next day. For example, right then they were trying to deal with Binaca, who, despite having been given a freshly cooked breakfast (thank you Aentchel) and some mindless down time watching soap opera reruns on the TV, was being especially uncooperative. Bess and Aentchel were in a darkened room, watching along with a video camera through a one-way mirror while Sim interviewed her, writing in his perpetual notebook, trying to work through the questionnaire while his subject refused to give straight answers.

'Why you ask that?'

'These are the same questions every week.' Sim, with his relentlessly patient affect, was trying to keep things calm. Binaca was having none of it.

'Bullshit. You know something you ain't telling me.'

'I just need to know what you remember about yesterday.'

'I can see what you're doing. I ain't stupid.'

'I'm not doing anything. It's the same—'

'Uh uh. You're all caught up on yesterday.'

'Did something happen yesterday?'

'You tell me.'

'We're here for your memories, not mine.'

'I think if you know something about me, I gotta right to know.'

'That's fair, and we can talk after. But right now,' Sim tapped his notebook with outstretched fingers, like a spider bouncing its web to entice an evasive bug, 'I just need to know what you remember, without contamination.'

'Fine. Yesterday I jumped out of a window and broke my neck.' Binaca grinned deviously. 'What? You don't believe me? How do you know I ain't telling the truth? I've seen people die and come back, why not me?'

'What's the last thing you remember? Jumping? Hitting the ground? How do you know you broke your neck?' Sim was antagonistically relaxed.

'How do you know I ain't been lying all this time shithead?'

'Do you remember any pain?'

'There ain't nothing else.'

Bess leaned forward towards the dusky glass, speaking to herself as much as Aentchel. ‘She obviously knows something, but doesn’t trust us.’ She thought about Binaca backing up in horror from the man being dragged from her room. Or was it from Roman? Then yesterday, through the bathroom door, oblivious to being watched, touching her face in the mirror, gingerly, fearfully, her finger tracing the orbit of her eye. ‘She was suspicious earlier, too. Though not angry. The doubt is continuing through her cycles, building up a latent resentment.’ What time was it? An hour to go before the transition. This session was going nowhere. Perhaps they could get at the truth through her lies. ‘What if we went with the suicide story? Tell her that it actually happened. Maybe she’ll push back and tell us what she actually remembers. And, even better, we’ll know what to ignore. What do you think?’

Aentchel looked like she’d been asked to drown a cat. After a few wells and ums, Bess cut her off.

‘I’m going to go in there and try it. I want you to pay attention, times-tamp whenever we mention jumping out of the window, and when she does.’

‘O—OK,’ Aentchel said hesitantly, ‘but what about if she starts talking about her memory, do you want me to keep track of that too?’

‘Yes, Aentchel, that’s the point of this. We’re trying to understand how memories carry over. We can’t talk about what we know because it might pollute our data. But if we make something up, we don’t have to worry about that. Also,’ the more Bess talked through this, the more excited she got about the possibilities, ‘we can see how external ideas persist compared to memories. Maybe we’ll find a way to filter out imagination and fiction from reality.’

‘Wait, but what if she actually did it? What if she wasn’t lying about jumping?’

Bess stared through the mirror, contemplating this. Binaca was whining about being hungry. Sim reminded her that she’d just ate, then tried to cajole her into talking about something relevant with empty promises of food.

‘You ever seen anyone return?’ said Bess, ‘I mean, die and then come back?’

‘No.’

‘I wonder if anyone actually has. We’ve all heard about it. Willy. The senator. That old surfing lady. It’s all rumor, people tricking themselves. The universe is on an infinite loop so we must be infinite too. Or at least some are, the chosen ones. Do you really think that if Binaca returned she’d be acting so coy?’

‘Maybe she’s scared of something. Maybe she was thrown.’

Bess looked at Aentchel without turning her head. ‘If she’s scared about anything it’s getting beat up yesterday. You don’t forget something like that unless you have to.’

‘They say that returners don’t remember dying. We’ve seen trauma loss. Look at Grav — half of last week was gone. Maybe she’s scared because she knows but can’t remember.’

‘But she can remember taking a flyer out of a window.’

Confronted with her own illogic, Aentchel turned back to the interview and resumed her notetaking furiously. Bess stood up. ‘Make sure you get the timestamps,’ she reiterated, hoping the girl’s self-consciousness wouldn’t get in the way of following directions. She headed out to join Sim, her mind navigating a path auspicious with new ideas.

The phone was an old rotary style in faded beige, its corners and touch points shadowed with dark streaks from years of wear and human residue. Similar ones existed all over the lab, varying only slightly in shape or tinge — though no matter the source color they all seemed to revert to the same dull drab. They had become a sort of Caltrop mascot. When they’d first moved from the basement, Bess had assumed they were the consequence of working in an old building, the inertia of constant use preventing updates. She’d been around on other floors and in various labs and offices before and had never really paid attention to the phones. However, after a while, she and her students noticed that theirs were the only ones that weren’t modern touch-tone. Clearly all of the older phones had been intentionally concentrated in one particular section of the eighth floor, like an out-of-the-way corral for worn-out horses. A younger version of herself would have assumed it was some sort of practical joke or mistake, something to be chuckled at and replaced without further thought. Instead, she decided to keep them, obstinate symbols of her resilience and contrast. At the very least they complemented the overall decor, as the lab appeared to be a similar (if less consistent) dumping ground for out-of-date chairs, desks, file cabinets, and blackboards, not to mention a variety of unused curios: hazy specimen jars, a couple of typewriters, a partially disassembled dictation machine, a chrome hatrack, a stack of slide rules. All of this lent the space an aged but also nostalgic feel, creating an environment that was like a lab of yore, a space of enterprise and invention and adaptability that set them apart from those two old conventional bores that surrounded them.

Bess watched the phone, glancing away occasionally to check the clock on the wall — indeterminately old, stylistically timeless — wondering if the call would repeat. Aentchel had said it had come through at noon yesterday, a man who wanted to talk about the latest developments in their research. Bess normally wouldn’t have worried about the fact that Aentchel, despite

her claims to the contrary, had not written down his information for Bess to see when she returned to the lab, or that now Aentchel had no recollection of his name or even what letters it started with. However, Aentchel's description of his voice, the droning monotone ('he almost put me to sleep'), sounded just like one of the warning visitors from last week. Did they have a change of heart about working with her? Were they coming down on her because she hadn't stopped with *The Loop*? Although she would have preferred to just ignore them, it seemed best to deal with the situation directly. They had given her only admonishments, not names or cards, and with no way to reach back out to them Bess had, in frustration, chewed Aentchel out for not providing a clear message the day of or remembering even a hint of his contact information. This had reduced Aentchel to a crying mess, and Bess tried to alleviate things by sending her off to take Binaca back to the hotel.

And so now she sat, staring at the phone, wasting time she shouldn't on an event she didn't even know would come. She really needed to get to work on her notes, capturing the important data from today's session, distilling it into memorizable elements. Or she should be working on the next section of her report for *The Loop*, a record of her most important research methods and findings, information sent backwards so that it could be disseminated forwards. Tell an earlier riser, who tells an earlier riser, and so on until it could be spread from a point closer to absolute zero, further from the unknowable, absolute boundaries of the day's dead ends. Working *with* time instead of fighting it.

She should be considering Binaca, figuring out what it meant, the poor girl unable to remember the actual damage she suffered but believing in a story that *she* made up. Bess thought about her lying in her room, that beautiful jade eye disappeared under a gruesome swell of purple, jaw stiff and distended, the bed frame rattling with her shaking body. A monocular stare at Bess, through Bess, at nothing, fear and pain and anger and silence all wrapped up together and refusing to connect. She had that same look when she believed, when she'd thought she'd returned. It seemed as though she'd interpreted that violence as death, and that it was mesmerizing. Was she overwhelmed? By horror? By eternity? Whatever it was, she had stopped speaking, and Bess and Sim had to pull back and wait, the transition immanent. And that haunted gaze never wavered, even when the zero hour had surely passed, a detached vision that survived the crossing. When her thrall had finally released, they'd pressed her about what she remembered, what she'd seen, but Binaca was evasive, ornery. Bess was sure that the memory of her death had survived, the invented wound now a real scar. Yet now they couldn't risk asking, for even an indirect reference would pollute the truth, pollute it forever. They had to wait, take their time, let Binaca speak on her own. Or try again when she was back in negative time.

In the meantime Bess needed to start working out what the consequences of this were. The possibility of memories persisting where it was thought impossible. There must be something about the repetitions that they had missed, maybe something that was the key to unlocking the enduring mysteries. Whether memories existed as physical structures in the brain or patterns of electrical impulses or both or something else, they still didn't understand how they could be transferred to the beginning of each loop. And how were they retained through the negative periods, when everything else new was forgotten? Now that something had pierced that boundary, did they have a means to—

There was a tumult of loud, indistinct voices coming through her door from somewhere else in the lab. She tried to focus on what was being said. One of them was Sim, he sounded angry. He never got angry. Bess got up to see what was happening and there was a terrific crash and she scrambled out towards the disturbance. She rushed down the hall, turning into the main corridor to catch a glimpse, down at the other end, of a figure with a backpack jogging away.

'Hey, what's going on?' Bess yelled, moving towards it.

The figure turned its head, showing only a non-face, a black mask and sunglasses, then disappeared around a corner. Bess sprinted in pursuit and nearly collided with Sim running out of the vestibule. There was a bright stream of blood running down one side of his face.

'He just came in and started throwing things around,' he said, breathlessly. He touched his head and held out blood smeared fingers for Bess to see. 'Look what he did!'

'Did you see who—'

Something punched Bess' face and she was whipped around, spun as if absent gravity and for a moment there were broken walls and bent air and Sim upside down only instead of a head there was a phone, the dial like a perforated face and the handset trailing or leading, then all rotated away, into a hole that shouldn't be, a chasm that opened right through her and strobed, dark and light, flashing until it was everything and then everything was blank.

...it will not release...

In bed, wrapped up tight under her blankets, Vira waited. She was staring at the window, watching the low corner where the sun's first ray would cut through. Above her, sitting indistinct on the edge of her vision, the desk clock's numbers flipped. She pushed back at the urge to get out of bed and start pacing, to burn up her anxiety. That wasn't the routine. She was supposed to just lay here and wait for the light. It would be easy, too, to reach back and touch the other half of the bed. Tarry wouldn't be there, he never was, but the truth of his absence would be confirmed by the temperature of the sheets, the presence of his nightclothes. She never had to do that before, though, and to change things was to admit the difference, to force it into existence. She needed to believe that things had truly started over, that Tarry was still here, had gotten up, gone to take his shower in the upstairs bathroom where it wouldn't disturb her, made himself breakfast, spent time by himself (he needed his space), went over to Darren's to get movies. Some of those hadn't happened yet, but they would, because they had. A nebulous panic was looming in the shadows and she wanted to drive it all away. However, if she wasn't careful she'd invite it to come to her, to lay down its infinite punishment. The void surrounded her, threatening solitude, but Vira wasn't completely alone yet, not while she maintained the routine. She watched for the light to show, a clock endlessly delayed by her anticipation.

The shower was hot and quickly filled the bathroom in thick vapors. At first it was a place to be warmed, then after her chill was gone a place to wash herself thoroughly, soap and shampoo and conditioner, her hair and face and ears and neck and armpits and arms and chest and legs and hands and feet, creases and bulges and bumps and ripples, and down *there*, extra

clean, for Tarry, for later. Soon, though, it was almost unbearable under the heat of the water, and as Vira struggled under the uncomfortable stream she found herself drifting, slipping from the present, meeting pain with pain. It was the final routine of the shower, its most important obligation, facilitated by a locked door and veils of steam and the obscuring roar of the water. Behind all this she was isolated, not just free from interruption but safe to think about Tammynn while she rocked back and forth, scalding, oxygen depleting, her time limited.

Vira was back in their old house, mixing cookie dough, keeping an eye on Proddy sleeping in his crib, every few minutes going to the front to peek out the window for Tammynn. The vigil seemed to last for hours. She went to the window hundreds of times. Proddy woke and cried and slept again. The cookies never got baked. She saw the other kids returning but not her daughter. There were frantic calls and her friends didn't know and the police and staying up all night and the next and the next. Tarry trying to be a rock but eventually collapsing, harder than Vira, under the realization that she was really gone.

For years it was like that, waiting, hoping, buoyed by leads, crushed by failures. Sleepless nights, desperate days. Newspaper ads were bought, travel to cities and towns, discussions with the police. Nothing was found, no body, no hint of her death. Proddy grew to be her age then older and then an adult. Tammynn was a woman now, brainwashed or amnesiac or lost or locked up. They had to guess what she looked like. Slowly they moved on, not forgetting but with so little they could do except stare intently at every stranger that walked or drove by, making awkward queries whenever they vacationed, check the background actresses in movies and shows with the vague hope that their little child had escaped and become a star.

And then everything stopped. Being stuck in the same day meant they'd never see her again. They had paused someplace far apart and could never expect their lives to cross again. She was out there without her family, they without their daughter, Proddy without his sister. Talking about it was useless, Tarry would only get angry or distant. They couldn't handle it, the impossibility of it, the unfairness. Was this really how it ended, after so much suffering? Would they really never know? Would they always be apart?

Vira was on her knees, slumped over, hands clasped behind her head, water pouring across her back and down the drain, carrying with it her tears, its heat failing to reach the frozen hole deep in her heart. Her sobs died without echos, absorbed by the spray and dense air. Her whole body convulsed, aching with sadness and regret and cowed by a loss that was bigger than her daughter, threatening to finish pushing Tammynn away forever.

* * *

The toast popped up and Vira gingerly pulled it out onto the plate. She cut a couple slabs of butter and placed them on the bread and looked at the kitchen doorway again, listening for the turning of the front lock, the door sliding open, footsteps. By the time she turned back from the silence the butter had completely disappeared into soft spots in the center of the toast. She pressed at it with her knife to spread the now liquid around but only managed to leave moist divots and a meager gloss out towards the dry perimeter. While waiting on the toaster she had cut up some fruit which she now slid into a bowl. She put the cutting board and knife into the sink and realized once again that Tarry's dishes weren't in there. Sometimes he cleaned up after himself, usually if he was running early, which typically meant he'd come back earlier. She glanced at the clock and then the doorway. Sometimes he took longer at Darren's — he could still be there. Vira got some juice and sat down at the table with her breakfast. She didn't feel like eating. The food seemed fake, pointless. Tarry's chair was empty, empty as it had been for days. He might still be out, she had waited longer before. She wasn't eating, not until she saw him. That was her penance. But the routine required she take as much time as she would if she was. She turned the glass mindlessly in her hand while she imagined eating her meal: a bite of toast, chew, swallow, fork two pieces of fruit, a sip of juice, chew, no crying, swallow, just eating and waiting, another bite of fruit (that's three out of twelve), chew, won't cry, sip, swallow...

Through the drapes she could see the outside which looked deserted. Cold from the glass tickled at her face and she rubbed her nose. Off to the side she could just see Darren's house but not his front door. She pressed her face to the glass and the view instantly fogged. She tried wiping it with her hand but at that angle it just turned to smudge. When Vira pulled away her cheek still felt icy and she put her hand up to warm it. She could go over to Darren's, check if anything happened. She looked at the door — it was locked, but Tarry always locked it when he left. Always. Vira never went outside, there was nothing out there for her. Tarry was fine. She closed the drapes and got a chair and set it up in front of the window. A thin, wavering line glowed where the drapes met. The faint smell of cocoa wafted into the room. If he took too much longer it would cool off and she'd need to make more. She sat down, her back to the television, looked at the thin sliver of light, waiting for it to flash dark with the passing of her husband.

Behind, where she couldn't see, was the phone. If she knew the number she would call, call Proddy and wait while he watched the phone, apprehensive but finally relenting and picking it up and they would just talk, like they used to, mother and son. About the weather and how things were in the city

and if he wanted he could come out to see them or they could make the long drive in if he'd let them know where he was. Tarry would listen to her side and couldn't stay angry anymore and would take the phone and say hello and they would all smile mistily together.

She wished he would call. She loved him, Proddy must know that. All he had to do was let her know he was OK, let her talk to him and tell him what he already knew. He had hit a bad stretch, but that was in the past, she was there for him. He needed his mother. She needed him. She was alone. She needed Tarry. Why was he taking so long? The door was still locked. The phone wasn't ringing. Sir Hairy was gone too, maybe he'd found Proddy. If only he'd come back, like in the movies, brought her son home, showed them the way.

A shadow? Tarry? No, still nothing. She was full of memories, but they went nowhere. She could almost see, hear, smell, taste, feel him. Almost. Closing her eyes she touched her hand, touched herself, recoiled at her own inadequacy, the dry chill that seemed depthless.

Everything was so quiet, empty. No voices, no footsteps in the kitchen or movement upstairs, no collar rattling or barking, no calling out or complaints or laughs or flushing toilets or opening doors or slammed doors or whispers or panting or breath or cough or slapped skin or claws on the floor or the smack of a kiss or lies or the television or a no or a hi even if it was the only thing said all day.

Vira wondered if Proddy really knew how much she loved him. She knew he must be hurting, like they all were. The drugs made him sick, made it easy to forget, but deep inside, they all had the same emptiness. Everyone had left each other. Maybe the dog had found him. Maybe Tarry had followed the dog. They'd all come back and they would be together again. They would or could talk or not talk just not be alone anymore. All but one. Maybe her too. Send Sir Hairy out to find the one Fulling he'd never met, return so they could have at least one day whole at last.

The routine. She needed to get back to it, otherwise she was going to fall apart. Keep the schedule, pass the day. If— *When* Tarry came she couldn't be a mess. Or she might make a mistake or fall asleep and miss him. He was out looking, probably had the car, maybe she should check the garage...

No, checking would do nothing. She was avoiding. It was time for lunch. She turned the stove on under the two pots of water she'd already put out. Got the package of hot dogs and carton of milk, opened the box of macaroni, pulled out the cheese packet, checked the butter. This was all kid's food, the kind she used to make for Proddy. One time, when the power was out, Vira made it as a joke, to pretend like they were roughing it, having to eat simple.

Tarry loved it and started to ask for it regular, even after the electricity was back. He never laughed at it and so probably neither did she.

She adjusted the silverware and plates and cups that she had set out a few hours before. Refolded the napkins and realigned everything by tiny amounts, fixing some perceived crookedness or asymmetry. She washed her hands again and sat down, eyes level with the flames, watching the blue heat until finally the water began to boil. The macaroni went in first and exactly three and a half minutes later the hot dogs. Then she had enough time to stick her head out and check the front door, check ingredients, put ketchup on the table, wipe her hands, check the stove. Eventually the hot dogs were ready and from that point she was busy straight through with draining and slicing and measuring and mixing and serving the food into the bowls. Big, heaping portions for each that still left a generous amount of mac 'n' cheesiweenie in the pan. She refolded the napkins one more time and got the settings just right and sat down.

Vira imagined eating, turning the fork in her fingers while she visualized taking a scoop and chewing it purposefully. Her mouth moistened and at one point she considered taking an actual bite but she looked over at Tarry's empty seat and untouched food and her appetite vanished. She kept her head down and worked on her meal, one forkful at a time. She would eat again when he returned. The thought that he wouldn't briefly crossed her mind and was alleviated by the notion that in that case she wouldn't eat or drink forever which meant she would be with him anyway. There was no deliberation in this, merely a fleeting logic which comforted and passed while she worked out how many bites she had left.

When the bowl was empty and she was stuffed Vira got up and cleaned everything. She dumped hers in the trash and put Tarry's portion and the rest from the pan into the refrigerator in case he made it home in time and was hungry. She considered what he would most want for dinner after being away for so long and then set up the kitchen for broiled steaks and baked potatoes and cheese bread.

Vira looked at the clock and realized she was running a little late and ran into the TV room. She clicked on the television and changed the channel to *Today Turns Tomorrow* but almost immediately turned it off. She'd already seen this episode, more than once. They seemed to be repeating more quickly now, as if the running thread was getting cut shorter, its end withering. What was the point in watching anyway? A refresher was good when she needed to give Tarry a recap, but today they'd have plenty else to discuss. She could catch up later, now it didn't matter anymore. She still needed to wait until the show was over, though. Vira sat forward on the couch and looked at the blank screen, at her indistinct reflection in the dark grayness, stared at the shapeless figure and up at the clock and waited for the hour to finish.

The needle poked into the wrong hole and Vira slid it back and moved it to the adjacent one and drew it through. Stuck it into the diagonal and pulled the thread tight, completing the dark green X. She held the hoop back and looked at what she'd done. A quarter of a distant pine, half of the shadowed half, an unfinished idea or a haunting glimpse through a blizzard of white fabric. She uncrossed and crossed her legs. The sunward side and trunk she had finished before, along with most of this section of forest. It ran up to and above the trapezoid, rows of trees arranged in a graphic arrangement to signify depth and density. She looked at the pattern and counted her stitches. When she was done with this one she'd move down to a completely different location near the bottom and work on the stems of a bouquet of flowers, part of which used the same color thread. She'd worked on the background forest in small segments, five or six of the front trees wide until she began to tire of it and then moving on to something else. She never repeated anything from previous days. The parts of the sampler that were finished seemed random but in Vira's mind they charted a clear sequence in a causal chain, where what was done each day was a consequence of the prior, capturing the complex of past and present decisions that formed a history which was now inevitable and ordered. When looking at a specific area she could see all of the completed stitches emerge from the blankness, a palimpsest of memory nearly so vivid that anything physically before her was indistinguishable from imagination.

Vira squirmed in the chair. She found the next hole and pulled the needle through. Without thinking she moved her hand over the spot for the stitch's completion and pressed the needle's point against her skin. It formed a well between her knuckles, reaching blindly towards its true target. She could sew herself into it and no one would ever know, no one but her. If she did it would it ruin everything? Would she be stuck with the image of her own hand attached to the work, blocking it, her blood a stain across all that she had or would do? Or would she forget? Did it matter?

She jerked the needle away and the thread pulled from the eye and floated down into a loose tangle. In her box she found a spool of black and unwound a length, snapping it with her teeth. She threaded the needle and unfolded the fabric and loosened the hoop and let it fall away to the ground. She picked a spot anywhere and tied off the thread and began to make long, dark, ungainly stitches across the gleaming expanse. At first it was a crooked line then a sharp angle with the intention of spelling a dirty word but her impulse shifted and she was soon making a pointless, ugly web that spread out and reached back over itself in improvised whims of frustration. When the thread got short she pulled at it and a section of the cloth bunched together. Vira pulled tighter, hoping to make the whole mass compress into a gnarl of black,

but the thread snapped and the scrunched area eased slightly. She jammed the needle into the armrest and slid a finger under one of the stitches and yanked it so that its vicinity was drawn together until it too broke. She did this again, and again, alternating hands and watching everything writhe and move in directions barely related to her actions.

Then she was standing, the fabric tossed onto the ground, she pacing with her fists pressed into her eyes. She wanted to burst, to scream, to forget. After a while she stopped weeping and began to feel weak and collapsed into the chair. She picked up the cross stitch and using the needle and a pair of scissors, methodically removed the black thread and stretched everything smooth. When she was through she returned to the tree and finished the one stitch, then did another, then stopped as if she was now overwhelmed by the immensity of the task. Instead she stared at her incomplete effort, setting into her memory exactly what she had done so that it would not be repeated.

From the kitchen doorway Vira looked at the plates and pans and potatoes and everything else she had set up. She didn't want to think about dinner, let alone cook it. Yet she found that she couldn't turn away, couldn't turn her back on it. The sun was falling towards the horizon, a view seen every day, always through this window, during a time spent cooking. The routine wasn't helping, though, it wasn't passing the time or calming her down, instead it was *reminding* her. She wanted Tarry to return but not like this. She averted her eyes and caught a glimpse of the shelf, the wine bottles and next to them the line of books. She could hear his voice, slow and calm, drawing her into another world. He asked her to take a turn and though she wasn't any good she acquiesced. Vira walked over and pulled out the book and sat down at the table. She thumbed through to a story but it was the beginning and she never started, that wasn't what was done. She flipped into a middle but when she tried to pick a spot couldn't do that either, didn't know where to go, couldn't speak with nobody listening. She closed the book and looked out the window at the setting sun, hovering identically, taunting her with its imperceptible, ceaseless movement.

Vira paced through the dark hall, around the corner and through the TV room and into the brightly lit kitchen, stopped at the table and turned around to head back through the increasing dimness towards the hallway. She reached down and touched the phone as she passed it, to feel for the vibrations of its ring in case she had gone deaf, in case its bell's clatter had been silenced somehow and only through contact, that most intimate of senses, would she realize they had been trying to call. From the hall into the TV room she peered through the shadows at the front door, willing it

to open. Entering the kitchen was worst of all, its lights held no secrets, they offered her no place to hide. But she couldn't turn them off — without them she couldn't see, not the phone nor the door nor where she was going. Without them she would have to stand still or sit down. Stop.

She hated this, the waiting, the uncertainty, the powerlessness. The isolation. There was nobody to talk to or to listen. Nobody who could understand. She knew this feeling well. It never left yet it seemed impossible it could return like this, every time worse. Vira had an urge to fall to her knees and pray, to ask for forgiveness for whatever wrong she had done to deserve this punishment. But instead she kept pacing, pushing aside the pointless thought. Long ago, since she was a child, religion was a place of comfort, something she could always turn to, believe in. But she had learned that a god didn't care about her pain, about the tortures it inflicted. It only cared about itself. It only knew itself. She was nothing, just an unseen vessel of its continuance. They each existed beyond the realms of the other's comprehension. Its true test was one of indifference, and the test was perpetual. She didn't have room for this, Tammynn needed her faith. A god couldn't understand or accept that, so she had no use for it. And now it seemed like it was doubling down, abusing its power to frustrate and ruin anything that was good or made sense in this world. Exacting needless suffering on the souls it had already broken. Vira had left it, left it alone, why couldn't it do the same?

The church was no better. People talked about reasons and larger meanings and better places but didn't understand a thing. They spoke of faith like it was an escape and couldn't grasp that what they offered was the opposite of what she needed. The peace they talked of was nothing and she already had that. She wanted something, anything. She wanted to know. She wanted a glimpse, a moment, a new memory. She wanted to believe. Their belief was empty and even if they cared their comfort was formed from a dulling acceptance or obliviousness gained through the passage of time. Vira wouldn't accept it, wouldn't let them forget. Eventually, they just seemed afraid of her, because she embraced what they couldn't fathom.

Perhaps she *should* pray. Somewhere inside she still believed in it just not in the way she'd been taught. It had to be aimed in the right direction, not up but out. To those who could fill the hole inside you because they occupied a real place. And she had so many to pray to, now, so many. Proddy and Tarry and Tammynn. Even Sir Hairy. Vira stopped pacing. She was in the hallway, facing the dark corner. She dropped to her knees and put her head against her hands. But she couldn't reach out, it was just a void, whatever prayers she was sending were tearing her apart. She stumbled onto her feet and moved into the blackness.

* * *

The door was still. In the gloom it seemed massive, immovable. The edge of the knob glinted from a light that did not seem present. Vira reached out and touched it. The metal was cold, colder than seemed possible, as if it was actually outdoors, as if she was on the wrong side and if she only opened it she'd find shelter and warmth and escape. She grabbed it but it wouldn't turn. It was locked at the deadbolt, not here, it was like someone was holding it from the other side. She stepped forward and looked through the peephole. Shadows, the vague outline of the porch, emptiness. They could be hiding, crouched down low. Her hand was frozen, her wrist turning to ice. It wouldn't move. She pulled it away, put it behind her back. There was nobody hiding, nothing out there for her, just a bigger void to suck her away, farther away from her family.

Vira lay on the bed, on top of the sheets, looking up at the ceiling. Her hands rubbed against one another, one inside the other inside the other. Her feet did the same. The light was on and shadows from the fan blades cast dark halos above them, larger than their sources, less distinct in their boundaries. She couldn't sleep. Her belly was hollow, her mouth dry, her body weak. Her breath wavered, on the edge of breaking. How could she ever sleep? Someone might come home. What if she missed them?

She would not sleep. She would not eat. She would not drink. She would wait, wait until she withered and dried into nothing. They would come or she would go to them. Sleeping was punishment, sleeping was forever. It was a trap. She would not be alone, not again. This house was holding her, it was full of ghosts, it was not for the living. The light was on but there was darkness all around. Tarry's clothes were under the sheets, next to her. Vira couldn't touch them, wouldn't go near. She edged to the side of the bed, away from his ghost, staring directly into the light and blinding everything else out.

The flashlight swung wildly between the blanket, one moment filling the space with harsh illumination and the next sweeping it away to a useless corner or glowing annulus or complete absence. Vira gripped the blanket below her, dragging it along as she inched her way across the yard. She could hear the grass cracking underneath, frigid and dry. The blanket wrapped over her seemed to be pressing her down, weighed by the void that reached off to eternity. The backyard wasn't even fully exposed — it was still part of the house — yet even so she could barely hold up the emptiness. In the tiny space it was stuffy and cold and damp and she could hardly breathe. She shouldn't be here, it was a mistake to come out, she might get stuck. But she couldn't turn around now, she had to know.

Vira slid her hand between the blankets and reached out, sweeping tentative arcs in front of her. Icy air and blades of grass were indistinguishable. She stretched further, all the way to the shoulder, and suddenly, off to the side, hit something hard and angular. She tapped around and felt the opening and sucked her arm back inside, breathing excitedly into her balled-up fist. She made a course correction and crawled forward, up to and through the doghouse entrance.

Everything seemed to go quiet. It was not just that the swishing under her had stopped when she had moved onto the wood floor, but also the entire atmosphere seemed to change, the air no longer encumbered with the enormity of space. Vira lifted her butt to fill in the doorway and it became even quieter, a dull silence that leaned against her ears as if everything within had been pressurized.

‘Hairy?’ she whispered.

There was no response. She spoke again, louder. She looked out at the blanket, peering past the faded pattern and shadowed furrows. She saw her original vision of him cowering in the corner, returned and hiding all this time, just as frightened of the outside as she, unaware that there was somebody in the house, that he was not alone. She was scared in here too — she didn’t feel safe to come out from under the protection of the blanket. She yelled his name but it seemed to fall dead within her cocoon. Vira began to weep, afraid that he’d never hear her, afraid of what she might find. After a couple deep, nervous breaths of stale air, she pushed her hand out into the doghouse. The floor was hard and cold and grainy with dirt. She found the intersection with the wall, ran her hand along up to an empty corner, then across the back wall to the other corner, also empty.

‘Hairy?’ she cried. ‘Sir Hairy?’

She lifted her arm and began to swing it around, in front and above and behind her. Her other hand bunched the blanket tight under her armpit. The flashlight had fallen next to her face and was shining right into one eye, leaving her sight a combination of over- and under-stimulation, averaging to a blank. Her hand moved about, flailed for her vision, continued to find nothing.

The room was nearly empty. Proddy had taken as much as he could, leaving behind only the stuff that couldn’t be sold or bartered or was too much of a pain to remove. There was a plain, worthless bedframe with a thin, cheap, too-small mattress wrapped in cracked plastic. Two folding chairs next to a lamp with no shade. A triangle of mirror held up with some thumbtacks. A pair of shelves attached to the wall, on them some sentimental items from his childhood: A couple trophies and a stack of ribbons. A stuffed mouse missing an eye. A bridge made of toothpicks. A stack of photographs, some

mutilated with scratches or crude scissor snips that left bodies decapitated or wholly removed. A ball made of rubber bands.

Despite those most personal things the room felt completely barren, devoid of the common, often invisible objects that indicate presence: A clock. A stereo. Deodorant, cologne, mouth spray put out for easy access. A stash of magazines. Posters on the wall, their corners pocked and torn from dozens of rearrangements. A space for detritus and clutter, be it the top of a dresser, a bottom drawer, a far corner. Clothes in the closet, stuffed into the bureau, hanging on the bedpost, piled on the floor. The random trinkets that expose one's personality. And it didn't smell, didn't smell like anything, just the hollow odor of vacancy. This was not a place anyone lived, or could live. It was a skeleton, picked bare by the scavenging, sick creature that had taken over her son.

There wasn't even a phone. It was like he was mocking her. She only needed one call, that would be enough. Vira looked at the shelf, at all the little remnants of the son she remembered, the parts of himself he had left behind, discarded as carelessly as her. She grabbed a ribbon and tore it in half. Then another, a blue one, pulling off its bow and throwing the two pieces to the floor. She took the rest and tried to rip them, struggling and grunting and just when she was about to give up there was a crackle and then her hands flew apart and a rainbow of confetti flung up around her. She shoved the bridge onto the ground and slammed her fist onto it, sending out a spray of splinters. She felt a sharp pain and saw the shard of a toothpick sticking into her hand. She pulled it out and fell back against the bed, holding back the blood with her other hand, sobbing tearless and weary.

Vira looked out over the broken mess. What kind of mother was she? The kind who could hate her own son. Who could say I wish they had taken you instead. No wonder he didn't call. She was a worthless bauble from his past. He'd never know her destruction, it didn't matter. For so long she was convinced he was out there, that he was too sturdy, that Tarry was wrong, that no matter what he did or who he hung out with he would always survive. Now she realized it didn't matter.

She put the pipe up to her nose and inhaled, smelling the sweet, earthy scent. She hated it when Tarry smoked around her, but now this was the only thing that seemed anywhere near him. Vira walked over to the bed and slumped down, looking across at the closet full of boxes. They were full of those old magazines and newspapers that he liked so much. Sometimes he would tell her what he read but she never looked at them herself. She glanced around the room. It seemed cold and distant — not lifeless, just alien. She had no connection to him here. This was his space, she didn't belong, he wasn't any closer here. She pressed her hands flat together and

bent her head down to them with closed eyes. The pipe pressed to her lip and she breathed it in again, holding the fragrance deep and close.

The stairs descended into a grainy, purple glow. Although there were no windows in the hallway and downstairs the drapes were closed the light of the dawn had seeped in and permeated the air. She held the banister, her breathing tight, her legs wobbly, her head faint. If she only had the strength to throw herself down, to finish the day forever. But she didn't have it — what if she just woke up again, not as hungry, not as thirsty, a day or more left to get this point again? She was exhausted, barely able to stand, unable to fall. She wished this dim light would compress into to a white flame of electricity that would shoot through the bed and Tarry's clothes and across the house and up the stairs and through her and off into the sky and out to wherever everyone else was, a lightening bolt to connect her to the rest of her family. Vira stumbled backwards and fell against the wall. She was looking down the hall, down to the end, where the pale light could not reach but she could still see the pink letter marking the door.

Vira was on Tammy's bed, running her hands over the texture of the quilt, grasping at its edge to pull it down and lift it back, a tucking-in movement, familiar and precious. She'd lost track of how long she'd been here, how many hours or days. The lamplight was beginning to fade again as the sun brought a hazy luminescence through the sheer curtains. Her eyes were drained and aching, her throat tight, her muscles feeble. Her belly felt shrunk, a shriveled pit that pulled at her insides. Her breaths flowed in and out by some force beyond her control. She ran her tongue across her lips, dry against dry, tasting the sting of the crusted tear salt. Her eyelids were heavy, struggling at the precipice of sleep. The light was getting brighter and she could feel it passing through her body which was not transparent but full of holes, perforated and vacuated, voids opened all over like bubbles and chasms, like the space inside her heart that was expanding and agonizing and ripping her apart. She was crying again, not because of the hurt, not because she wanted it to stop, but because she was the only one left here feeling this stuck miserable alone.

She began to thrash and kick and pull at her hair, to scream out at the dawn. She had to stay awake, use up her last energies, burn off into nothing before she slept. All of a sudden she stopped, unable to continue, laying still except for her chest which filled and drained madly and in inscrutable coordination with her hollow heart, an unrelenting collusion that stretched back before time was known. There was so little of her left, why couldn't she just go? She was powerless against the merciless pressure of time and her unwanted will to live. The sun pushed another day at her and she was sick

of seeing and with a great effort rolled over, burying her face into the pillows. Somehow through the density her breathing continued unabated and with it came the stale, fresh smells of laundry and unuse but also another thing, deeper, further back, which she hadn't known for so long. The odor of a small child. Vira leaned further into the pillow, inhaling, exhaling, trembling, reaching behind to embrace it to her. Something touched her hair, a familiar hand across her head. The bed sagged and she tilted towards Proddy while he waited to tell her about his day. There was a tickle at her ankle, wet and furry and licking. She kicked and Tammynn laughed and Vira wanted to join her but there were no laughs left inside, only memories. The hand drew her hair from her neck and she felt Tarry's lips, his warmth, and her chest quivered and she fell into joyful sobs and the voids released and her heart rent and the pain disappeared and they were at last all back together.

...come into my house...

Colonel Bassmouth stepped into the briefing room and the conversations halted. Stern and stiff-backed, he briefly examined his troops as if he were searching for the sweetest smelling turd to start his campfire with.

‘Enjoy your beauty rest, ladies?’ he said, and handed a stack of paper to Jawbuck, who took one and passed it on.

‘Fuck you,’ said The Machine. A couple of snickers arose from the room, one of which was Bassmouth.

‘Is that an invitation?’

‘With all due respect, I doubt you could keep it up, sir.’

‘Maybe if you didn’t have a dick.’

‘Maybe if you did.’

The Colonel laughed, a deep rumble that filled the room. Koozie watched The Machine, slumped, unsmiling. He thought he saw a cheek twitch, a curl of her lip. But she wasn’t looking at him, not even when she reached the papers his way. He stared at her, head down, already focused on the briefing material. Koozie turned to his own and flipped over the top page. There was a picture of a muscular soldier with bulging arms crossed and camouflaged fatigues stretched against his bulk. Square jaw and flat top gave his head a geometric form that appeared constructed rather than organically formed. His exposed skin was painted with thick stripes of brown and green. He looked through Koozie, his confidence unfathomable.

‘This is Walter Tensor. Ex-Echoman. Veteran of dozens of campaigns. A real badass. Retired before the loops, before the Knots. Since then he’s lived alone in an isolated cabin, no contact with the outside world — *almost* no contact. We have intelligence that recently he had a visitor: Jek Notet. A name you might recognize.’

Notet. One of the Knots. Those bastards who were supposed to keep order but went rogue and nearly tore everything apart. Notet was one of the few remaining who had escaped removal and were in hiding, cowards shirking their punishment. There were rumors of a coup, something which — given their numbers and the resets — could never succeed and would be amusing if it wasn't so despicable. He flipped the page to Notet's picture. He had a real faggy look about him. Was probably holed up in a bathhouse with a dangling earring and a fishnet shirt. Koozie began to scratch an X across the traitor's face with his pen.

'We don't know what the two talked about. They were Echomen together, and given what we've seen with Notet there are strong suspicions that he might be trying to recruit Tensor. Tensor is a damn straight arrow and it's doubtful he'd go along, however the circumstances surrounding his exit from the Echomen was not what you would call agreeable with respect to his superiors.' Somebody asked the Colonel to expand on this and he declined. 'All you need to know is that there are some who believe there is reason to question his allegiance. I know Tensor. He was a loyal soldier, loyal to a fault. To think that he would join Notet is preposterous. But others are not so trusting, others who don't understand Tensor.'

'With that in mind, our primary mission is to make contact with Tesnor and extract whatever information we can about Notet. And since I'm the only one here who knows Wally, this means that you all are going to escort me in so that he and I can have a nice, friendly chat.'

Poppy spoke up. 'If that's all it is, why go in? Couldn't you just call him up, reach out and touch someone?' He stretched a deeply freckled arm across the aisle and laid his hand on Doe Boy's leg. It was immediately slapped away.

'Like I said, this place is isolated. No phone. No communication.'

'But if you're just going to talk, what do you need us for?' said Moss, head slumped against a hand lost inside his beard, looking incredibly bored.

'Because he might not want to talk. I might need you all to help me persuade him.' Bassmouth paused for a second and his face turned somber. 'There is also the possibility, as inconceivable as it is, that he got turned and in that case, this turns into a removal operation.'

'What if he's protected?'

'Intelligence says he's been isolated since the beginning so he'll have no knowledge about that.'

'Maybe Notet told him.'

'Maybe. But if we don't get him, then it's out of our hands.'

Grumbling spread through the room. 'In the country? For one fucking dude?' said Poppy. 'Isn't that a bit extreme?'

Bassmouth slapped the podium. ‘Zip it! With Wally Tensor, you don’t take any goddamned chances. Anyway, it won’t be an issue if we get our job done. Besides, if it’s bugging you so much, think about this: Out in the middle of nowhere, damage limited to one day, damage limited to one man — nobody will know about it. Least of all you ladies,’ he gestured at The Machine, ‘and gentlemen, who won’t even remember this anyway.’

Koozie walked through the cafeteria and headed over to where The Machine was sitting. He was disappointed that this mission seemed likely to be a bust. Escort the Colonel to some cabin so he could have a talk with one of his old soldiers? Too bad they weren’t going after Notet today — *that* would be something worth remembering. Then again, what if all the missions were this bland and they were just told bullshit stories to keep their spirits up? That was the kind of thing The Machine would say. He figured he might as well make the most out of the day and decided to see if he might be able to get something out of her. Maybe because they were protected she’d let her guard down.

He sat down across from her at the end seat, giving a wink. He was next to Silverfish who was talking with his mouth full, excitedly telling the table something.

‘...lands in an empty forest, is there a mush—’ Silverfish stopped and stared at The Machine, who was getting up and walking past Koozie for a different table. ‘What, you don’t like my joke?’ Bits of food sputtered from Silverfish’s mouth.

‘It was Kooz,’ said Jawbuck, pointing. ‘What’s the matter, you two have a lover’s spat?’

It was a strange comment, seeing how The Machine was hands-off of everybody. Koozie played along, hoping it would lead someplace.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘Who was the last memorant? Cyclops! Where are you?’ At another table he saw the stylishly mussed blonde hair and bushy mustache rise up and between them the glasses formed of one blacked-out lens looking his way. ‘Tell me the truth. Did The Machine try to mount me ag—’

He couldn’t breathe. Something was clamped around his neck and pressing against his back. He twisted and pulled and swung his fist, touching nothing. His ears began to ring, a black tunnel closed around his vision. Then it was gone and he was free, coughing, gasping. Koozie lurched around for his assailant but Silverfish was in his face, blocking him. Koozie pushed against him trying to get at The Machine who was just out of reach, rubbing her hands.

‘Don’t forget who’s the bitch,’ she said with a smirk.

Koozie backed off, laughing. He put his hands up in the air.

‘What can I say? She loves me!’

The chopper flew over the forest, tall pines spattered with snow forming a mesmerizing, shifting pattern of dark and light like television static. All around the ground rose to hills and mountains, the trees covering the landscape like a dense ocean, flowing and undulating and lapping up the steep sides until rock or oxygen lack, gravity-like, forced them to split and dissolve into snow and crag which thrust upwards into pale, treacherous peaks. Above them the sky was cloudless. In the afternoon sun, the shadow of the helicopter bounced ahead of them along the uneven surface, leading them towards their destination. They leaned into a turn and the shadow dipped below sight, reappearing when they leveled out only now trailing slightly, flitting across the trees as if rushing to not be left behind.

Koozie turned away from the window and looked around the cabin. A majority of them had gotten rest on the transition flight — though of course not Koozie — and the only one still asleep was Doe Boy, upright and stiff and with relaxed face like an expressionless mannequin. Next to him, Moss was bobbing his head and mouthing words, a set of earphones nestled into his frizzy hair. He turned to Koozie and mimed more emphatically. Jawbuck was chewing bigly on a wad of gum and tobacco, intermittently spitting and blowing mottled bubbles, looking around for anyone to challenge his nastiness. Poppy had tucked his bright hair into a dark cap and was letting Silverfish wipe over his light skin with greasepaint. Far away at the opposite end, The Machine was talking with their memorant, Blarney Schwartz. Schwartz held his hands out as if showing a measurement and The Machine smiled. Across from them was an empty seat but Koozie didn’t want to create another scene, plus he didn’t need Schwartz listening in and reporting back. He only wanted to ask her about her red pill technique, just in case. However it was a question that might raise some flags and he preferred it to be private, or at least kept to the protected. He’d heard that she accepted a red pill for every mission but, as far as he knew, he had only asked her about it once before.

‘You shouldn’t trust every rumor you hear,’ she’d said. ‘You do realize that my memory’s no better than yours, so I can neither confirm nor deny this.’

‘But you know yourself, you know if that’s something you’d actually do. They say you run entire missions with it in your mouth, in imminent threat mode. Seems like a dangerous way to carry that stuff — one slip and you’re done, you just let down the team.’

‘I don’t slip.’

‘But why even bother? It’s completely unnecessary.’

‘Do you actually trust these guys? You ever wonder if they just give us amnesia meds or that they’re fucking up somehow and that we aren’t protected at all? I always have a backup I can rely on. Myself.’

‘If you really think that then why are you here, on this team?’

She looked at him suspiciously then turned away and spoke plainly. ‘I just make sure the machine keeps running.’ She stood up and started to walk away before coming back around as if she’d remembered something. ‘Do me a favor, Statatatata’

‘It’s Sta—’

‘Do me a favor. Quit acting like we’re friends, or could be. There’s plenty of others who actually seem to enjoy your schtick. Why don’t you go and talk to them?’

Conversations with her always followed this exact course. Tantalize you with something vaguely revealing then shove you away. She was more of a mystery now than when she’d first joined the team.

The chopper lifted slightly and entered a narrow ravine, snaking its way along a river’s path. With limited sun exposure, it was like the day had suddenly turned to dusk. Then they steadied and the sunlight returned as the river widened and pushed the walls away. They had entered a broad, forested valley. Colonel Bassmouth nodded and pulled off his headset.

‘Alright, this is it! Hold steady!’

The plan was to buzz the cabin a couple times to let Tensor know they were coming, and then land in a different clearing to allow for a safe approach. The helicopter descended until it was sweeping along right above the trees, throwing off puffs of snow from their upper limbs. Then the trees ended and below them the ground was smooth and white. They dropped further, only meters above the surface, everything appearing to rush by more quickly. Koozie craned to look ahead and just then the chopper pulled back and below him he saw the cabin, from this view a white rectangle tucked in near the edge of the clearing. As they pulled around he could get a better view of its log exterior and the thick, smoking chimney. Surrounding its rear half was a couple of outbuildings and piles of detritus semi-covered in snow. There were a few tarps extending out from the side of the building.

They flew along the edge of the treeline then turned back for another pass, this time coming at an angle. Through the window Koozie could see the porch and even a rocking chair but no sign of Tensor. The chopper lifted, circled a few more times then, notice being given, headed for their landing spot.

After touching down and exiting they all checked their weapons and gear and white camouflage. They went over the plan one final time. Schwartz did some tests with the radio equipment he had set up in the helicopter, checking

each team member's earpiece and microphone individually. When that was done he hopped out and called everyone over.

'Infrared scans show no strong signal aside from the chimney. If he's outside of the cabin he's blocked his heat or positioned far away.' Schwartz pulled out a small bag and opened it. 'I've got knockout pills for anyone who wants one. Here you go Grace.' The Machine took one and turned around. 'Anyone else?'

Koozie raised his hand.

'Statatatab?' Schwartz looked perplexed and reluctantly handed the red capsule to him. Koozie thought about slipping it into his mouth but didn't trust himself to not accidentally break or swallow it, so he placed it in his armband pocket instead. When he looked up everyone was watching him, as if waiting for some punch line.

'Everything alright?' said Moss. Through all his hair he looked almost concerned.

'Just mixing it up. Seeing if the legend is all that it's cracked up to be.'

The Machine glanced at him, Her face blank behind the angular shield of her dark sunglasses. Jawbuck put his arm around Koozie and spat right by his feet.

'You even remember how to use that thing? I sure don't.'

'Maybe I can stick by The Machine,' said Koozie. 'If I need help, I'll have an expert who knows something about taking the pill.'

'Oooh, that's dumb,' said Poppy, who was shaking his head but came in to slap him five anyway.

'OK,' said Bassmouth, 'Does anybody else want one of those pussy pills? Good. Then let's get going. Koozie? I like your idea — you stick with The Machine. Everyone else, pair up and head out!'

Koozie walked towards The Machine but she'd already started without waiting and his big smile was wasted on her back.

As they moved through the forest Koozie scanned their surroundings, looking for signs of concern but mostly just taking in the surroundings. Given their mission he wasn't worried about being ambushed and it was hard not to feel a little sentimental about what he was seeing. The snowy ground, the big pines, the deep blue sky, the crisp air. He could understand why Tensor had settled here. It was beautiful. The team was making a big loop around the cabin to encircle it and cut off any escape routes, and as he and The Machine had already moved into position he was making some effort to commit what he was seeing to memory.

Just once, he had wanted to remember one of the missions. Not a debriefing, not the team's collective recollection of what they'd been told, but the first-hand experience. It was dispiriting to have to listen to a memorant's

report about a wild firefight or close call or some hero shit as if he hadn't already been there, like his actions were not really his own. That he no longer got to actually feel the adrenaline, the risk, the edge, the taste of victory. His was now a boring life, the only excitement from stories told of far-away adventures and glory he didn't seem to deserve.

So today when he got his pill he slipped it and only pretended to fall asleep. He expected someone to come through and check on them, to inspect each cot to ensure that its occupant had actually found dreamland. He even thought they might have some sophisticated, secret device to measure the state of unconsciousness. But there was nothing. Koozie just lay there with his eyes closed and after a few minutes an alarm blared over the loudspeaker and everyone started to wake. Bassmouth was the first up and immediately went through the room hollering and kicking cots. Koozie waited for him to shake his leg before he opened his eyes and sat up. His actions felt mechanical and revealing but the Colonel had already moved on. The Machine walked by and she suddenly stopped and looked right at him. He froze, wondering what he had done, how she knew. She seemed to be seeing right through him. Then without expression she turned around and went back to her cot to pick a pen up from the side table. That momentary rush of panic was better than anything he'd felt in forever and was still lingering when he stopped at the head on the way to the briefing and flushed the pill.

Over the radio, everyone confirmed being in place and the Colonel gave the order to start moving in. Koozie and The Machine were approaching the western side of the cabin, weaving towards it, catching glimpses through the trees of its wooden exterior lightened with frost and the small window obscured from the inside by some pale fabric. Fifty meters out they stopped and spread out. She moved up in front of the building to get an angle on the porch and entrance. Koozie found a spot behind a stump with good sitelines and waited. After a minute the Colonel appeared, moving across the clearing. As he hiked through the knee-deep powder, a megaphone swung with his hand, the blue of the handle marking short, rapid arcs like a cold lantern signalling from afar. When he was centered in front of the cabin he lifted the bullhorn and began to speak.

Tensor. This is Colonel Bassmouth. Gordy.

It was easier to hear him over their radios than through the air.

We aren't going to harm you, I just want to talk.

He took a couple steps forward and stopped again. Koozie swept the house, without and then with his scope. There was nothing. He waited his turn and reported over the radio. Bassmouth moved closer and spoke again.

Wally. This is Gordy Bassmouth. We need to talk. I know you met with Notet.

He waited for a few seconds.

I'm unarmed. I just want to talk.

Different voices started to speak over the radio.

Movement at the front door.

Roger, I see it.

The door's open but I don't have a visual.

It's alright, this was Bassmouth, I can see him. He's not threatening.

The colonel stood there in the open, cocking his head.

That's right, you are surrounded. But they won't come in if you'll just talk with me ... Yup, just me.

There was a pause, muffled voices.

Eyes open, team. I'm heading in.

He moved towards the porch and Silverfish started to relay a description of what was happening.

Approaching house. No movement inside.

The Colonel raised his hands and climbed the steps and moved forward until he was blocked from Koozie's sight by the corner of the cabin.

At the door. Hands still raised. Target not visible.

Listen everyone. He's going to remove my radio. Hold your positions, hold your fire. There is not threat. Everything is fine. I'll deliver a report afterwards.

This is not protocol, Colonel. It was Schwartz, back in the helicopter. Without audio we cannot assess your status, nor his information. Do not remove your radio.

He won't talk with the radio. It needs to come off.

That's a negative, sir. Protocol says we shift to—

Fuck protocol! Trust me, I know this man. We stick with the plan. Everyone, stand your ground, that's an order! Schwartz, you can wait for my report.

There was some static followed by the sound of a deep, unfamiliar voice and then a click.

Colonel? Colonel? Fuck! What's happening?

He's just inside the doorway. Some— something dropped through the door. The radio, I think. His hands are down, he's moving. I've lost visual. The door is closing.

Fuck!

Koozie had moved over near The Machine so that he could get a full view of the porch. She was kneeling, facing the cabin intently, eyes hidden behind her glasses. A cigarette hung from her mouth, every so often the tip glowed as she pulled a drag without touching it. The sun was dropping and the shadows of the trees had begun to stretch across the clearing.

'You know that smoking isn't healthy, right? That shit'll fill up your lungs.' He'd flicked off his mic.

'And tomorrow they'll be empty again. Keep quiet.'

'Tell me, how do you do that pill?' He waited but she just ignored him. 'I know you stick it in your lip. Where do you put it so it doesn't pop out?'

'Fuck Kooz, now is not the time. Ask me tomorrow. Shut up and focus.'

Koozie touched the pocket on his wrist and felt the pill. He was definitely going to try it out, but he'd have to wait until this was over. He could play it off as a joke so nobody would—

Door! Door! Door opening!

He turned his mic back on and looked through the scope. From this angle he could see only a thin line of black opening into the cabin.

I see the Colonel. His hands are out, he's moving funny. Shit! There's a knife at his throat! He's saying something, I can't hear!

Easy people, steady. Can anyone see Tensor?

Just a hand. He's behind him. Fucking coward!

Close in.

The Machine started forward, moving quickly through the snow. Koozie traced a rough arc through the woods, keeping the porch covered, attempting to get a better angle. There was motion in the forest on the opposite side.

Stop! Don't come any closer or I'll cut his throat.

Shit! Tensor had the radio, he could hear them. Koozie dropped and got his sights on the door. The Machine slowed down but kept coming, slipping between the trees. The Colonel was visible now, standing right in the doorway. His head was being pushed upwards by the large survival knife under his chin, his teeth bared in a snarl. A trickle of blood was running down his white jacket. He turned slightly in Koozie's direction.

I can see you! Stop!

He didn't give me nothing! He had nothing to say! It was Bassmouth, projecting his voice into the sky. The sound was coming through the radio and the air, both weak, separated into a faint echo of each other.

I don't know anything. Just leave me alone. Stop!

Koozie thought he saw the shadow of a second head but the Colonel moved again and it was gone. He searched for a clean target. He wondered how close The Machine was but didn't dare break his concentration.

He won't say anything. I have nothing to report!

Back off!

What are you waiting for? Light him up!

Koozie suddenly realized what he was saying. He hesitated for a moment and heard the crack of gunfire then he pulled his trigger just as the Colonel moved forward and his head disappeared in a haze of blood that seemed to hover above the porch as his body shook with bullets and collapsed. Through

the red mist he could see the door, spattered with Bassmouth, divots and slivers popping into and from it as if from some great internal pressure were finally finding release. His ears were filled with the sound of shooting and yelling over the radio. He stood up and began to rush forward and saw The Machine, waving at him, heading back around the cabin. She was yelling something but it was lost in the space between them and his earpiece's cacophony and he couldn't understand. He ran after her, dodging trees and desperately watching the undulation of the snow for hidden obstacles. The Machine stopped and fired her rifle at the side of the house. A short line of dots traced across the logs before hitting the window in a shatter of glass. She twisted and flung something through the hole and turned away. Koozie ducked down himself and there was a flash and the whole building shook. A thick sheet of snow slipped from the roof and tumbled to the ground in a billow of white dust. The Machine was lying prone, her rifle aimed at the window. Koozie ducked down and slid up next to her on his knee.

'Keep me covered,' he said, and started to make his way towards the window.

He was stopped by the sound of an engine starting and revving aggressively behind the cabin. It was roaring, DROOOM, DROOOOOM. He shifted directions towards it, towards the back, his rifle held up. Something creaked against the house and some snow flicked up from the ground and he thought he saw a wire twitch. He was yanked back and with a yell thrown down behind a large felled tree just as an explosion ripped from the side of the house. Projectiles slammed into the log and trees and whizzed above him through the air and branches with a devastating fury. He lay there with his face buried in his arms and the cold as pine needles and snow and broken limbs rained down on him harmlessly.

Before the debris had stopped falling Koozie tried to push himself up but something was pressing down on his back. The radio was screaming madness and he popped out his earpiece. Bracing himself against the log, he pushed up again and the weight rolled off of him with a growl. It was The Machine. She was shaking, her teeth gnashed. Her glasses were gone and her eyes were just as black.

'Fuck. Are you OK?'

She turned to him and growled again. He looked her over. There were bits of red around her and a bloody slush at her feet. He leaned over to check her injuries when he heard the DROOOM of the engine again along with the CRACK-CAK-CAK of strange gunfire. He looked up to see a blue 4x4 truck powersliding from behind the cabin, bouncing and weaving, kicking up snow and dirt as it corrected and overcorrected, a muzzle blast spraying haphazardly through the busted windshield. Koozie dropped behind the log as bullets pattered all around. He heard the tires catching and losing and

catching traction, the engine gunning, and then a huge crash that seemed right on top of them.

Koozie sat up and saw the truck right in front of him, its side smashed into a tree. He pulled his gun up but The Machine passed between him and the vehicle, moving towards it. Her back was a mess of shredded fabric, white and red, and she was limping on a calf that looked like blood-soaked bone. The truck was wedged against the tree and barely moving, its engine roaring. The Machine was shooting through the windows and doors, almost at it when there was a snap that wasn't gunfire but like a branch exploding and her leg collapsed and she tumbled forward, sliding under the truck. Koozie jumped over the log and gave cover fire where The Machine had been but at the same moment the vehicle released itself from its restraint and lurched forward, the rear tire tearing across The Machine's legs.

It sped off but she didn't appear, instead a thick crimson line trailed the escaping truck, deep red against the bright ground. He could hear her howling, louder than the engine, louder than his gunfire. Then a momentary silence before a blast and the rear of the truck lifted into the air and the whole thing flashed into flames. It landed, bounced, rolled slowly through the snow pouring out fire and smoke before clumsily thudding into a tree.

Koozie ran after the wreckage, searching for a sign of The Machine. Near the spot of the explosion there was a white-sleeved arm connected to a huge slab of side flesh. Just beyond that he saw a head, severed at the neck, half buried in the snow, mouth frozen in a sneer, teeth and lips and surrounding skin covered in an electric, maraschino-colored gloss. As he moved towards it he realized that it wasn't buried but rather the upper section of the head, starting just above the nose, was missing. He stopped short, trying to comprehend the half-face, looking into eyes that were not there.

There was a sound and Koozie looked up to see the truck's door swing open and a giant flaming creature fall out. He lifted his gun but the figure just stumbled through the snow, sooty smoke pouring into the air, sparks and hunks of fire falling and flitting from the conflagration. Koozie watched it move and fall and move again, mesmerized by its vague humanity and pointless willpower. The inferno swirled and screeched and then a glint and Koozie was on his back, pain radiating from his neck. He grabbed at his throat and blood sprayed over his face and into his nose. His breaths were liquid, there was no air. Choking and thrashing he tried to grab at his wrist pocket but it was too slippery. He dug his fingers into it, trying to tear it open when he noticed the ruby mouth jutting from the snow. If he could just kiss it...

A boot crunched in front of his face. Koozie looked up to see Doe Boy standing over him. He held up his hand and tried to speak, to tell what he needed, coughing, sputtering. Doe Boy was shaking his head.

'Shit, Kooz, that was rad. Can't wait for them to tell us about this.'

Doe Boy lifted his gun. Koozie pointed and swung at the barrel. His words were blood, wet and soundless. *Not yet*, he told him, *I'm not ready. Not fucking yet.*



return

...dark to day...

The day was another traffic nightmare. The expressway was jam-packed. The boulevards were jam-packed. Even the supposedly secret backways — those quasi-parallel tracks that stitched passage for the in-the-know through residential straightaways, alley shortcuts, park lanes, false dead-ends, trigger-happy stoplights, and whatever other closely guarded discoveries that nobody talked about so no one else should be using — were jam-packed. Every time Lino went out it appeared to get worse, even though there should have been fewer and fewer people around. He had heard once that adding more lanes to a freeway would actually make things slower because it would entice more drivers than the extra capacity could handle. To an individual, the lane had more than enough space for them, they just didn't account for the fact that there were thousands, millions more just like them. Everybody is special to themselves and a gratuitous annoyance to all those around them. Everybody is the same.

To Lino it seemed a similar effect was happening here, only the attraction was driven by ever-increasing urgency, a sense that as the triple-threat of pointlessness, apocalypse, and mortality became increasingly prominent in people's lives, their need to take advantage of an unprecedented and ephemeral freedom became paramount. This manifested itself in a desire to get out, to have experiences, to avoid settling. Of course, the only way to get anywhere was to drive, and thus a shrinking population exacerbated traffic as each day they made a mad dash to cram in one more memorable adventure before their chances had been exhausted. That much of the time would be spent on the impersonal shared experience of funneling out in a bumper-to-bumper crawl mattered little so long as progress was being made against wasted opportunity. That was Lino's theory, at least.

Because of recent events, these were as much actions of panic and desperation as intention and, accordingly, even though Lino was heading into the city his path was just as clogged as those leading out. Like swarming ants frenzied at their hill being kicked in, the drivers filled all directions around their desired route, seeing any movement as progress until they ground to a halt or found themselves straying too far and cutting back to rejoin the teeming gridlock. It was an infuriating situation for Lino, since all he wanted to do was pass through and get on with his business. All these selfish assholes freaking or checking or bugging out and getting in the way of people like him trying to do some actual work. They had no clue what was required to keep society running (how quickly forgotten were all the sacrifices promised to get the power back on) and were perfectly content to just get in the way.

Lino did have one thing (coincidental, not deliberate) going for him: his final destination was near the zero grounds. For all the semi-aimless tumult of the horde, it was a place explicitly avoided. There was not even the strange attraction — spiritual or macabre or inquisitive or exploitative — that he had heard existed at other loop-associated sites. He had found that by aiming himself directly towards the area, even if he was far from the blast radii, he would soon pass into a boundary layer within which flow was tangential or outwards, progressively weakening to a state of free flow and, eventually, desertion. Lino was entering that layer now, no longer fighting for passage as part of the frustrated, resigned, nearly stagnant mass, but instead working his way against an order that had informally been agreed on. Occasionally he would catch the looks of others, fleeting glances that had shifted from irritation to confusion or warning or, perhaps, envy.

Winding orthogonally through the thinning traffic, the urban landscape changed in cycles: from upscale, standoffish buildings to cramped but quaint middle-class row housing to decaying apartments and back again. Like changing seasons, there were underlying reasons for these rhythms — metropolitan history, zoning politics, demographic inertia, location trendiness, proximity to landmarks positive or not — however these were as abstract to Lino as the tilt of the earth and as far as he was concerned an equally valid explanation was the city's predictable inconstancy. Decades on the force had left him resigned to the fact that there was a mysterious flux that roiled within the world, a chaotic force that made stability and complete understanding impossible. Yet he also believed that the only thing preventing society from getting ripped apart by the churning maelstrom were those like him who refused to surrender and discard their duties and instead fought to preserve continuity, and along with it obtain some amount of truth and accountability, however imperfect or incomplete.

As he got closer to Chef's a gradual shift in the weather (ostensibly due to a drought of money and prestige) turned the surroundings consistently

drearier, more run-down, unsettled. Paradoxically, if he ignored the poverty and decay it could seem as though he were moving into a place of greater community — more people out, kids running around, things happening, actual interactions rather than everyone just passing each other by. Sure, many were probably up to no good, but all the loitering, jawing, hustling, propositioning, furtive exchanging, and messing around created an energy that bonded everyone together and prevented their forming insular bubbles where they huddled down the streets, withdrew into their homes, look, spoke, touched only in bounded and detached social orbits.

Lino looked around. There was actually far fewer people out than he remembered. Hard not to look past them to the weathered buildings, grimy sidewalks, derelict cars, blowing trash, faded and tiresome signs above storefronts mostly shuttered, some busted (probably looted), a few still open. This was no place he'd want to live, far worse to wake up every morning in. It was a community of those who couldn't even try to escape, even for a day, even if it meant getting stuck going nowhere. Yet more than anywhere else it seemed this was the place where society was continuing, where people actually had to *live* together. It was like proximity to the blasts had cleaned out the chaff and these were the survivors — maybe not by choice, but chosen.

The others at the station — the few that were still showing up — didn't understand why he even bothered coming down here. There were plenty of other cases, they said, plenty that didn't mean having to wade through shit (or, now, annihilation). But they *didn't* understand. It wasn't about where or when the crime occurred, what mattered was the truth being sought, whether it was big enough, important enough. This was huge. It was terrorism, right here in the city, and whoever did it could do it again, any day, any moment. The strikes were beyond anyone's control yet they had ceased and this threat still remained. Lino had no interest in easy victories or cheap praise. He wanted the truth. The others kept busy working cases from before the repeating, digging around in some increasingly distant past because they unironically would say they wouldn't have to worry about disappearing evidence, forgetful witnesses, or the inexactness of facts. Then again, at least they were trying. Even before the strikes most had already left to join the masses rushing off to live it up while they still had the chance. Eventually they would come back, or others would. Society wasn't held together on faith but on hard work, on the backs of good people fighting to do right for those who cared. Those who didn't would die off. He and his fellow detectives were setting an example, maintaining order. Civilization would survive, the city would survive. There were plenty of good people. They would come back. They had to.

Turning a corner, the dilapidation gave way to tendrils of economic life. Food, clothes (new and second-hand), beer, bookstores. Music. Video rentals.

A bike shop. More food. Nothing that seemed permanent or stable, businesses sprung up on passion or opportunism or whim or as a way for the owner to hang around after their long-passed/missed graduation date. A couple-block halo of optimism and vitality fueled by a density of hungry, impulsive, tireless, enthusiastic youth. And within this buffer a bubble of calm, dignified purpose. An engine of knowledge as inscrutable as a brain. The university.

There was almost nobody about, streets and sidewalks nearly empty. The rare living soul seemed uncomfortable with the exposure, the lack of anonymity once provided by crowds of others just like them, collectively ignoring their fear and loneliness through a shared presence. Where were the students? Sleeping in because the morning's classes had long since been cancelled? Joining the scramble out of the city? Gathering behind these cold walls, in relative secrecy, for parties, study groups, orgies, mind-expansion, mind-numbing, revolution, loafing, spontaneity, whatever could be done for distraction or fun so long as it kept them at a distance from the frigid weather and the contemptible, clueless, depressing, annoying, mortal outside world? Or maybe they had all died? (They *were* within the zero grounds, after all.) That seemed impossible — despite their natural rebelliousness, surely they wouldn't mind going back to sleep — yet so did this barrenness. There was a truth somewhere underneath the surface. It wasn't like Lino was imagining that nobody was here, yet he also could not confirm their absolute absence. The real answer was probably something both entirely sensible and completely unconsidered, a logical conclusion which he had failed to recognize because of incomplete information and indifference. That was his theory, at least. Whether it was beyond his comprehension or not didn't matter, he had a different mystery to focus on, one where the truth was closer, the consequences graver. Disappearing kids could be anything, from horror to farce. Actual death, the threat of it, the threat weaponized — that was pure tragedy. How many actually died was of less concern than that those remaining could. The city would always rebuild, but fear might destroy it.

He approached the building and slowed, looking up at its unblemished figure. He'd only been inside a couple times since that day — it was empty, everyone who had survived considered it an omen to stay away. Good thing, probably, as it had supposedly toppled again in one of the strikes. But no help to those already murdered, those he would not forget. The street was empty, Lino stopped the car. He stared at the face of the tower, the perfect pattern of brick, the pristine glass reflecting the sky. He remembered that first day, driving in, seeing the top half broken and leaning and crumbled like something from a movie, debris scattered across the road he was on right now. It was like a dream, as if it was unclear which version of the building — intact or crippled — he was seeing.

Driving away, Lino pulled out his flask and took a swig. Just a little. It was time to work and he needed to hold it in check. There was plenty of time to drink later. Even then it would be better to take it easy, no need to risk his memory of today. He knew he'd forgotten some things, couldn't always keep track. He wasn't the only one — it was something with the loops — but getting drunk wouldn't help. When he'd interviewed that Aentchel Faelix girl for the second time she swore it was the third. He'd go to sleep and come into the station the next morning and the other officers would claim he'd been gone for days. Strange looks from his neighbors. Captain Dorfenhops had called him in to say that his drinking was starting to become an issue. 'I know it's hard, Des was a special woman. But you gotta think about the image we're putting out.' Said maybe it was time for him to take a break. Lino told him that he was supposed to be retired by now anyway, asked about his pension. Captain just shook his head, said he was sorry. But there was nothing he could do, Lino would always have his badge. One month away from retirement forever. He'd lost any sense of time's passage, though maybe this was all for the better. He couldn't stop working, he wouldn't know what to do. Especially now, with this bombing case, he wasn't ready. Probably never would be.

Lino passed Chef's building and looked for a spot to park, finding one half a block down. He could have double-parked in front but there was no reason to call attention to his car in case some drunk or hooligan happened to pass by. He certainly didn't want to get stranded here. When he stepped out the cold air tickled his lungs and he began to cough, finding it hard to suck in a decent breath before wheezing out another spasm. He grabbed at his cigarettes and lit one, managing to pull a good drag that finally calmed things down. Standing up straight he blew out a hot cloud of smoke and steam, looked around — everything seemed deserted. He hadn't been here since the strikes ended. He was pretty sure the closest ground zero was at least a few miles away but that'd still be close enough. How many people were left? There were lots of cars parked in the street, vehicles that could be participating in an exodus.

Lino walked up the steps, wondering if Chef was still around. At the door he buzzed and got no response. Again and again nothing. He tried the other apartments then back to Chef's. He checked the doorknob but it was locked. There were no windows. He kicked at the door half-heartedly, knowing it was too solid to bust down and not wanting to hurt himself.

'Hey pal, nobody's home.'

He spun around to see a man standing against the railing running along the sidewalk next door. His clothes were dingy, mismatched, layered. He was smacking loudly on gum. On the ground next to him was an olive green pack

with a sleeping bag strapped to it. In his hand was a leash that ran down to a black animal curled up tightly at his feet. Lino hadn't seen the bum when he'd come up to the building and should have been surprised by his sudden appearance but was too fixated on the dog. He hadn't seen one in ages. It almost seemed he'd forgotten what one looked like. He stared at the creature, feeling both drawn to touch its soft fur and trying to puzzle out the riddle of its shape, an alien circle, features indistinct in its darkness. He watched for movement: expansions, contractions, shifts, twitches — anything that might hint at its underlying form and reconcile it with the Lino's recollection of the species.

'It's a dead space. I can tell just by looking at it. The city's full of them, always has been. After we got hit, though, it's even worse.'

Lino went down a couple steps and stopped, maintaining the higher ground. 'How long you been there?'

'Long enough to see you come up.' His smile was obscured by a vigorously working jaw.

'You sure nobody's here? You haven't seen anyone?'

'Just you, man.'

'Are you from around here?' He didn't look familiar, but that didn't mean anything. 'I'm looking for someone.'

'Nah, just passing through. New place every day. No sense in repeating yourself, eh?' The man burst into loud laughter. He scratched his face and the leash pulled at the dog which slumped slightly, oddly. 'Anyways, I already told ya, it's a dead space.'

'How do you know that? You been inside?'

'Anyone answer the doorbell?'

The constant smacking was starting to aggravate Lino. 'What's your name?'

'I ain't nobody, man. You're nobody too. That's all that's left anymore. A bunch of nobodies.'

'Nobody my ass.' Lino flipped open his badge, holding it out for the man to see. 'What's your name?'

The man stopped chewing, looked over his shoulder, then turned back with a creeping grin. 'You better watch flashing that thing around. You're liable to find yourself disappeared, Mr. Somebody.'

Lino put the badge away. This punk was asking for it, but he didn't know about that dog. Sometimes the calmest ones were the most protective. He watched at the animal, feeling sorry for it. It looked cold and miserable. What an unlucky life, getting stuck with this asshole. It would have a right to be bitter. The smacking had started again — *snka snka snka*. Lino went down to the sidewalk, took one last drag, flicked the butt at the man's face. It fell short and landed on the dog. *Shit*.

‘Hey!’

The man jerked the leash and the cigarette jumped out into the street. The dog unfurled into a furry sheet, flapping up into the air and flowing in a large circle before coiling back into stasis at the man’s feet. Lino stared at it with unease. The dog was gone, all he could see was a blanket stuffed through a collar. He understood now, but preferred the other truth, the amazing, strange one from just a moment ago. The *living* one. It was an uncomfortable acknowledgment, to prefer the deception. He felt a looming wave of grief and pushed it away. It was only a crazy bum, it meant nothing more.

‘Are you some kind of idiot?’

‘Sorry,’ said Lino, putting on well-practiced face of authoritative apathy. He turned to look at the building, searching again for a way in. The bottom floor windows all had security bars on them and there was no way he was going to be able to climb up to the higher ones. He glanced back at the man who was watching him with mild interest but without threat or anger, tenderly petting the blanket with his heel. Lino walked away from him to the other side of the building. There was a tall wooden fence set back from the street and some garbage cans in the corner.

He went up to the fence and peeking between the slats could see a path around to the back of the building. His first thought was to use the trashcans to get over but they were all coated in some goo that looked like half-digested food and still semi-liquid even in the freezing cold. Instead he stepped back, stared at the top of the fence, and with a couple shuffle steps leaped, reaching high like he was about to go up up and away. His gloved fingers nicked the top and slipped off and he awkwardly flailed back to the ground, nearly falling. Brushing off his hands in frustration, Lino tried again with a longer run up and this time was easily able to wrap his hands over the boards. Hanging there heavily, face pressed into the wood, Lino first tried to pull himself up, then to raise his foot up to the top, then to walk up the fence, his backside pouting out as he inched slowly upwards. Soon his leverage seized up and he was stuck, a human triangle jutting out pointlessly, wedged up but not giving up while he attempted to formulate a way to salvage his efforts. Though nothing was coming he had a feeling something was about to however it didn’t matter because there was a moan, a flex, a crack, and in a blink he was on his back, on the ground, struggling to breathe, still clutching the top of the board in his hand. The fence rose up above him, split by a gap, remnants of the slat he’d been climbing hanging listlessly towards the ground.

He heard a cackle behind him and rolled over to see the bum leaning on his knees, pointing and laughing. The blanket was tucked up neatly next to him, facing away.

‘Hey man, you all right? You outta be more careful.’

Lino pushed himself up and seethed away from the laughter. He began to kick furiously at the fence, cracking the boards and then grabbing them, trying to rip them off.

‘Should you be doing that? I mean, this isn’t your property, is it?’

Pushing and pulling, struggling to yank out a nail with the wood that it held, Lino called back, ‘It’ll be fixed by tomorrow.’

‘Yeah, sure. But I thought you were a cop. You can’t just break into someplace because you feel like it.’

Lino let go and walked towards the man, pulling out his revolver. ‘Listen asshole, I can do whatever I want. If you think you have a problem with this,’ he casually pointed the gun, ‘you should wait around to see what happens when I really ignore the rules. Or maybe you’d better gather your shit and move along someplace else. Capisce?’

The bum raised his hands defensively. ‘Hey man, no problem. We’re gone.’ He slung his backpack over his shoulder and backed up, watching Lino. ‘Come on Congry, time to go.’

Lino lowered his gun and watched him strut away. The hand with the leash was held out, tugging encouragingly while the blanket bounced and shuffled along at his side. When they had disappeared out of sight, Lino went back at the fence and pulled off the busted slats with little effort. Turning sideways and sucking in his belly, there was just enough room for him to slide through. Behind the building the yard was an irregular mosaic of concrete cemented by weeds. Up against the fence was a row of stacked records, weather-faded and warped, precarious monuments of uselessness. One of the columns had toppled and amongst the strewn sleeves he could see bits of covers he recognized. He felt an urge to further check out the piles, partly out of a desire to find some forgotten memories and partly to see if he could build a profile of the owner. However, he had better things to do than dig around nostalgically in the cold, nor was it likely that they were Chef’s. Besides, the moldy stacks were probably breeding grounds for all kinds of nasty micro- and macro-biological vermin.

The building had a fire escape and knowing better than to blindly trust its stability, Lino pulled down the creaky ladder and shook it — first gently and then with increasing vigor — to convince himself that it was sound. As he climbed he felt a previously unnoticed ache pull in his lower back, right where he’d fallen on it. It was irritating but he didn’t worry about it or try to move gingerly since he knew it would be gone in the morning. At the fourth floor, Lino turned to his left and, counting windows, stopped at what he thought was Chef’s and tried looking in. The windows were locked up tight and shades drawn. There were no air conditioners or other obvious weak points.

He could use his gun or foot to bust the window but they wouldn't provide much distance and he didn't want to risk cutting himself up. Lino looked over the railing, scanning the yard for something to smash with. At the very least there was the wood from the fence or his flashlight back in the car. His back twinged at the thought of climbing down and then back up all of those steps. He glanced up the side of the building and noticed through the metal grating the diagonal line of an open window frame. Ignoring his back, he returned to the steps and made his way to the apartment two floors above Chef's. Sure enough, the casement had been opened, thin wisps of steam curling from inside up the exterior wall. He called into the room a couple times and when nobody answered punched out the screen and turned the crank — his back radiating with each awkward twist, warmth radiating over his front — until there was enough space for him to go through.

Stepping in, he realized why the window was open. The room was hot. Not just toasty, but sweltering. He peeled off his jacket and began to fan himself, blowing warm air ineffectually across his face. He was in a bedroom and almost every inch of it was covered in clothes, scatters and piles that going by color appeared vaguely feminine — although these days one couldn't be certain — and which formed an obscured landscape under which were hints of a dresser, a bed, possibly a radiator. Sweat began to bead on his forehead and rather than stick around in the oppressive sauna, he rushed through the apartment, barely glancing around to confirm that it was actually empty.

Down at Chef's, he banged on the door and, getting no response, tried barreling into it with his shoulder to knock it down. The door was immovably solid and the only thing that seemed to be giving in was Lino's torqued back. Realizing he was going to have to go through the window, he went back upstairs to search for something to break in with. This upper floor was noticeably warmer than below and he almost immediately lost any interest in spending time searching the stifling apartment, instead following the indistinct, inadequate cool of the draft straight back to the bedroom. Once there he swept at and tossed clothes as he moved through, hoping to find anything useful. Near the bed he grabbed and the clothes he was reaching for disintegrated in his hand. When he looked more closely he saw winding streaks of black and ash, as though there had been a small knot of fire. It was too hot to spend time pondering it. He noticed a table lamp but when he went to pull off the socks laid over it something else caught his eye and he made an improvisational change, snatching the perfectly tanned, anatomically idealized, grossly oversized phallus and hurrying out of the window into the cold, refreshing air. Only once outside did he wonder if his chosen implement was clean, and he held out the rubbery beast with trepidation, strangely compelled to sniff at it. At least he was wearing gloves.

Back at Chef's window, Lino put his coat down and wiped his brow. Leaning back against the railing and covering his face with his arm, he threw the dildo hard at the window. It bounced off of the glass and like a giant worm twitched and writhed chaotically towards the edge of the fire escape. Lino lunged to stop it and when the convulsing had abated picked it up again and manipulated it in his hands, trying to find a good position to use it, finally settling on gripping the knoblike head. Then, with his own head turned away, he took a big swing and at the last second flicked his wrist to let fly the scrotal mass like a mace. With an underwhelming pop the bludgeon penetrated the target, followed by a crash of breaking glass and a cascade of tinkles down through the grating. When he looked Lino saw a couple sharp remnants still poking out of the frame but the ungainly tool wasn't stiff or accurate enough to knock them out and he tossed it aside. Cautiously running his arm through the hole, he angled to reach the latch and felt his back tense. He tried adjusting his position while simultaneously releasing the lock and managed to lean against a pointed sliver, the glass spike sliding through his shirt into his arm. Swearing, he almost cut himself further as he jerked back out.

Lino's sleeve was wet with blood by the time he got the window open and inside Chef's apartment. On the bed he found a shirt to press against the cut. Then he checked the other rooms to make sure nobody was around before heading to the bathroom to clean up. After washing the wound he searched the cabinets for first aid supplies but came up empty, the closest things of use being a roll of paper towels, a bottle of antiseptic mouthwash, and, way in the back of one shelf, an old box of sanitary napkins. Lino couldn't believe that a dealer didn't have any medical supplies but rather than waste time searching further he just made do, disinfecting the cut with burning yellow liquid, drying it off, and finagling a pad under his sleeve to deal with the blood. When he was done his arm was stiff and sore, and when he pulled out his flask he found it painful to unscrew the top. It was getting low. He'd need to keep an eye out for something to refill it with.

He went to the back room to start searching, opening the curtains to let the sunlight in. While not uncomfortable like upstairs, it was still too warm to wear his coat. Looking at the bed more closely, he saw that there was a slight, shadowed hollow in the pillow and that the sheet and blankets had been scrunched down to the end. There was a pair of sweatpants laying across the mattress, almost appearing to be depressed into it. Lino laid his hand against them, then on the pillow, trying to check for any residual body heat, but the ambient temperature made it impossible. He continued to look around, hunting for clues or signs of life or anything interesting.

In the closet there was an organized row of suit pieces: coats, pants, collars, vests, and suspenders in a variety of colors. A few of the hangers

were empty. Below that was a shelf with some wide-brimmed hats and shiny dress shoes. He was reminded of the time he had seen Chef outside and almost hadn't recognized him. Lino was having a discussion over coffee with another detective, Ridack Barl, when outside on the sidewalk he saw this character walking along in a goofy, mismatched outfit. A closer look and he realized it was Chef. At the time Lino had assumed it must have been a costume for a party or something.

Now he wondered about that. While it looked ridiculous at the time, in this closet there were far more ostentatious combinations. It was possible that he always dressed like that. Maybe it was an intentional attempt to draw attention to himself. Maybe so customers would know he was out, like advertisement. Lino didn't remember anything like this from before, so maybe it was a recent thing having to do with junkie memories. Or maybe it was for security, ensuring that it would be obvious if he'd been killed. But that wouldn't prevent anything. Perhaps he just had horrible taste. No, it must be so that he could be found easy, so that fickle addicts wouldn't jump ship to another dealer if he stepped out. Maybe. Well, it was a theory. Not that it helped much, except for making him easy to describe, in case Lino needed to ask around or look for him. Lino touched the empty hangers, wondering which colors were gone.

Next to the shelf, partially hidden by some long coats, was a large safe. It was locked and Lino searched around to see if the combination was hidden someplace, on a paper secreted in the clothes or scratched onto the door jamb. This must be where he kept the dope, and if he'd died surely there would be junkies or rival dealers up here trying to break in. How long would it take to search through every permutation? Did it really matter? There was plenty of time to go around nowadays. Then again, Lino wasn't even certain that Chef mattered at all. His links were tenuous, perhaps coincidental. Going back, Lino knew him a little, enough that his being involved didn't make any sense. But his name kept coming up, so Lino eventually decided he might as well check into him. He didn't get far. That was a hazy time, a hard time. He'd been missing Des and drinking too much. If he couldn't solve her death what made him think he could solve anything? That was the hole he'd been stuck in. He'd been there before. Then the strikes began...

Lino lit a cigarette and shook it off. He continued to look around, digging through drawers, looking under the bed. While down there he happened to glance up and noticed on the ceiling there was a large black mark, like a burn. It reminded him of the clothes upstairs. He kept on, going to the front room and finding an instant camera then nearly falling asleep while laying on the impossibly comfortable couch to rest his back. He roused himself and used the camera to take a picture of the bedroom ceiling, though when the photograph developed the spot never sharpened past a dark smudge. After

that he went through the bathroom again followed by the kitchen. The longer he searched the less confident he felt about finding anything useful. He wasn't really even sure why he was here. He'd wanted to interview Chef, not dig around his apartment. For all he knew he was repeating himself. Lino's efforts to straighten himself out and rekindle his investigation had him going over ground that he felt like he should have already covered. And that was probably pointless in the first place. So Chef had been providing Caltrop drugs for some experiments she was doing, was that any reason to attach him to a terrorist nexus? He wasn't violent, probably never carried a gun. Lino was beginning to become doubtful that it was even worth his time to fin—

What was this? He'd been flipping through a spinning address list and here was a card for FELANTEX. Was Chef involved with The House? It made sense, drugs were a favorite tool for escrow. However these cards would have to be from before, so the relationship would go further back than the looping. Lino was surprised he'd never heard of it. He spun through, looking for others: DORMIT, OSOS — no, they would be ESCALANTE or PIÑA. Nope, only the one. He gave the deck a final, satisfying whirl and took off for the front door, almost forgetting his coat in the excitement of a possible new break.

'Detective Orbstak, nice to see you're still around. What can I do for you?'

Jimmy was sitting at a giant wooden desk in a giant, stately chair, a giant window behind him looking over a cityscape stuck in perpetual winter. Lino knew this as Gio's office, though according to the freshly imprinted sign outside (hours old, presumably), it was Jimmy's now. Lino looked back at the big man standing in the corner. He was wearing jeans and leather, a submachine gun strapped over his shoulder. Lino rubbed his back and took a seat.

'Hi Jimmy, I wasn't sure you'd be here.'

'Where else would I be?'

'Running away, like everyone else.'

'Everyone is an inexact term. There's plenty of people still here, making transactions. My family is an essential part of this community.'

'Speaking of which, I was sorry to hear about your father.'

Jimmy gave a perturbed look. 'That was quite a while ago. And you already gave me your condolences.' He paused, watching across the desk. 'Twice.'

Lino allowed in his face a hint of deference, shrugged apologetically. 'You know how it is. Me and your father, we—'

'I've told you before, I don't want to know. Whatever agreement you had with him, it's over. We don't do payouts anymore.'

'Screw you, punk. I never took a handout.'

Jimmy settled back into the chair, eyebrows raised. 'Then tell me, detective, why *are* you here, this time? Can't find anyone to open the liquor store?'

'Listen you little prick, you obviously don't know shit about what daddy was doing, otherwise you'd be showing a little more respect.' Lino leaned forward and winced as his back caught.

'You OK, old man? I didn't think people could run down these days.'

Lino took a few deep breaths, relaxed himself. 'I just want to ask you a couple questions, about a case.' He dug in his pocket for the pack of smokes.

'Let me guess: the collapse of the university tower.'

Lino didn't say anything. He pulled out a cigarette and lowered his face to light it.

Jimmy continued: 'You know, they're pretty sure that was a missile from the sky.'

Lino blew a cloud of smoke across the desk. 'Not them. The one from before.'

'I don't remember one from before.' Jimmy was grinning, challenging.

'You know, the bombing. Killed Dr. Caltrop...'

'I don't know a thing about that. My memory's not so good lately.'

'Convenient amnesia, huh?'

Jimmy cocked his head. 'You know how it is.'

Lino rubbed his arm unconsciously through his jacket. It crinkled under his hand, the pain absorbing his frustration. He looked past Jimmy to the city behind. An image of devastation flashed through his mind. Neither seemed possible now.

'You're pretty close here,' Lino said. 'How did you survive the strikes?'

'It's a funny thing — I don't remember them either. I must've just slept through.'

Jimmy started laughing and looked into the corner. Holding his shoulders square, Lino turned his whole body around and saw the bodyguard leaning against the wall, also laughing. His chin was high and his crossed arms bouncing.

'Alright,' Lino said, turning back, 'why don't you tell me about Chef?'

Jimmy, still smiling, seemed to not understand.

'Come on, you know him. Chef Pholen. He was working with Felantex. Do you use him for The House?'

'Chef's still around.'

'Is that a question?'

'Could be.'

‘Well, do you?’

Jimmy looked off to the corner again. ‘You know, Chef has a safe in his apartment. You might find it’s contents relevant to your case.’

‘Is that right?’

‘What I’m saying is: I think you ought to check it out.’

There was a sound behind Lino and he twisted to look. His back began to pull and he straightened himself towards Jimmy again, but not before noticing the corner was empty.

‘Why would you tell me this?’

‘You’re an old friend of the family, I’d like to help you out.’

‘Don’t patronize me.’

‘Chef was a liability. Sounds like he may still be one. We don’t like to leave debts unsettled.’

‘I’m still not following.’

‘Can’t figure it out, Detective Orbstack? We’re escrow, we facilitate the transfer of payments for goods and services. In this case we pay you information and in return you deal with our Chef situation.’

‘I wouldn’t count on it. There’s not much the law can do these days. I’m just looking for the truth.’

Jimmy smiled. ‘We’re not worried how you render your services, we trust you to handle them honorably.’

‘Well, I appreciate your faith, but there’s one little problem. I’ve seen that safe and it’s locked. And I don’t know the combination.’

‘Don’t worry about that. We remember it.’

‘You have the combination.’

‘Of course. The House’s reserves are quite extensive.’

‘Including combinations.’

‘Just try not to lose it, OK?’

On the way back to Chef’s, Lino considered just calling it a day. His arm was throbbing. His back was throbbing. He could just memorize the combination and come back the next day after his body reset. He was worried, however, that he might not be able to trust himself to remember. Maybe he couldn’t trust himself to remember after he saw what was in the safe either, but at least he would have a chance to see it. He wasn’t sure that he trusted Jimmy either, but if the kid had wanted him gone there was no reason to go through these complications.

To keep himself running through the end, he stopped at a union shop and bought a pint, filling his empty flask and downing the rest. He hadn’t had anything to eat since breakfast and as he drove he felt his head start to swim. It was only mid-afternoon but the city’s buildings had already started to block the low sun, creating a premature dusk that was his least

favorite part of the day. The sky was duller, the shadows colder, the streets dispirited. And unlike true sunset, still far off was the embrace of the night, with its infinite dark and secret freedoms. Before the looping had started, back when Lino still had to count his hours and show up every day, this was when he would feel most despondent, when the weight of his obligations and the distance of his liberation were the most overwhelming. It was a time to think of regrets and mortality, of inadequacy, of loneliness. This was when he would think of Des.

He pulled his car into the same spot as he had earlier. The good thing about now was that the end of the day was as close as he wanted. He didn't have to worry about another four or six hours of work, feeling the pressure to continue or put off the relief of sleep. When he was done here he would just stay in his car, polish off the flask, pass out. Get a quick start on the next day. No worries about avoiding traffic or driving in pain or making it home. He'd close his eyes and have a safe ride back to his bed.

Excited about both the safe and finishing up, Lino hopped out of the car, doing his best to shrug off his clenched-up back. He patted his pocket to make sure the paper with the combination was still there and shuffled up to the building. The front door was still unlocked, just as he'd left it. The stairwells were dark and the bulbs at the top of each landing offered meager illumination. Between the second and third floors his eyes or his feet got crossed up and he misstepped, twisting his ankle and nearly falling back down the stairs. For a while he sat on the steps, massaging his foot with his good hand, hoping that it was just a minor strain that would ease up in a few minutes. The throbbing didn't pass, though, and realizing that the injury was only going to get worse, Lino forced himself to get up and hobble forward. Forget sleeping in the car, he would use Chef's bed tonight.

By the time he got to the fourth floor he'd discarded his jacket, unbuttoned his shirt, was damp with sweat. Using the wall for support, he tried to limp along the hallway but at some point had to give up and got down to crawl on his hands and knees. At Chef's apartment he found the door cracked. Had he left it like this? The pain searing up his leg and arm and back was too distracting for him to bother worrying about it. He just wanted to get to the safe and then to bed.

When Lino got to the bedroom he was staring down at the floor, focusing on lifting his limbs in an ordered fashion so he didn't cause another stupid injury. At the doorway he looked up and saw a figure with its back to him, kneeling at the safe. It was wearing one of the fancy suits. At the sight of it, Lino slumped back, discouraged at the thought of missing out on both the safe and the bed.

'Hey Chef,' he said.

The figure stiffened then stood up. It remained facing away. The curtain rippled, there was something dark below it.

‘I thought you might be dead. Listen, I’m beat up pretty bad and was wondering—’

The figure spun around and Lino caught just a glimpse of the familiar face before he saw the gun and as he reached for his own the smile and the rising shadow and the fire.

...face with someone else's eyeball...

‘Come on Deana, time to get up.’

The voice was part of the dream that had already started to evaporate and now she recognized it as she stared at Bruce, standing over her, gently shaking her shoulder, talking softly.

‘Hey sleepyhead. You were really deep. Usually it doesn’t take this long.’

She was looking at him without comprehension, lost in the feeling that he’d been in the dream and it would all make sense if she could just remember it. It was right there, only a moment ago, but it was gone. The harder she thought about it the more the man before her dominated, wiping out her vague memory with his physical presence.

‘How long what?’ It didn’t make any sense, even though it seemed right as she said it.

Bruce smiled at her and pulled up the blinds, flooding the room with bright sunshine. ‘Don’t worry about it. You’re awake now, that’s all that matters. We’ll put together breakfast while you get ready. We’ve got time so take a nice long shower and remember to grab enough clothes.’

The light was harsh and Deana squinted against it. Above her, in front of the brightness, Bruce’s outline glowed golden and in the shadows of his face his eyes gleamed. She realized what she must look like and turned her head away, shading her face to cover it. The clock on the dresser showed it was early. She rubbed her eyes and tried to clear her head. The time floated through her thoughts and she grasped at its consequence. Then clarity and she turned back to Bruce in a rush of panic. He was standing above her again.

‘Is Chester here?’

Bruce reached out and squeezed her shoulder. 'No, he's long gone by now. We've talked about this: He's too far back, we don't have anyone who can get here in time.'

'But he was here.'

Feeling vulnerable, Deana put her hand over Bruce's and leaned her face against them. She pushed Chester away, held on to Bruce, relaxed. There was nothing to worry about.

'Hey, hey! Don't go back to sleep.' Her head fell slightly as a blanket was pulled out from on top of her. 'We have time but not for you to doze around.'

Deana reached for his hand to pull him back but it wasn't there. She opened her eyes and saw he had backed away, his arms crossed impatiently. She pouted at him.

'You can doze with me.'

'No, you should get up,' he said calmly. 'We'll be in the kitchen.'

Processing the plural, she looked around him to see a woman leaning against the frame. Tight lips, tight hair, blank eyes. She was wearing a dark, close-fitting sweater from which a white shirt collar rose. Her crossed arms were holding a coat. Deana felt like she was being judged.

'What?' she challenged.

The woman's only reaction was to look up at Bruce, who was walking towards her.

'By the way, this is Grace. She's our driver.' He paused and looked back at Deana with a sly grin. 'She's always our driver.'

They left and Bruce closed the door behind him. It immediately opened again and he stuck his head through the gap.

'Remember, it's cold out, so you need to dress warm. You should pull your clothes out first before you shower, otherwise you might forget.'

The door shut again and Deana stuck her tongue out at it. She kicked at the remaining covers and swung out of bed. Why was he suddenly being such an ass? Why should he care what that Grace thought? Maybe it was some sort of joke. For all Deana knew he was lying and this was the woman's first day on the job. They were probably having a good laugh about it right now.

She got up and went over to the dresser. A shiver ran through her. Of course Chester didn't turn the heat up when he left, probably turned it down. It didn't matter that it was free, he was a cheapskate at heart. She opened a drawer and picked up pair of socks and another fell out with them. She leaned down to pick them up and stopped herself. With a chuckle she reached in and pulled the entire contents out onto the floor. She moved to the next drawer and clothes started flying. She was searching for an outfit but moreso was having fun flinging a mess, letting panties and sweats and giggles fly with

abandon. When she was done what she'd chosen was tossed on the bed and everything else spread around the room. Breathing deeply, she looked at the sudden chaos, satisfyingly unnecessary and consequenceless.

On the way to the bathroom, Deana stopped at the thermostat. It wasn't turned down as far as she expected. The piece of tape that Chester used to hold its position had been pulled back. It was still cold. It was always so cold. She would have to let Bruce know he didn't turn it up enough. She spun it even higher, looking forward to taking a long hot shower and, for once, stepping out into a warm house.

Even though her hair and skin were still damp, when Deana stepped out of the bathroom the air was warm and comfortable. She glanced at the thermostat on the way to her bedroom and saw the tape and how high it was set and with alarm reached to turn it down before Chester noticed. An instinctive reaction accompanied with the assumption that Chester was home and she froze at the thought. She looked down the hall at his room. The door was wide open and streaks of sunlight ran across the floor and walls. It was empty. She turned in the other direction — no one was there either. It was so warm he surely would have noticed. He wouldn't have left it like this, he would be confronting her right now. Which meant she must have set it herself. Which meant she was alone.

Deana exhaled and laughed at herself. She started towards her own room and with each step the emptiness of the house seemed to deepen. Being alone made her feel more exposed, as if that emptiness was observing her, pondering her existence, questioning it. She looked back down the hall, saw nothing. Backed away towards her room. When was Bruce coming? His absence was something she had never considered. She needed him.

In her room clothes were strewn all over the place and there was a neat, folded set on the bed that must be for that day. The disarray was a different extreme from the vacancy of the house but no less worrisome. She knew that she had probably done this yet it felt like an intruder or mysterious entity had trashed the place while she was in the shower, or even when she was sleeping. An overwhelming anxiety crept inside her, of helplessness and insignificance. She grabbed the clothes and opened the door to leave. She did not know what she was going to do but staying there was not a possibility. Then she heard the sound of soft laughing.

Chester? A moment of dread — no, it sounded like Bruce. *Shoot!* He was here already? And there was another voice. Suddenly feeling exposed, Deana tightened the towel against her front, stepping back to softly close the door. She looked around at the room — it was a disaster. Had he already seen it? She quickly got dressed and then went around gathering up clothes and stuffing them into the closet. When she was done they were spilling

out and the door wouldn't close all the way but at least the floor and most everything else looked clear.

She looked at the clock. She couldn't remember him saying anything about coming this early — not yesterday, not ever. Was something wrong? She probed her memory. Maybe this was how it always happened. Feeling an urgency to see him, she began to hastily dry her hair but looked at herself in the mirror and stopped short. She looked a mess. Resisting the impulse to rush out, she got her hairdryer and hairspray and sat down to work on fixing herself into something presentable.

When she came into the kitchen Bruce and some woman were sitting at the table, mugs of coffee and plates with bits of egg and toast in front of them. They were staring at her, Bruce with a warm smile, the woman expressionless.

'Come on in, have a seat,' he said. 'I'll make you a plate.'

'Who's she?'

'That's our driver, Grace.' His eyebrow raised. 'Don't remember?'

Deana looked at Grace. She was somewhat attractive, but seemed like a tight bitch. Deana shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. 'Sorry. I guess you're just not that memorable.' Grace's lips pressed ever so slightly, and she turned back to her coffee. As she sat down, Deana kept her eyes on the driver, challenging her. Grace looked at the table, at her mug, at the wall, at nothing. Deana continued to stare.

Bruce put down a plate of eggs and toast with jam, lukewarm and soggy.

'Sorry about that,' he said, 'I waited until you got out of the shower to start cooking, but you—' He paused and made an oval motion with his finger at her head. 'Special occasion?'

Deana dabbed at her face. 'What? Is something wrong?'

Bruce looked coyly at Grace who finally turned her stoneface to Deana.

'No,' he said, 'you just look...nicer...than usual.'

Deana felt herself blush. She put her head down and began to eat. She could feel Grace's eyes on her and wished she would just leave. After a minute she looked up.

'Wait a second — did you tell me to do this?' she said, mimicking Bruce's finger circling.

Eyebrows high, Bruce shook his head slowly. He looked like he was fighting off a grin. Grace was still watching her, face almost lifelessly still, probably suppressing a smile too — or maybe that was one.

'What?' Deana said to Grace, showing more irritation than she meant to. Grace didn't appear to be wearing any makeup but her face was almost disarming in its perfect plainness. The driver glanced at Bruce and then turned to her coffee. Deana tried to think of a follow on, something that

would get a good reaction. Maybe something about a tight bun and a tight ass—

Bruce interrupted her train of thought. ‘Hey, there’s no reason to get mad at her. I just noticed you were made up. It seemed, uh, prescient of you.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean? Like a gift?’ said Deana, tearing off a piece of toast.

Bruce was shaking his head. ‘It’s just strange, that’s all. It actually *is* an important day and it’s almost as if you knew it.’

‘Important? How?’

‘You’re not going to remember any of this...’

He trailed off and looked at her with a sudden warmth that seemed ominous. Deana’s belly tightened and her chewing turned mechanical, gnashing on something that had turned to bland texture. She swallowed with effort. His implication was at once enticing and worrisome. What knowledge was she privileged to know, only to lose? Not just now but before? She felt like a child allowed to overhear secrets because their comprehension was out of her grasp.

Then he continued: ‘...but I guess I can tell you. I just need to remember to keep my trap shut so I don’t have to repeat myself a hundred times until you hit your zero-hour.’ (Was that a code name for something special?) ‘Today we’re going to break you out of the loop. For the first time, tomorrow’s going to be a completely new day for you.’

Deana’s mind blurred, racing to understand what this meant and its consequences. She thought about her husband and everything halted. ‘Is Chester out? Will he be able to find me?’

Bruce started to say something but stopped and sighed instead. He reached out and took her hand. ‘Yes, he’s free. And from where we’re at, there’s no way of tracking him. I’m sure you’ll be able to find each other, though.’

‘But he knows — about you, about us, about what I’ve told about him.’ Deana was starting to feel ill.

Bruce closed his eyes and squeezed her. ‘Yes, yes. I only meant...’ He slipped his other hand under hers, holding it from both sides. ‘We don’t know what’s remembered after the break. It might be different for you two, like what once was.’

Deana’s thoughts were reeling. She shook her head, unable to see how this was possible. She could never be with him again, not now.

‘In any case,’ Bruce said, ‘whatever the situation, we’ll make sure you’re protected.’

‘How can you be sure? How does it work?’

‘It?’

‘The loop-end-thing. How do you stop things?’

‘Oh,’ he glanced across the table, ‘it’s a bit complicated. No use explaining it now. We have to wait for your memory to start working again anyway.’

‘But then we might lose it again? Are you saying when break through we might not know each other?’

‘Well, um,’ he clasped her hand tighter, ‘it may not matter. You see, I’m not going with you.’

‘What?’

‘Eventually I will, I guess. We don’t want to leave anyone essential behind so me and my team need to stick around until everyone’s clear.’

‘Does that mean I won’t see you again? I mean, after tomorrow? Ever?’ A tear began to roll down her face. ‘Then I’m not going. I refuse.’

Bruce looked hurt. ‘Deana, don’t do that. I’ve got my duty. This is already going to be hard enough. You are very special to me, what we had together — it’s something very special. Nothing can take that away. No matter what happens.’

He put her hand to his lips. His eyes were delicate, pained and sincere. She knew that look, was melting under it. They remained like that, staring into one another until it was broken by a cough. Bruce sniffed and brushed his eye and gestured at her plate and she said she was done. He pushed his seat back.

‘No, I’ve got it,’ she said, collecting the dishes and the pan from the stove and taking them to the sink. She started scrubbing them and Bruce asked her what she was doing. ‘I don’t want to come to a dirty kitchen tomorrow.’ He chuckled and nodded and said he was going to go to the bathroom before they left. Deana stopped him.

‘Hey, who *is* going to protect me when I’m through?’

‘Maybe we’ll send her,’ he said with a sly grin and a tilt of the head before walking away.

Deana looked behind her. The woman at the table — Deana had lost her name — gave her a dry look. The woman picked up a napkin from the table and reached it out, at the same time brushing a finger at her face from her eye down her cheek. Deana took the napkin and turned away, but not before noticing the sidearm on the woman’s hip and wondering if Bruce wasn’t joking.

They bounced along the dirt lane, the all-business woman driving faster and harder than seemed necessary. Deana held onto the seat in front of her as they bucked and slid but the driver never seemed concerned, steering and shifting easily, avoiding ruts, anticipating poorly graded curves, even veering onto the shoulder ahead of the rough patch by the old oak. It was as though

she was already deeply familiar with the road — not that this made Deana feel any more comfortable. She wanted to say something and leaned around to get Bruce's attention but when he looked back, despite his jerking head and hand firmly planted on the roof, he appeared unworried, perhaps even amused, so she slunk back behind him and kept her mouth shut.

They skidded around the final bend and the paved road came into view. At the intersection there were two soldiers with assault rifles blocking the way. They ground to a halt and a cloud of dust drifted past them and over the approaching soldiers. The silence was sudden and ominous.

'What's going on?' asked Deana.

Bruce tilted his head back and spoke up into the air. 'They're always here — you always ask — no, I won't explain — it's too complicated — you never remember — don't worry about it.'

One of the soldiers came up to the window and the driver rolled it down. Deana had forgotten she'd been looking through tinted glass and the light from outside was harsh, almost unreal. The other soldier stood in the middle of the road, blocking their path. Bruce passed a piece of paper across the driver and out the window. The soldier took it and glanced at it and then looked through the opening at Deana and then back at the paper.

'She's the only one left?' He was talking to Bruce.

'Yep, that's it.'

The soldier stepped away and pulled up a radio and spoke into it, holding up the paper as he talked. Deana didn't understand why the military was here. Did this have to do with her husband? Was it because of something she had said? Bruce had told her that he kept some of their discussions for after she would forget, for her protection. Was this part of that?

The soldier came back to the window and returned the paper.

'You're good to go, sir, ma'am. We'll follow you out.'

The window rolled up and the other soldier moved to the side and they pulled out onto the road. Deana was pressed into her seat as the car accelerated.

'Why were those guys there, guarding the driveway?' she called out above the increasing roar of the wind and engine.

'I already told you not to worry about it,' said Bruce. 'In a few minutes it won't matter.'

'Were they looking for Chester?'

He turned around to face her. 'No. They are not looking for him.' He paused. The road and trees rushed by behind him, making it appear as though he were flying in reverse. 'I wanted to wait to tell you this, but since you're pushing — we know where your husband is. That's where we're going right now: to see him. To have *you* testify against him. Put an end to all of this once and for all.'

Deana's heart dropped, her head swam. Chester? Today? Soon? She looked out the window. It was a blur of trees and fields and road as they raced towards him, into a future where she did not want to be, faster, faster. They needed to slow down. She needed time to think. Something took a hold of her hand.

'Hey. Hey! Deana. Look at me. He can't hurt you. I promise. I need you to be strong, just like we talked about. OK? Just relax, put him out of your mind.'

She tried to forget but it wouldn't go away. She didn't remember talking about this. What did they want to know? What were they going to ask her? Why did she have to do this? She wasn't ready. She wasn't strong. She needed more time. Bruce handed her a packet of tissues and she reached for them but the car swerved and they were both thrown to the side. Bruce swore, pulled himself back into his seat. The road was all curves and rises and falls and the car flew through them, the driver unconcerned about oncoming traffic or unexpected obstacles, floating over blind crests and moving across both lanes as it swept through the snakelike bends. Deana felt like she was in a movie on fast-forward. She suddenly didn't care if it was dangerous, didn't care that they might crash — she *wanted* to crash. Anything so she wouldn't have to face Chester. She wiped at her eyes and squeezed Bruce's hand which he held back for her. She wished she didn't know. It seemed impossible that she could forget it now.

Then they came around another curve and ahead of them were blinking lights, red and blue, approaching quickly. Too quickly. The roadblock sped towards them and Deana thought they were going to drive straight through it however when it seemed like it was too late the driver braked hard and the car squealed and leaned to a stop right in front of a line of wooden barricades. Behind them a row of police cars and drably colored military vehicles were parked across the road, blocking it.

There were more soldiers lined up here. Two approached from either side and both the driver's and Bruce's windows dropped with a smooth hum. They started talking and Deana looked around. Outside it was trees and hills and plenty of places to hide. She faced forward and slid her hand over to the door lever and pulled it. Nothing happened. In the front, Bruce was talking and pointing at the paper, while on the other side the soldier was making silly faces at the driver whose head was still like a statue. A cold draft was flowing through the car. Deana moved her hand up to the doorlock and pulled but it wouldn't budge. She glanced over and tried harder and when she turned back the silly-faced soldier was staring at her.

'Everything alright, miss?' he asked.

Deana nonchalantly put her hand in her lap and tried to make a casual smile. Bruce looked back at her.

‘No problem. She’s just having a tough time of it today,’ he said.

A man in a suit appeared on the passenger side and shook Bruce’s hand. He handed Bruce an envelope and glanced back at Deana, gave her a quick grin that almost seemed like a wince. Then he stood up and made a signal and a few soldiers ran up and moved one of the barricades. Two police cars backed up and opened up just enough space for the car to slip through. As they pulled away, Bruce turned to the driver.

‘We don’t have the roads to ourselves anymore and we’re in no rush. And I don’t want you to try to get out of paying. You owe me for at least two.’

The driver’s head rotated like it was on a swivel, first to Bruce and then to Deana. It was as though she were waiting for an answer, her face an incomprehensible question. Before she faced back to the road the throttle eased and their speed stabilized. Deana watched their surroundings as they passed, wondering if they were moving slow enough to survive jumping out. She tried the door handle but of course it didn’t work. With a sigh she told herself that when they got to town she could ask for a bathroom break and try to escape then. Besides, there wouldn’t be any soldiers around so she wouldn’t have to worry about getting shot.

Bruce’s hand swung back at her, fingers twiddling. She took a hold of it and felt a little calmer and wished he would run away with her. Maybe there was still a chance...

‘Hey Deana,’ he said with his head slightly cocked, ‘will you tell me again about your favorite book?’

The room was tall and narrow, dominated by the glossy wood table and windowed wall that ran nearly its entire length. A series of identical, dark, tall-backed executive chairs were arranged around the table at perfectly spaced intervals. Sitting in one, Deana twisted and rocked nervously, feeling an anxiety whose source she could not pinpoint. Maybe it was the new location — she had never been here before, though she could tell where it was. Through the window she could see the hotel where they always stayed, counted up to the fifth floor and located a couple windows of which one was their room. She tried to remember the view looking out from there, to imagine where was the building she was now in, what it looked like. The room she was in was not as high, two or three stories up, though she didn’t know if there were more above her. There would be a wall of glass. To her left was a square brick structure, which would be on the right. Deana closed her eyes, searched her memory, couldn’t come up with anything. It was like she was someplace immanently forgettable, or perhaps unnoticeable. Was there someone in the hotel looking at her right now, not seeing her? Where were they? In one of the windows she had passed over without a thought?

Were they looking past each other, unable to realize the missed connection they would never know?

She felt hungry and wondered if there was someone around who could get her something. A burger and fries and a chocolate shake would really hit the spot. She spun her chair away from the window to face the door and stood up and at that moment it opened and Bruce walked in. He smiled and held up a brown sack and white cup from a fast-food restaurant. She sat back down and he put them in front of her. He reached into the bag and pulled out a styrofoam container and a cardboard sheath of fries.

‘No pickles no onions.’ He pushed a straw out of its paper wrapper and stuck it through the cup’s lid. ‘And a chocolate shake.’

Deana looked at the food with bewilderment. She understood what had happened but it didn’t make it feel any less spooky.

‘Go on, eat. Before it gets cold.’

Bruce grabbed a fry and popped it in his mouth and went to the wall and turned on the overhead lights. Then he walked to the far corner of the room and took a long stick and hooked it into the top of the curtains and began to pull them closed. The sun had just begun to peek into view, up near the top of the window, and now it was blocked again. As the curtain closed the clean, immense daylight was cut off and under the fluorescents the room seemed to turn flatter, less imposing.

Deana opened the container and took a bite of the burger. It was delicious. Then she felt something slimy and firm and picked out of her mouth a mangled string of pickle. She tossed it away and pulled open the burger. In addition to the green slices embedded into the bottom bun there was a speckling of onions. She brushed and flicked and peeled them off.

‘Shit, did they mess up the order? I’m sorry, I should’ve checked. You have no idea how hard it was to get that. Most places are closed now and this one was jam-packed. I’m actually not sure that the people making the food were actual employees, or if they just wanted to keep it running.’

Deana had finished cleaning the bun and took another bite. ‘It’s great,’ she said, chewing, shaking her head. It really was. ‘You didn’t need to go through so much trouble, though.’

‘Sure I did.’ Bruce came up behind her and squeezed her shoulder. ‘You deserve it.’

He said he’d be right back and left. Deana sucked at the shake but the straw collapsed so she popped off the lid and lifted the straw and licked at the glob that clung to it. Bruce returned carrying a videocamera and tripod over his shoulder and bundle of magazines under his arm. He dumped the magazines onto the table and they spread across the surface in an unkempt line. He set the tripod up next to the table halfway down the room, aiming the camera at Deana. From behind the viewfinder he made a few adjustments

and then looked over it and pressed something. Deana self-consciously put the lid back on the shake and wiped at her mouth.

‘Are we starting now?’

‘Soon,’ he said. ‘Just getting set up.’

‘Why aren’t we at the hotel?’

He stood up from behind the camera and looked at her and around the space. ‘The atmosphere wasn’t right. This is much better.’

‘We’re going to be here all day?’ she said, looking around uncertainly.

‘I didn’t say that.’ Bruce walked to her and sat down. He was carrying something red. With his other hand he took a hold of hers and brought it to his chest. ‘When we’re done here we’ll head over, like always.’

His face was the almost-hopeful look of longing and heartache that she had come to know. She could feel the beating under her hand. Her eyes welled up. There was a faint beeping and Bruce checked his watch.

‘I need to go check on some things. While you’re waiting you can read or play with this if you want.’ He put down a bright red device that looked like a giant phone handset. ‘One of the others brought it from home. You turn it on here and press these to play games.’

She smiled and held his hand as he got up to go, held it until their arms were stretched and they slipped apart. After he left she pulled over the toy and began to prod at the buttons, trying to figure out what to do, mesmerized by the flashing lights and electronic bleeps. Without looking away she grabbed a couple fries and ate them. After a few confused cycles she found a game where she had to repeat back what the machine showed her. It would start simple but as the pattern lengthened she had to really focus her concentration to follow it.

‘Deana?’

She was in the middle of a sequence and ignored the voice. It repeated her name more insistently and she turned around in annoyance. Bruce was there, and next to him was an expressionless, tidily dressed woman.

‘This is Grace. She’ll be assisting me today. Do you remember her?’

Deana shook her head. Neither the name nor the affectless face were familiar. She smiled politely but was met with a dull, judging stare.

‘We’ll be back in a few.’

They left together and Deana felt a moment of jealousy which instantly dissipated since there was no way Bruce could go for a bitch like that. She returned her gaze to the game and tried to remember where she had left off. She cautiously pressed one button, then another, but on the third was met with the grating buzz of failure. With a snap of her fingers she sat up and leaned forward, both irritated and eager to try again. She reached for her

burger and took another bite while she watched a new pattern present itself and poked out a ditto with her free hand.

She was following a long sequence when she semi-heard a knock behind her and the door open. The series had reiterated itself through the deeply ingrained early parts and now was stepping through its less-established half and Deana focused to have it overlay exactly onto her memory, the last bits coming almost as a surprised recollection then one new point which repeated the next-to-last just like at the beginning and instantly seemed a natural part of the progression.

‘Deana? How’re you doing?’

She held up her palm and said nothing. She repeated the pattern with her finger’s movements nearly automatic, realizing its arcane rhythms, as if within the seeming randomness was a self-evident logic which could be played back no other way. There was a cough behind her and her mind fumbled and she lost her place. She reached for a button and hesitated — was it that one and then the one next to it, or the one next to it twice? She chose the next one and got the game-over sound. She slumped back and sighed, satisfied with her achievement and irked at the disruption that truncated it. She took another breath and realized her heart was beating loudly in her chest.

You done?’ said Bruce.

‘I am now.’ Deana turned to the door. That Grace girl was standing next Bruce, her arms behind her back. ‘Oh hey, still not smiling?’ The only reaction Grace had was to turn to Bruce briefly and then step back out of sight.

Bruce pointed to his side, where the girl had been. ‘You remember her name?’

‘Sure, Grace.’ she said disdainfully.

‘Good, good.’ He stuck his hand out. ‘Alright, time to go.’

‘Go? We’re not doing an interview?’

‘We’ll come back. We have something for you to see first.’

Deana took a drink from the somewhat melted shake and stood up.

‘You can leave that,’ Bruce said.

He led her through the doorway into a nondescript hallway with blank walls. Grace was standing a little ways away, watching them. Bruce took Deana’s hand.

‘I want you to stay calm. You’re going to see your husband.’ Deana tried to pull away but he held on fast. ‘Hey, hey — it’s not really him. It’s only a recording. You have nothing to worry about. I just wanted to warn you.’

He pulled her close, wrapped his arms around her. She embraced him back, the flash of panic fading as they held each other. He patted her and grasped her shoulders and held her out.

‘I want you to be brave. This won’t hurt you, you have nothing to worry about. I’ll be waiting right here and when you’re done we’ll be back to what it was like before.’

‘You won’t be with me?’

‘It’s important that I’m not a distraction. We need the experience to be pure. Grace’ll take you. It won’t be long. I’ll be right here waiting.’

Grace said nothing, just turned and started down the hall. Bruce gently pushed Deana after her and she rushed to catch up, glancing back and trying to show confidence. She didn’t have time to think about or prepare for what was about to happen. She followed Grace around one corner and then another, moving at an uncomfortably fast pace, focusing on the legs and feet in front of her and nearly running into them when they stopped suddenly at a door. Grace fished into her pocket and pulled out a key and Deana noticed again that she was wearing a gun. After opening the door she turned on the light and signaled for Deana to go in. The room was bare and windowless, stripped down to concrete. Towards the back there was a wide, white sheet hanging from the ceiling. The fabric spilled down onto the floor and spread out to cover a large area in its soft brightness. Placed in the center of it was a single chair. Near where Deana was standing another videocamera on a tripod was set up, pointing across the room at the screen. Grace closed the door and on the back of it some headphones were hanging. She took down a pair and put them on. Deana reached her hand out to get hers but Grace shook her head and pointed.

Deana looked at the chair and back at Grace who motioned again insistently. Deana crossed the room, her footsteps echoing off the hard concrete. The sheet wavered and she thought she saw it press against a form behind it, edges and curves hinting within the undulations. She tried to make out it out as she sat down, to map it to her image of a projector. There was another sound of footsteps, light and fast. She turned around.

Grace was moving towards her, headphones on, goggles over her eyes, moving so smoothly that she appeared to be not walking but sliding. At her side she was holding the pistol. Behind the clear plastic her eyes were huge, glassy, blankness gone and replaced with an immense depth that was beyond the capacity of the world, containing and reflecting Deana because they were one and the same. It was pain and loss and loneliness and they were all alone. Grace’s jaw dropped open and it looked as though she were letting loose a cry but it was silent. Deana screamed and put her hands up and began to fall backwards. Grace continued towards her, hand now raised out front, behind which remained a face frozen agape surrounded by horrifying shrieks that seemed to be issuing forth from it.

...going somewhere...

The sun poked through the blinds, sharp pricks of light that bore through Chester's eyes. He pressed his palms against his face, blocking out the brightness and squeezing at his throbbing skull. Color swam through his vision, indistinct rainbows that were either retinal memories of momentary diffractions just witnessed or figments of his tormented mind. He was back. Back, again. He pushed harder, tried to force away this endless hangover. How was this happening? Was there no escape?

Then, through the agony and swirling visions, a thought: perhaps it had all been a dream. Or maybe just yesterday. Chester shifted his hand, opening enough of a space to peek at the clock. It wasn't earlier, it wasn't later. That meant nothing, though. Why shouldn't he wake up now? He'd been drinking. Last night, too — except that was at a hotel. Of course, if it was a dream then that didn't matter... But what about Deana? Was she—

He pushed away the blankets and sat up on the bed. The movement made his head pound as well as realize a not unfamiliar urge to pee. He stood, squinting to block out as much of the light as possible. It still felt like whatever was getting through was drilling straight through his brain. He stumbled across the room and waved around for the doorknob, unclear if his vague view of it was real or his imagination constructing from instinct and memory. By the time he got to the bathroom he thought he was going to piss himself. He pulled down his pants and underwear together and barely got the toilet seat raised before he started draining his bladder, the stream creating not a tinkle but a dull collision, unclear in the dark through half-opened eyes if it was in the bowl or out. He moved it side to side and down, searching for the water. The dull noise disappeared and turned to splatter at the floor and Chester instantly had his bearings, jerked in the opposite direction perfectly such that his urine was immediately sounding the depths

of the toilet's reservoir. When he was done he reached to flush but instead dropped to a knee, stuck his head past the rim, hunched. When it was over he knew that was it yet still he waited to make sure his stomach's heaving was through, then dragged himself to the sink to rinse his mouth and gulp water and wet down his face.

When Chester stepped out of the bathroom he saw the door to his wife's room and his queasiness returned. Was she there? What *had* happened? He moved towards it hesitantly. His knee was damp and cold with piss and he reached down to peel his pants leg from it. At the door he grabbed the handle but recoiled from the metal's touch. It was as if it were transmitting the temperature of the room — ice cold, lifeless. What if she wasn't there? He turned and looked at the wall, imagined seeing through it to the field where he'd taken her, pickaxed through the frozen ground, rolled in her blanketed body. Her face half-uncovered at the bottom of the hole, vacant and colorless. Then covered with dirt and gone. Disappeared. The only marker some slightly disturbed earth spread wide so there was no mound.

It was too real to have been a dream. She couldn't be in there. Chester felt ill, shivered, didn't want to see what was behind the door but had to know. He held his breath and grabbed the freezing knob and opened it.

Nothing happened. No sudden rush of chilled air, no overwhelming sense of emptiness. It was silent and still. Thin strips of light ran across the room, along the floor and over the end of the bed, a bed which wasn't empty. He stepped forward, moving around so that he could see the face buried in the pillows. It was her, same as yesterday, same as the day before. He stared somewhat in disbelief as the covers rose and fell slightly, paused, then repeated. How could this be? He knew he should be relieved but was not. His head hurt. He was being punished. No, she had tricked him. How could he not have seen it before? She had cast some sort of spell, like a witch or something. She had known all along. *Known.*

There was something else to check. Chester backed out and closed the door softly, then slugged down the hall as quickly as he could to the front door to put on his coat and shoes. He picked up his gloves and keys and walked through the kitchen to the back door. When he stepped outside his lungs recoiled at the frigid air. He pressed his arm over his mouth to suppress the noise, then made the few steps across to the wooden shed. While fumbling in his gloves with the keys and padlock, through fitful breaths he detected a faint odor. He was not surprised, he had expected it, yet was still unnerved by the accompanying dread. It was back, he thought, returned. Over and over. The lock released and he pulled open the door and the smell wafted out. Chester turned and took a hard cough then a deep breath and rushed inside. He didn't bother with the lights, just went straight back to the workbench, next to which on the floor, against the partition wall, were the two cans. As

he reached to pick them up he could feel the warmth radiating through his gloves. He shuffled outside and finally breathed and put the cans down to switch hands because the one was quite hot. At the back end of the yard he put them into the burn barrel and stepped away. Above the barrel an unsteady strip of the landscape wavered, dried grasses and leafless trees and high hills rippling about their true form.

Chester turned and walked back towards the house, unobservantly staring at the antenna rising high up from the roof, his anger boiling. He glanced over at the shed. What was she thinking? Did she even know what she was doing? He looked at the back end of the structure. Double-walled, entrance hidden. More than enough fertilizer for a large farm and he was no farmer. Nor a supplier. A plastic container filled with diesel. She couldn't understand what was in there. Or perhaps...

He closed the shed and locked it and took a last look at the barrel. Off in the distance something moved, a bird or a dog or maybe a deer, the camouflage of stillness lost for a moment, pushing clear from its surroundings before disappearing back into them. Chester watched for it to show itself again but it did not. His gaze returned to the barrel and he winced, seething, then headed back inside the house. She must have figured something out. She set this up to goad him, to make him upset. What did she care of the danger? All that she wanted was for him to confront her. And he hadn't seen it. He was so focused on what else might have been done. He'd gone back into the shed, tried to figure out what she'd mixed, looked for other traps, checked the hidden room. At the kitchen table he had worked over all the possibilities. Was she angry? Trying to get attention? Trying to kill herself? Both of them? Maybe she had a partner. Maybe that was how she knew. She found out and was trying to destroy it. Maybe she didn't know a thing and just did something stupid for spite. Or because she was insane.

Except she knew, she had to. She had set him up. Slept through half the day and when she finally woke he was waiting for her. He thought he had it mostly figured out, that he would get her to tell him the rest. But he was halfway through a bottle and he couldn't even remember now what had made so much sense then. The house stunk and she came in to complain and saw the two cans, emptied and burnt out, sitting on the coffee table. And she had just laughed. Chester had expected fear or surprise or even guilt but not that. He demanded that she tell him what she was trying to do and all she'd said was 'You don't even remember last night, do you?' before running away and barricading herself in the bathroom. He went after her but was too slow and wasn't about to bust up the house trying to get at her. So he sat in the hall and kicked at the door and yelled and waited. She never said anything, never came out. Maybe that was when she cast the spell. Yes, that was it. He should have broken down the door, stopped her in the act. Instead he

waited. Slipped into her room to pull out her blankets and pillows, using some to wrap up in, the others to piss onto.

don't even remember, do you

He didn't remember. He didn't know what happened. She wasn't talking. She had just laughed. *Laughed*. Exactly the same the second time. He woke up hungover and not even thinking of her until he was in the kitchen and the cans were gone and he went outside and they were back, the same thing again. Again. He went straight to her room and shook her awake and she opened her eyes and laughed, right in his face. Laughed. Again. She wasn't afraid. She knew, she fucking knew. She was provoking him. He never hit her but she was laughing like a madwoman and wouldn't stop so he slapped her and she shrunk away into the corner, a hand held against her face, fingers splayed so she could watch him. He saw fear in her eyes but he was wrong — she wasn't afraid, she was calculating.

'Please,' she said. 'Please.' He heard her wrong. Now he understood. She needed him to come after her, not go away. She set a trap and he stepped right into it. Pushing her to tell him what she did. Why. What did she know. She gave him nothing, pushed back, escalated. He lumbered forward while she danced around him, prodding him. 'What are you so afraid of?' 'Did you forget?' 'Big man who hits girls.' She was off the bed, back in his face. 'Trust me, real men know how to treat a lady.' Was there another? Did she have an accomplice? Who was it? She was laughing, asking him who did he think. Then she said one name: 'Tib.' Without thinking Chester grabbed her face and shoved her away. She stumbled back and was falling and then there was a terrible crunch and her head snapped back on the dresser and she crumpled to the ground like a tossed rag. Chester watched her, not comprehending what he was seeing, trying to understand why he reacted so. It couldn't be Tib. He wasn't around. Chester and he had been talking one night less than a week ago — he was out on another cross-country haul. She had tricked—

The kettle began to whistle then immediately was screaming and Chester leapt up and turned off the stove. The sound died away but continued to wail in his head. He massaged his temples and waited for his mind to settle. This was all too much, he couldn't figure it out. He got a mug and spooned in some instant coffee and filled it with hot water. Rich-smelling steam floated up and he leaned his face into it, letting the pungent warmth swirl over and inside him. For whatever reason he felt colder than usual and the heat was welcome. Maybe he had stayed outside too long. He could also check the thermostat — she might have messed with that too. He took a sip that was scalding and only after it had seared down his throat was he able to taste it, a lingering astringency.

It wasn't a dream. Or, maybe still a dream. But what about yesterday? It seemed as real as the days before. But how? The house was gone. Blasted away. When he'd seen her there in bed again, not buried, he thought he was seeing things. Or a ghost. He went in and touched her, touched her face. She moved and her skin ran across his fingers and she exhaled, hot, alive. She moaned slightly but it didn't sound like her, it was like a growl, a warning, from below, from deep within the earth. Chester panicked and ran out and took the truck and drove away. Kept driving until it was dark again and he found a cheap hotel and didn't look back until he was inside the room. Then he'd turned on the television and saw the news about the explosion. Helicopter shots over familiar land, land he knew except for the circular shadow of debris and waste where he had just been. Where he was sitting right now...

What was he supposed to do? Perhaps it was a test. Figure out the exact thing to be done and then this was through. What would she want? What would she want him to do? What if it wasn't her? No, it had to be her. But then why had she pushed him? Was it a lesson? Maybe he just needed to say I love you. That was probably it. He could go do it right now — three stupid words and this would be through.

Chester didn't stand up. He sat there and looked over the brightening room, his head still aching. He took another drink of coffee and rubbed the bridge of his nose. No, that was too obvious. And who knows what might happen. He runs away, the house explodes. He gives her a line, a hole opens up and he drops to hell. What if he did nothing, just left her alone? The house was safe now, he could just go to his room and she wouldn't have to see him. Maybe she had to make it through a day without dying. Chester chuckled bitterly to himself, shaking his head at the absurd logic of the thought.

Still, he couldn't shake the sense that him sitting here in the kitchen was less real than everything around him being obliterated. He'd seen it. How could that be undone? It was unlike any dream: patient and methodical, not an impression of truth evaporating upon examination but something that grew more undeniable the longer he reminisced. Was that part of her spell? To make him believe what wasn't? That would be just like her, to press her own lunacy on him. She was nuts. Of course he couldn't get rid of her. But how was she controlling the whole world? Was he actually the only one seeing this? If everyone else had been there they'd have to remember too. If he could talk to somebody, before she woke up, he could find out.

Chester stood and went to the telephone. Lifted the receiver and hung it right back up. She might have turned everything back on itself but they still could be listening. Crazy talk would get noticed right away and they'd have an excuse to swoop in. That was probably what she wanted, the bitch. Trick

him into giving himself away. And not just himself. But what if nobody else knew? What if she had set it up so they didn't notice? Chester groaned and grabbed at his head. He couldn't keep anything straight, she really was making him insane. No matter what, this was a time to use a protocol. Better safe than sorry. He walked back down the hall, past her door, grinding his teeth at the thought of her smirking in her sleep, so pleased with herself.

When he stepped into his room the window was blinding, slats of light and dark melted to one by the direct blaze of the morning sun. He shaded his eyes and walked past it, the pain in his skull resurging. His head was turned away and he noticed the television, thought it might have something about all this too. He pulled the power knob as he went by but didn't bother waiting for it to turn on, just continued to his rig. He pulled out the chair and flipped on the transceiver and picked up his headphones but before he could put them on noticed there was no lights. He toggled the switch a few more times. Nothing. Then he tried the radio and the swivel light and was about to get under the table to check the outlet when he realized the TV wasn't on either. Had the power been off this whole time? He tried to remember if he'd seen anything lit up. He swore he saw his clock this morning, but maybe he had imagined that, or was confusing it with a different time.

Chester headed to the laundry room and the breaker box, mindlessly flicking the light switches that he passed: by his bedroom door, reaching into the dark bathroom, at the end of the hall. They snapped up and down, signalling nothing for their changed state, restive movements void of purpose.

He had just stepped into the kitchen when there was a knock at the front door and he froze. Had he imagined that? Ahead of him, through the kitchen, was the door to the laundry room. He waited, watched it, as if considering whether the sound had actually come from there, his back kept towards the hall and the front of the house. All was silent except for the beating in his chest, thick throbbing confirming that the disturbance — real or not — wasn't a false memory. Tentatively, he began to move again but before he had taken a step the knocking returned, longer, louder.

Chester looked back, turned and headed out of the kitchen, glancing warily over his shoulder at the hall towards Deana's room as he made his way to the front door. Through the peephole he saw a man, distorted long and bent as though stretched over an unseen globe. He was dressed in a white jumpsuit and holding a small bag and behind him was the warped form of a van. Chester opened the deadbolt and checked the chain and cracked the door.

'Hello, sir. Aether Power checking on reports of outages in the area.'

There was a nametag on the jumpsuit embroidered in neon green. It said *Crean*. Chester said he didn't report anything.

'You have power?'

Chester looked around the man. There was nobody else there, the van was empty. He affirmed that the electricity was out, but that he hadn't checked the breakers yet.

Crean shook his head. 'I wouldn't worry about that, you're not the only one. It's something out here.' He gestured vaguely in the air, behind him, up at the sky. 'We're still trying to figure what's happening. I'd like to check your power line, make sure everything's alright there. Mind if I go around and look?'

Not wanting some stranger nosing around unattended, Chester pushed back, hemmed, said he should go with him because he wouldn't want him to get hurt or something.

'That's fine, sir, I understand.'

Understood what? Chester didn't, and said as much.

'Well, I'm sure nothing will happen and even if it did I wouldn't think of suing you. However, if it makes you more comfortable...'

Chester eyed the man, who grinned back innocuously. He spread his legs slightly and put his hands behind his back, the edge of the bag barely visible around his hip. Chester told him he had to get his coat and then he'd walk him over. He closed the door and checked that he still had his keys. He went to the kitchen to get his coat and looked out of the window, but even on his tiptoes he couldn't see the power pole as it was blocked by the shed. On his way back to the front door he paused at the old rolltop desk, tried to clear his mind and think through what was going on, then knelt down and pulled open the bottom drawer. He picked up the revolver, checked that it was loaded, stood and slipped it into his waistband.

When he opened the door he saw Crean squatting, hand pressed against the house's foundation and looking up at the overhanging eave.

'Did you build this place yourself?'

Chester was locking the deadbolt and didn't answer. He turned around and Crean was standing, tapping at a downspout, still smiling blankly. Chester asked him if his house blew up yesterday. He said it without thinking. Just blurted it out and then immediately tensed up, both fearing and eager for the response.

'Pardon?'

The other man seemed genuinely perplexed.

Dismissing it as a dumb joke, Chester forced an inert laugh. Crean responded with a polite grunt and gestured.

'Shall we?'

Chester pointed the way and stepped out into the yard. They walked past the front of the house, avoiding a stack of tires as they turned the corner. From behind Crean spoke.

'Sir, you are Chester Blemmo, right?'

He answered in the affirmative before the strangeness of the question registered.

‘What was that?’ Crean said as Chester was turning around. ‘Could you speak up?’

He was holding something out, square and metallic with a glowing red dot. Behind him, barely visible over the tires, Chester saw the back door of the van swing open. He scooted backwards and reached under his coat.

‘Sir?’

Chester pulled out the gun and waved it at Crean while he continued backing away.

‘Woah, hey, we just want to talk.’ He was still holding out the device.

Cocking the revolver, Chester ordered him to get down. Crean held out both hands and dropped to his knees. As he lowered movement was revealed in the background, the dark drab of camouflage. Without hesitation, Chester spun around and ran, sprinting to the backyard.

‘Shit! Stop! Drop it, Blemmo!’

He got to the back door and pulled out his keys and glanced up and saw movement through the kitchen. Ducking down he shuffled back towards the shed. How did they get in there? He fumbled trying to find the shed key and saw something in his periphery, at the other side of the house. There was no time, they were closing in. Chester jumped up and fired in that direction and ran into the yard. When he got near the burn barrel he dropped to his hip and did a baseball slide behind it, flipping onto his belly and sweeping the yard with his gun. He didn’t see anyone. Heat radiated off of the metal by his face. His breath steamed. There were voices in the direction of the shed and he shot a round that way and another at the opposite side of his house. Then he scrambled back from the barrel until he reached the fence and using his coat for protection pushed down the barbed wire with his arm and rolled through. He stumbled up and took off, into the open field of dirt and dormant grass. Farther ahead there was a large tree, its branches a gnarled web above a mighty, twisted trunk. Chester aimed himself for it, running as hard as he could. He was exposed, his muscles and lungs burning, yet certain he would keep going, all the way to the tree and past it, continuing until he was gone, lost, escaped into the boundless land and hills beyond.

...all the scenes...

The path ran through the cluster of pines and curved away, turning up-slope towards the ridgeline. Although exposed to the elements, Bryce and Puka's footsteps were still visible, soft dimples forming a rolling trail to the sky. He could see the crest, was almost there. Endogh stopped and looked around, taking a deep breath of the cold, clean air. Other than a few wisps there were almost no clouds, a striking difference from yesterday's gray overcast. Under the blue expanse everything appeared clearer, more vivid. The snow was alight with a shapeless glow which seemed not reflected but contained, as if within immeasurable depths there existed some radiance unknowable except for surfaced emanations revealing nothing of its source or true form. Against this the trees were almost black, shadowy blotches and lines and occasionally a lone figure standing isolated and resolute, asserting endurance as a quality of an individual's presence irregardless of its future prospects, elevated to notability by standing apart from the protective massing of its peers. Down below, the valley was immense and natural, unblemished by civilization except for a glimpse of the resort's edge and Endogh's knowledge of the ski runs and town and tourists obscured by tree and mountain and distance. A breeze ran across, causing branches to shiver and lifting snow into dust. The only sound was its whisper, a frigid tongue inscrutable yet speaking to his soul. It was awesome.

He raised his goggles and shaded his eyes from below, fighting a squint, as if everything would be lost if he didn't maintain watch. He took another breath, held his hands up wide and high, exhaled. He felt like calling out his elation, but such an articulation would spoil the very inexpressibility of his feelings. So he just remained outstretched and tried to expand beyond himself. Large enough to belong, withstand, surmount.

'Dude, you alright?'

Keane was standing at the edge of the pines, head cocked, hand held up to block the sun.

‘Just enjoying the view.’

‘Is that it up there?’ She was pointing past Endogh in the direction of the dissipating tracks. ‘We’re close.’

‘We may have to go along the ridge some, can’t tell from here.’

Endogh spoke without moving or even looking at Keane, continuing to stare out over the valley and futilely trying to retain the sense of solitude and immensity. For a moment it had been like she had vanished and left him alone, but that was gone. Crunching loudly in the snow, she hiked up next to him and turned to match his gaze, smacking her gum, scanning the vista like she was searching for the same thing. She threw him a glance of disinterest and patted him on the shoulder before continuing on, the sound of her steps and gum counting off a distracting, irregular rhythm.

He remembered yesterday when they’d seen the video for the first time, she chawing like mad, even more excited than he was.

‘Holy shit, Bry, that’s radical. From the ground you looked like a little bug, but here, you’re like a fucking god.’ She was up close to the screen, eyes gleaming bright white. ‘Radical.’

Endogh felt the same way. The tape was amazing. But he was a better skier than Bryce, better than all of them. He was sure he could do something just as big, bigger. That avalanche, though, that was going to be hard to top.

‘How did you do that? How did you know how to ride that down?’

Bryce swept his hair out of his eyes. ‘I don’t know, it was just, like, instinct, I guess.’ His cheeks bulbed out, reddened and freckled. Ever since the run he seemed to be wearing a permanent smile.

‘I’ll tell you what he did.’

Great White pointed the remote, rewinding the video. Dust settled and the whole side of the mountain lifted upwards and froze. Bryce weaved and bounced, rising up through the chute. The image stopped with him in his initial drop, hanging above the snowfield that had he just torn through. Great White stood up and went to the television. He was a big guy, big everywhere, body and head and hands, and stood well to the side to avoid blocking everyone’s view. The recording started playing forward, the large man pointing and commenting over it.

‘You see, it’s just like surfing. You have to stay in front of the wave, and catch it as it begins to build. Watch this right here.’ Great White was crouching, weaving, one hand tracing Bryce’s path, the other held out as if keeping balance. ‘There it comes ... boom! He’s riding it all the way down.’

Keane looked over to Bryce, her lips pulled into a little smirk. ‘Is that right? Is that what it was like?’

Bryce took a swig of his beer without losing his smile. ‘Not really. It didn’t feel like I was riding anything. More like the ground exploded.’

‘Pcha,’ said Great White, gesturing at the screen with his knuckles. ‘Don’t listen to him. He was so in the moment he could never understand what actually happened. This is the Bryce to trust.’

Everybody laughed while Great White started to rewind the tape again.

Endogh turned to Puka. ‘Hey, you were way closer than any of us. What did it look like to you?’

‘Dude, I didn’t see shit.’ Puka was lying on the couch wearing only shorts, body limp, head leaned back, not watching, the only movement coming from his mouth. ‘A big poof of dust. It was like he ripped a great white fart.’

‘You comin’?’

Endogh turned. Keane was a ways up, waving at him. He raised a hand and started hiking towards her. The path followed a sideslope which formed a somewhat awkward angle but had shallower snow. Mindlessly he matched Keane’s tracks, stepping into the depressions she’d left, echoing her movements through the bootmarks. The incline steepened and became more difficult and, as he labored under the increased effort, Endogh abandoned his replications and trudged upwards at his own natural stride. Keane was ahead of him, still moving, nearly at the top. His legs began to ache and he was breathing hard in the thin air but he pressed on, not wanting to break his momentum or show any hint of fatigue. He pushed down on his knees and felt the skis on his back sway from side to side. He kept his head down, not wanting to look up and realize he had covered less distance than he thought, not wanting to tempt himself to rest. His feet dragged through the snow, his predecessor’s trail no longer individual steps but a furrow. A pointless tempo counted in his head to distract from the fire in his thighs. He was slowing, every step more difficult. How long could he push himself without peeking, without stopping? His body resisted. His cadence shifted from a continuous motion to an intermittent pattern. *step—pause—step—pause* There didn’t seem to be enough air. He wanted to look. How much further was there to go?

Then the slope decreased rapidly and Endogh found himself taking three easy steps before leaning forward, hands braced on his knees, panting furiously. He was incapable of concern for how he looked as he gritted his teeth and felt a crescendo of pain rush through his legs. Then it trailed away and was replaced by a satisfying weariness.

‘That last bit was a bitch, huh?’ said Keane, breathlessly.

She was sitting on her knees, slouched, goggles up on her forehead, gnashing at her gum. Endogh nodded his head but said nothing, could say nothing. He pushed himself straight and rested his arms on his head, looking around. They were on a narrow flat that ran unevenly in both directions to form the

ridge of the mountain. The snow was thinner here and broken by irregular, rocky outcroppings. The path followed by Puka and Bryce was even less distinct and he could just barely make out where it ended, an area of unsettled ground in front of a ledge.

Endogh closed his eyes and remembered the run from yesterday: Bryce dropping down the mountain next to the exposed rock of the ledge. He looked again and saw the opposite side of that rock, Bryce disappearing next to it. His memory of the run was only of the video. He'd been down at the bottom with Great White while he was recording, had seen the entire thing unfold in front of him, but now his recollection was only of the zoomed-in images from the TV. The focused detail of the video became an enhancement to his initial experience and at some point over the past day had replaced it. He knew he did not originally see it as he saw it now, nor as he imagined it from where he currently stood. He was an eyewitness yet his image of the event was becoming formed of observations gathered afterwards and merged into a unified whole despite their incompatible perspectives.

He and Great White — and, for a time, Keane — had huddled around the television, replaying Bryce's incredible feat. The big man seemed to get more enthusiastic with every replay. Eyes widening, mop of hair shaking, broad smile showing increasing numbers of generous, brilliant teeth.

'When I edit all the footage together, this is going to blow everyone away.' He grabbed Endogh's shoulders and shook them, letting out a grunt of satisfaction.

'I know, the people back home won't believe it.'

'Oh, they'll believe it. And not just the people we know. Something like this can't not get around. I'll put it on public access, pass around copies. Everyone'll be like us right now, watching it over and over. It'll be hella big.'

Endogh watched Bryce come down the mountainside again, paying attention to the way he moved, cutting across just ahead of the wall of snow behind him.

'I'll tell you what Edryck, I know a bunch of old surfers who have all these big wave stories that sound great but might as well be fairy tales. Who knows what's true? — especially when they're always trying to outdo one another. With something like this, we no longer have to imagine what we weren't there for, no longer have to worry about what big talk can be believed.'

Bryce was tearing down into the flat, leaving behind a huge, rising cloud.

'Someday soon talk won't be worth shit. If you didn't record it it won't matter. We're almost already there. But the best part of this is finally the whole world's gonna know how fucking awesome we are, man. Legendary. And this right here,' there was a tinkling noise as Great White tapped the screen, 'this is going to be the climax. But people won't have to remember it, they'll be able *relive* it, no different from us right now. People out there

who don't even realize that the greatest thing they'll ever see happened today. People who wouldn't even believe this was possible. People who haven't even been born.'

The camera panned slightly to follow the misty atmospheric residue of the avalanche. Endogh watched the video restlessly. Maybe there was no way to surpass it. Great White reached for the remote but Endogh stopped him.

'What, you want to see Puka? He's alright, but nothing compared to this.'

Endogh hit the pause button.

'Hey, look at that,' he said, 'beyond those trees. It's another face, just like this one. The angle makes it hard to see. If you moved around a ways, though, you'd see the whole thing, have a perfect shot.'

'I see it. You could be right.'

'Sure I am. I'm going to ski it.'

'Well, we can check it out tomorrow.'

'I get dibs.'

'Sure, sure.'

'And one other thing.'

'What's that?'

'Don't start editing just yet.'

Endogh and Keane came up next to the ledge and looked down the slope. 'This isn't so bad,' he said, 'on the video it I literally thought Bryce was falling down the side.' It was steep, for sure, but not the cliff he had expected. Farther below he could see the mounding where the avalanche had piled up.

Next to him Keane began to wave both hands above her head. 'Look, they're down in front of that clump of trees,' she said, pointing.

They were barely visible, barely moving, smaller than he expected, blending in as if they were themselves trunks. Endogh was reminded of how much closer the camera was able to make things appear. He told Keane to stop waving so that they didn't confuse them. They continued along the ridge, now in untouched snow, following the rocky ledge until it dropped away and a new gap opened. The pointed tips of a few evergreens rose up to their eye level, moving slightly in the breeze. That was the marker — the takeoff spot was just to the right of these.

They walked over to the edge. The beginning was no worse than the other chute, but after heading downward for a dozen feet or so it disappeared into a precipitous drop. There didn't seem to be any connection between the terrain they were standing on and the white ground extending far beneath them in the valley. Endogh felt a nervous buzz start within his chest. This was going to be great.

'Fuck that,' said Keane with a nervous laugh. 'There's no way.'

‘What?’

‘It’s a blind drop! You don’t know what you’re going in to.’

‘C’mon, you saw the video. It’s a straight shot all the way down. Almost all powder. No trees. I’m going first anyway, I’ll show you.’

Keane smacked her gum, grumbled about the fuzziness of the video and hidden rocks and line of sight. Endogh ignored her and shrugged off his backpack. She was the one who insisted on coming along. Just because she was wussing out didn’t mean he had to. And he *did* know what was down there. A gnarly run. Hella gnarly. Better than Bryce’s. Keane was going on about falling and how she wouldn’t be able to see him and that it would be better to just take the other one. Endogh snapped into the bindings, shaking his head. It would be pointless to argue with her.

Bryce would understand. Bryce did understand. Last night, while they lay in bed.

‘Dude, what if you fell?’

‘But I didn’t.’

‘But what if you did? Like, you wouldn’t even be here right now.’

‘I am here right now, so I guess I couldn’t. It must have been inevitable. I *had* to make it, otherwise this conversation couldn’t be happening. You could say this exact moment is predicated on what happened earlier today, but the way I look at it, us talking like this was already going to happen long before I got up on that mountain. I mean, can you imagine it any other way? Think of how it feels, *right now*. The present isn’t a result, it’s a cause.’

Bryce went silent. Endogh could hear his breathing, soft, regular. He was about to ask if he was awake when he continued.

‘You know, people obsess about dying, spending so much of their lives avoiding shit without realizing that it does no good to worry about things we can’t control and that it’s a waste to run away from those we can. Look at those douchebums who run double blacks and act like they were on the edge of life. They’re really just trying to score with the chicks but have probably convinced themselves that they actually risked something. They’re proving nothing, man. To know which side your destiny sits on you have to actually tempt fate. Until you do that, you ain’t really alive.’

‘What about when you saw the avalanche? Didn’t it make you wonder, you know, that maybe it was it?’

‘Well, I don’t know that I actually saw it. But when it’s your time, it’s your time. I’d rather go out doing something incredible than spend every day living the same dull life as every other robot.’

Endogh nodded to himself, seeing in the blackness the white blankness of tomorrow’s run, untouched by anyone.

‘You ever had that feeling like everything is perfect, that you’re in the zone and you can’t not succeed? When I was going down today, I never

once thought that I wasn't going to make it. I'm not talking about being delusional or ignorant or anything like that. I *knew* I could do it, I knew I *would* do it. There was no doubt, even before I started. Sometimes you just know, like you're in sync with the world, that it has to go your way.'

'So you weren't worried?'

'I just told you, there was nothing to worry about.'

'That's awesome.'

'Fuck yeah.'

Endogh checked his skis one last time and stood up. He pressed the earphones into his ears and pulled the headband over them, then reached into the backpack and pressed the big button on the tape player. He waved his poles in big arcs above his head.

'Duuude, you sure about this?'

'They better be recording. It'll totally suck if they miss it.'

The song began to rise. Endogh saw a flash down where the camera was set up, then another. He held one pole high in the air then let it drop. Leaned forward, looked below. Teetered. The rush was spreading within him.

He heard Keane's voice and looked over. She was shaking her head and hands. The music was loud and he could just barely make out her mouth forming the words. *You don't have to do this.* He replied with a nod. He already saw himself at the bottom of the run. There was no turning back now. *Are you sure?*

'I'm stoked.'

And he was. With that Endogh pushed off, body focused, music blaring. At first it felt like he was hanging, barely moving, and then his speed picked up and before he expected he was at the drop off. The ground fell away, far below him. Too far. He whooped, spinning circles with his arms as he rushed towards the mountainside, falling through snow and air. Falling and falling. Longer than possible.

Then he landed slammed into the powder let his knees buckle absorbed the shock. Bounced up was already flying down the face barely lost speed no time to think. Ripping through the snow. He caught up with himself and settled. Everything was perfect now. He made a turn and pulled tight. There was a slight rise and he launched off it and glided through the air, no flailing, landing smooth and fast. He carved to adjust his line, throwing up powder that blew off into his periphery, seeming to uncover a shadow that opened forever into the distance. Then, despite the steepness and air rushing across his face, he was decelerating. The snow slowed and paused instantaneously and then he was starting to move in reverse as sprays of white dust started bursting around him.

This was it. The whole mountain was falling. Surrounded, he was going down with it, but he could still see ahead of him, through to the bottom. En-

dogh tucked in, keeping his balance as the surface destabilized and dissolved beneath him. He was moving again, pulling forward, away from the collapse, riding the wave. Then he was in a cloud, white, floating, face sprayed. The music was gone, replaced with a deafening thunder from everywhere. He felt like he was turning, leaned to correct, was spinning, tumbling, covered, rolling. Something whipped around above his head and knocked into his arm. He tried to pull himself into a ball but a force was pulling him taught, straight, tearing him apart. He roared, struggling to hold everything together.

Then it stopped. Darkness. Endogh wasn't moving, couldn't move. Stretched out, frozen. The roar was gone, the song playing again. Heavy pressure on his chest. There was snow in his mouth but it wouldn't budge. He couldn't breathe. He tried to thrash, to yell, to break free. Nothing happened. How far down had he gone? Which way was up? Someone needed to find him, dig him out. He was trapped, suffocating. His nerves tingled. It was all black. Music screamed in his ears. He was stuck, still. He had to breathe. He saw a prick of light. This was it. Finally. What a fucking run. Soon they'd be talking. All night. What did it look like? He had to know. His ears screamed. The prick grew. How long till he'd see?

*...feeling
feeling...*

It was dark, nothing to see, it seemed.

Nothing except for the tiny glow, floating. Darren was laying on his bead, staring at the ceiling or where he assumed the ceiling was. The tip of the cigarette came alive, the smolder turned orange hot and creeping, becoming and then fading from its wavering ash wake. He exhaled, watching the cloud of smoke rise up in front of him, or perhaps seeing nothing. Maybe it was just in his mind. Of course it was, there the difference between thought and real dissolved. He waved a hand above him, cutting through the cloud that might not be there. He was invisible yet an apparition hovered, faded, remained, disappeared — an untestable existence. It felt like complete stillness, like motion was impossible or meaningless if it could not be observed. Only the ember of his cigarette mattered, a fairy flitting at the edge of imagination. It lit up again, releasing into his unseen body, closer to exhausting itself. Every morning, on his back, contemplating irrelevance. Equality. The alarm had woken him up, he'd gotten his smoke, he'd lain back down. He was still tired — he always was — yet there would be no more sleep. Around six minutes after the alarm he would finish his cigarette and get up and begin his day. What if he could fall back asleep? What if he already had? A day turned as black and unknown as his surroundings. Nothing to miss. A respite unnoticed. The routine would not break. Darren took another drag and the burn touched the filter. He reached for the ashtray and put it away, flipped up the clock to check the lighted dial. Just under six minutes. Right on schedule.

He got up and went to the bathroom and took a piss and a shower and only turned on a light when he needed to pick out his clothes. He could probably have done that by feel too except he didn't want to make a foolish mistake like a mismatched top and bottom that the eyes might

take as something worth noting. It was part of the passage: dark into light, nothing turned concrete, the uncertainty of the day's start resolved to the inevitability of what was to come. His creeping anxiety that the world had changed, could change, settled by reassuring structure.

After unnecessarily checking his briefs for holes or stains, he put them on and then the shirt and socks, followed by the gray sweatpants and sweatshirt, finally stuffing the gloves and ski mask into his pocket. He went to the kitchen and began to cook breakfast. Bacon and eggs, always. When it was ready he sat down to eat, the air warm with the smell of smoky grease and coffee and fresh toast. He ate slowly, under the single, lonely light above the table, chewing carefully, focusing on every bite and sip. The fact that he'd consumed these eggs, this very piece of bread, the same strip of flesh from the same belly of the same pig many times made their continued deliciousness almost incomprehensible. It was like a miracle. He thought of a single coffee bean, picked in some far-off land and shipped and roasted and ground and packed and scooped and its bits giving up the same essence day after day. He smelled, took another drink. Again. The full appreciation of this special pleasure possible only through eternity.

After finishing Darren checked the clock and then cleaned up, taking care to pour the grease into the can under the sink and drying everything before putting it away. As it was before. He'd considered that the same could be accomplished by doing nothing, by waiting it out until the next morning. That was something he could not do, though, not because he was bothered by the illogical reversion of disorder (which was like cartoon physics or movie magic, an absurdity that felt sensible in context and thus was acceptable, perhaps even cherished), but because he couldn't stand knowing the mess was there. Why would he not clean? It looked so much better. Plus, it was part of his schedule. That time would have to be spent no matter what.

He walked into the TV room, over to the shelves of videotapes. Found the last pair he'd given to the Fullings and pulled out the next two. Comedy and brooding drama, an odd pair — perhaps they would even each other out. It was a large collection of movies, and the organizational possibilities were immense — date of release, director, genre, reputation, box color — each of which posed problems with ambiguity of order or difficulty in ascertaining a tape's position given its spine. So, instead, Darren used a straightforward, alphabetic-by-title system (ties broken by release year) which worked out just fine except it sometimes created strange neighbors. Not that the Fullings would mind, they were just happy to have access to this convenient library. Tarry in particular seemed content to have something to pass the time and didn't appear to bother about much else. He had his opinions but they were predictable, riskless, vaguely noncritical. Anything that fell on the broad continuum between martial arts, war, and farce would get an unequivocal

thumbs up. There was also a coy taste for horror. Everything else was judged with more indifference. 'It was beyond my pay grade.' 'I believe it put me to sleep.' 'Vira liked it.' The closest thing to a complaint was when the old man would get confused and claim that he had gotten a repeat — a ridiculous notion probably a result of the studios' habit of cloning each other's output or their own (often as selfsame sequels) — and even then would almost always claim that the movie was better the second time. Whatever the case, Darren found a certain level of satisfaction that others were able to appreciate (even if shallowly) the effort he'd put into building the collection.

He put the tapes on the side table next to the front door, checking to make sure it was unlocked. Not that it wouldn't be — people just didn't lock their doors around here, even before the looping. It was just that kind of neighborhood, with those kinds of people. Like the Fullings. They were a nice couple, though he often wondered how they ended up together. Tarry was ruggedly confident and beneath the belly and gray hair Darren could imagine a time when he was a rather handsome man. Vira, on the other hand, was pudgy and wrinkly and he couldn't trace her back to anything other than the kind of shapeless dog who even in the spring of youth is destined for the convent or lonelyhearts ads. Most people seem to grow into older version of themselves, but maybe she was one of the transformers, the statuesque beauties who get pounded by time and hormones and bad luck until their cells have been rearranged to the point that they no longer retain any semblance of their original appearance. He occasionally thought about asking to see a picture of them when they were young, at their wedding or something, though he also harbored a fear of confirming that she was as ugly then as now. Sometimes even the mangiest of strays luck out with a good home.

After checking the clock again, Darren looked over the movies, searching for later though he knew he wouldn't pick anything right now. It was impossible to anticipate what he would be in the mood for. It was as if there was a chaos within him, forcing variations of experience despite the order he maintained. An obscure flash of uncertainty passed through him which he shook off. Actually, he just liked to look over the titles, to remind himself of all the different choices and how big the collection was. It really was impressive. He'd calculated once that if he started watching them back-to-back finishing them all would take almost half a year (whatever that meant nowadays). He pulled out the one he knew he'd need and put it on top of the player. Some things he could predict. Just like he knew not to have another cup of coffee — it was better to wait and not get too jittery. Same too with the cigarettes, though this was even more important, almost fundamental. Waiting made the first one after *exquisite*. He looked at the clock and sighed. The same thing every day, everything should take the same amount of time, yet some-

times things seemed to just drag. Today he had to pass the time, others he was rushing to catch up. He scanned the movies again with impatience, finding the spots where the first letters switched, connecting the points in his mind into an intricate lattice that extended into the room. He began to see an asymmetric flower, an unwieldy beauty whose form arose from its source without carrying any underlying meaning or insight. It was pure structure, elegant unto itself, a map of information unnecessary to its enjoyment.

Eventually the clock caught up and he headed back to his bedroom. Pulled out jeans, shirt, underwear, socks, a sweater. Unfolded and refolded and arranged them on his bed. Got a clean towel and put it beside them. Watched the alarm clock, waiting for the hands to tick over the hour. To the bathroom to brush his teeth, check his hair, put on cologne. To the TV room, another time check, wait, tape into the VCR. Fastforward — he knew the exact amount almost by feeling or instinct without looking at the time display. He reached the spot, checked the clock, pressed play.

The woman is alone. There are lights but it is dark. She is looking over something. Engaged, distracted. There is an intensity about her, yet her guard is down. She feels safe. She walks across the space and begins to unbutton her outfit. There are shadows everywhere, all around and on her, but she is not concerned. The woman pulls off her top and then her bottom. Her undershirt is small, loose, hanging above her navel. Her panties barely on. She turns and goes to check on something. The crease of her ass rises above the waistband. There is something in the darkness. Did it move? She doesn't notice. She does not realize it is there, right behind her, reaching out...

Darren hit the pause button, leaving a blurry smear of the woman's backside. He slowed his breaths and steadied himself and waited for the tape to rewind. After he put it back he turned everything off and kept his breathing even, kept his heart relaxed, did one last check of things. The clock showed he was less than a minute late. Time to go.

He went out the back door and through his gate onto the greenbelt. Across the way, past the creek and above the houses on the opposite side, he could see the streetlights beginning to dim, globes of yellow against a purple steel sky. He put on his gloves, flipped up his hood, and began to jog. He kept his pace slow — not only was he was out of shape (always) but it was also easier to watch his step in the dim light. Though he glanced up occasionally to see if anyone else was out (nobody, ever, at least outbound) he mostly focused on the ground in front of him, avoiding pine cones and gaps in the cold-shrunk asphalt.

One time he'd made the mistake of coming out while it was still dark. Though it had the immediate problem of increasing the risk of a faceplant or

ankle twist (he could never seem to memorize the hazards, which he swore shifted as some kind of cosmic booby trap), the bigger issue turned out to be the eyes, always keeping watch over the subdivision. Later that day someone from a street over, a grayhair wearing a brown turtleneck and a fake smile, the vaguest of neighbors whose name Darren didn't remember then or now, came over asking questions about why he was out running so early. Darren tried to give him some line about not being able to sleep and getting his exercise in but the fellow wasn't having any of it and kept pestering him about why he'd never before seen him out then and was everything OK, all the while trying to peek around into his house. Darren finally relented and invited him in, suggesting they swap stories about the annoyances of insomnia. At which point the nosy bastard took the hint and begged off but not before telling him that he should watch out or he was 'liable to get hurt.' It came off as neither warning nor threat nor genuine expression of concern, more a weaselly attempt to stir up shit. Since then, Darren was always careful to maintain the routine and wait until dawn to leave. The eyes were surely still watching, but clearly they didn't suspect or know squat. He was just Darren Portlett, out for his morning jog. Not too early, not too fast. Nothing exciting, nothing memorable. They probably didn't even know his name.

Despite the slow shuffle with strides shorter than walking, he was soon breathing hard and his heart pounding. Steam burst from his mouth, barely dissipating before his next gasp. Even in the chill he was starting to sweat. It never got any easier. He kept his pace, knew that he could and that he had to. When he reached the path connecting to the cul-de-sac, he turned and jogged a few steps to get out of sight of the main belt before slipping into the bushes. Under the cover of the shrubs he leaned against the fence, hands on his knees, head sagging. His chest trembled at the deep, cold air and he focused himself, concentrating on not coughing. Once he had caught his breath he snuck along between the fence and the screening plants, back towards the greenbelt and around the corner to the gate. A gentle pull of the cord and the latch released. He crept into the yard, remaining in the shadows against the fence all the way up to the side of the house.

There was no line of sight between him and the street or a window or any spot for intrusive eyes. He gently turned the handle of the unlocked door and disappeared inside. Though the mudroom was dark, lit only by whatever early sunlight scattered through the small window on the door, Darren knew his way around. There was the sink and washer and dryer, a litter pan that needed changing, a bench spilled over with clothes and a pair of boots in the middle of the floor, a line of bowls with water and varying selections of pet food. The room had the strong odor of ammonia and butt with an undertone of rubber. He'd never once seen a cat or any other animal.

It was warm in the house, hot compared to outside. He pulled off his sweatshirt and slowly navigated past the obstacles into the hallway, soft steps on the shaggy carpet, down past the empty rooms and the bathroom, all the way to the end where the bedroom door sat ajar. With one eye pressed to the crack, he could just barely make out her lying in the bed, a head and two clasped hands in front like she was praying, the blanket showing in relief the fetus curl of her body. He touched the fabric of his sweats, felt himself beneath them and from beneath felt his hand. Watched a bit longer her unmoving form, his increasing restlessness pushing at the calm until it was too much and he had to leave.

In the main room Darren began to undress. He untied his shoes and made sure they were loose enough to put on again quickly. After pulling out the mask and putting it aside, he methodically folded the sweatshirt and pants and stacked them on the coffee table. His shirt and socks were slightly damp, so he spread them over the back of the couch, knowing they would dry out in the warm air. He took off his underwear and placed them next to the mask, then stood up tall, rubbing his toes into the rough pile. His skin tingled with exposure, his penis began to swell. He picked up the mask and pulled the black fabric over his head, adjusting it so the holes lined up, licking at his lips to make sure his mouth wasn't off-center. A wiggle of his hips to feel the weighty jostle, a signal to commence. Then one more time, just to make sure.

He walked back down the hall, briefs in hand, straight for the bathroom. He rolled his feet across the plasticky floor, minimizing the sticky sound of his bare soles peeling up from the surface. After he got the bottle from the cabinet he went across to the bedroom, easing the door open, always worried about creaks or squeaks that never came. The only sound was the gentle brush of the door against the carpet continued by the similar sounding whisper of his controlled exhalation after he realized he'd been holding it in expectation of the hinge's alert.

The room was dark, creases of light barely gaining entrance around the drawn shades. He stood next to the bed, over her, watching the shadows of her face, soft and relaxed, lips nearly kissing her interlocked hands. Up close he could just make out the movement of her breathing, the blanket rising and falling like the mysterious undulations of a night ocean. He knew what lay beneath, knew well the true form, the tender curves and folds, its extents and depths. It was a contradiction, something known and not, a secret experienced and as yet untouched.

Until now hanging in an anticipatory state of semi-arousal, his erection hardened, rising out before him, pointing the way. Darren arched his back, letting it hover over the bed, sweeping small movements back and forth like a snake tasting the air. *She does not realize it is there...* He stepped back

and opened the bottle, holding it high in the air as an invisible thread of oil streamed down in front of him. He could feel the light liquid drizzle over him, down his length and the insides of his legs. He dropped the bottle and squeezed his balls with his hand, massaging the loose, pliable skin until it was slick. He reached up to spread the lubricant over his cock and it recoiled at his touch, overexcited, functioning in a realm beyond his conscious control.

Darren wiped his hand across his forehead, pressing the mask into the sweat that had started to form. The scent of the oil wafted around him. He pulled up the covers and slipped into the bed. She started to move and before she was awake he was next to her, leaning over her, stuffing his underwear into her mouth, holding her wrists. She was writhing, fighting, kicking under the blanket but his weight was too much.

‘I’ll fucking gut you. I have a knife, don’t make me cut up your face.’

She stilled, remained tense. His cheek pressed against hers, the mask between, his mouth to her ear. She was shaking, distant moans emanating from somewhere inside of her — desperate, heaving laments. He pulled her arm across her face and released the other wrist and she grabbed for his head, clawing at his hair under the mask. Expecting this, Darren knocked her arm away then punched her. ‘Stop it!’ he yelled, then hit her again. Her arm fell against the pillows. She was limp, sobbing. Her panties stretched and tore in his hand and he brought them up to his face, inhaled them, then pressed them on top of his own underwear, shoving everything further in her mouth. He was a rock, a solid mass upon her panicked struggle, crushing her until she broke open for him. He was beyond her resistance, touching her secret. He knew now. She took him, would know too. They slid across one another, he pressed on her face, making her taste him. He lifted, floating above her. She flew away? Something slammed into his back and he was on his feet, against the wall.

Darren tried to breathe but the air was gone. A shadow came at him and into his gut and he doubled over, retching, his breakfast spraying onto the carpet. He finally sucked in a breath and the smell went right to the back of his throat and he was puking again. His hands were stuck behind his back. He looked up and leaning over the bed was the shadow, a dark figure in the gloom. Darren lurched for the doorway but with his hands cinched behind he lost his balance and sprawled forward, the carpet searing his face. When had he lost his mask? The shadow was standing over him now, its face angular, shiny, like metal. The eyes blank domes. It threw him back against the wall and he dropped to the ground, coughing, still trying to catch his breath.

‘Grenada! It’s me, Derrick. You OK?’ The voice was deep, muffled.

She cried out, spitting, coughing, whimpering.

The muffled voice again: ‘Sorry, but I had to be sure.’

‘Sure of what? Wasn’t it pretty fucking obvious?’

‘Sure that you’d be angry enough.’

‘Bastard! Is this angry enough for you?’

There was a light blur from the bed and something smashed into his crotch. The entire room lit up, dazzling stars flashing, too bright to illuminate anything. Electric jolts fired through his belly. As the lights faded, he could see the shadow holding her back, its head bobbing, its words indistinct. It held something up, a glint, put it on the bed. Then it was holding something else. The hand twisted, the outline of a gun. Through the darkness Darren could see the white of her eyes, wide and wild. The shadow was gesturing intensely.

Darren rolled onto his knees and lunged for the doorway again. He made it only a few steps before there was a jerk and he felt his shoulder rip and he was on his back, a giant black boot pressing on his chest. Pain seemed to surge from it to his arm and neck and balls.

‘Come on, you don’t have much time.’

He couldn’t see. Just a foot and a leg. A black column.

‘Think of what he’s done to you. What he just did. *You* have to stop it. One each.’

He kicked and struggled, twisting to get free. It was like the foot was planted through him.

‘Take it!’

Her voice spoke and the foot was gone and she was right there, standing over him with her hands held together high and tall like an unlit candle. Before Darren could try to sit up or move away she yelled and collapsed, her fists falling between his legs, punching into him, inside him. Her head snapped up and wet hit his face. She lurched backwards and he could see a thick, ridged shadow rising from his crotch. He was shaking, his stomach heaving again, his nerves screaming. He managed to suck in a breath and screamed along with them.

Darren attempted to roll, reaching around his back to get at the knife. He shifted his hips and a web of pain sparked through his body. He froze, tried to remain still. He heard her but couldn’t see her. Something trickled across his hip. He was pissing acid. What was she doing? He couldn’t move or scream or even whimper only barely breath so as not to disturb the blade. He was going to destroy her. She’d be sorry tomorrow. There was a shift in the dark and he moved only his eyes to see her white figure framed by the shadow, something dark and wavering framed by her. He watched it approach, floating, fitful, holding his breath and every muscle tense as he thought about what he would do to her and tried to remain perfectly still.

...to who have I kissed...

It was one minute before ten after the hour and Cressida Crimp stared at the digits in reverious incomprehension, vaguely aware of something to happen but unconcerned. She was curled up under the blankets, hands sandwiched between her legs, far too warm and satisfied to expend the effort to cross to reality. It felt like a dream, a repeated dream, so many times watching the same numbers aglow in duskiness yet still unclear how she was here awake, late yet not up nor dozed off, waiting when she knew better, cozy just a bit longer. But even more, different. She shifted her arm — it rubbed against her through her shirt, ran over her, like the touch of another. She did it again. Time hung there too long unchanged. She still had time. Only moments ago. She was full, wonder—

The digits switched and the clock began to beep loudly, urgently. The sound jolted Cressida, not because it was unexpected, but because she was expecting it, only not right then. She thrust an arm out into the relative cold and banged at the blaring machine, hitting the big button to cut it off mid-siren before clumsily feeling for the switch to turn on permanent silence. She rolled back and slid her hand under the blankets, collapsed her head onto the engulfing mass of pillows, attempted to return into the state she was snatched from. It was lost, though, ripped away by the intrusion of the outside world, recapturable only via a day's passage, when so whelmed by the accretion of experience and thought and consciousness a return to the liminal space of just-awoken is once again granted.

The room's presence was insistent, pushing at her desire to drowse. Her desk, posters, overflowing closet, the convocation of stuffed animals atop the dresser, the cragged ceiling. It was the same as always but seemed strange and disconnected, remnants of a younger self. Below the covers, unseen, she caressed herself, running her hands along her legs, under her nightshirt,

feeling a woman. Her eyes drooped. The darkness became that of a different room, in a strange house, the bed shared. She held, touched. Drifting to her last memory, her head on his chest, rising and falling as he slept. She could still smell his cologne, feel his warmth. Then to before, talking, laughing, sincere, close. And gentle. His first touch, a single finger across the hand, leading her away, his lips to hers, pulling her tight, tight against—

The phone began to ring, breaking the moment. Cressida quickly reached over and grabbed the handset, certain it was for her, hopeful at who it might be.

‘Hello?’ She was smiling, practically beaming through the phone line.

‘So...what happened?’

‘Oh, hi Niven. It was fine.’

‘Just fine? It seemed pretty serious when you took off. Did you kiss?’

‘We went back to his place and talked. About football and how to train when you reset each day. He’s very interesting.’

‘You hate sports.’

‘I guess I never really paid attention.’

There was a muffled cough on the line.

‘Dad? Is that you?’ A click. ‘Oh god. How embarrassing.’

‘What? You didn’t say anything.’

Cressida dropped her head into her pillows and sighed.

‘C’mon, I know you didn’t just talk about sports all night. And you never called, so *something* happened.’

‘A lady never tells.’

‘Puhleeze’

‘I will say this: He was a perfect gentleman.’

‘Noooo. I can’t believe it. Rip Peters. You gotta tell me more. What was it like? Were the lights on? Was he on top?’

‘Niven!’

‘Was he, you know, big?’

‘I’m hanging up.’

‘Nonononono wait. I’m sorry. Just— At least tell me this. Was it good?’

Cressida didn’t say anything. She stared up at the ceiling, its texture growing sharper with the approach of dawn. Indescribable infinitudes.

‘Hello? You still there?’

She closed her eyes and spoke softly, purely. ‘Amazing.’

As she was hanging up the phone she thought she heard a sound from his end, perhaps a sigh. Her hand slipped away. Her eyes were still closed. She breathed out and held it. Silence.

There was a knock at her door. Her father called her name and she answered. The door cracked.

‘Still on the phone?’

‘You should know.’

‘Sorry, we picked up at the same time.’

‘You could have said something.’

‘Yeah, um. Hey — I just wanted to let you know I’m making breakfast. So don’t take too long or it’ll get cold.’

‘OK.’

‘Cressida? I’m— I know you think I’m just an old fart, but if you want to talk...’

‘OK, dad.’

‘Good, good. ’Cause I know a little about boys and teenagers—’

‘Dad.’

‘Yeah.’

‘You can close the door now.’

‘Yeah.’

During this endless winter, Cressida’s morning shower had become a refuge, a place to escape the gloom and cold, to be washed by heat and steam in uninterrupted privacy. She would spend most of the time just standing under the hot spray, letting her mind wander, her skin first burning at the temperature then prickling then accustomed then addicted, forcing her to regularly reposition herself such that no patch was left exposed to the air for long without the water’s protective, transient touch. This day was no different, except that touch became more than just comfort, it was a reminder of him, of his closeness. She shut her eyes and breathed deep the humid air. Her hands guided the water over her body, felt it embrace her, its tactility flowing her away into a flawless sensuality. Her imperfections disappeared and were replaced by desire, by another’s desire. She let a single finger trace out parts of her, imagining their shape as she wished they were, that he saw her this way. Maybe he did. He had wanted her, as she wanted him. She held herself, knowing that despite the fact that she was now physically untouched it was not so. The memory made it real, a memory not just in her head but somewhere deep inside where she could still feel his touch. The shower began to cool and she adjusted the knob to fully on hot. She brought her arms close and let her head drop and the warm water roll down her back, trying to enjoy the last moments before it turned tepid and she would have to leave.

In her room, she picked out an outfit, a bright, flowery dress with a wide belt and a broad hat which she pulled low, covering part of her face. It was wholly inappropriate for the weather however it was the cutest thing she had. She looked at herself in the mirror, turning sideways, dipping her head so that only her lips showed. She blew herself a kiss and smiled demurely, then

decided the hat looked stupid and threw it aside. With a sigh she grabbed the brush and hairspray and started to tease.

When she got downstairs, the table was spread out with scrambled eggs, pancakes, and bacon. There was a setting for her and across the way her father was slumped in the chair, staring into a mug of coffee, a plate of barely-touched food pushed to the side.

‘It’s probably cold now. You can heat it up in the microwave.’

‘Sorry — it took longer to get ready than I expected.’ She took a deliberate pose behind the chair.

He nodded and forced a grin which disappeared as quickly as it came. He took a long drink then dragged himself out of his chair.

Cressida was hungry and looked more closely at the food. The bacon was burnt hard, the eggs stiff and dry. The pancakes looked just about perfect. She got a stack and, feeling her father’s gaze, also scooped a polite helping of eggs and clinked a single bacon strip onto her plate. Soft margarine spread unmelted like frosting over the pancakes. She generously coated them in syrup.

‘You really should heat that up. It’ll taste much better.’ Her dad was standing in the doorway, pouring himself another cup.

She shrugged, cutting a wedge of pancakes and forking it into her mouth. At first it was sweet buttery fluff but quickly she realized there was also raw batter in her mouth. She looked at her dad and nodded grinned chewed searched for something to drink however all she had was an empty glass. She forced herself to swallow and took her cup and got up, waving off her dad’s offering of help as she went into the kitchen. It was a mess. The stovetop splattered with grease and batter drippings and burnt somethings. The sink filled with mixing bowls and pans and eggshells. There was a trail of flour that ran across and over the counterop to a small heap on the floor. All of it seeming far in excess of what was necessary for the meal. Cressida ignored the disaster and opened the refrigerator and poured herself a glass of milk. She leaned back and drank half of it, washing down the uncooked pancake that was still hanging in her throat, then refilled the glass. Her father was standing slumped over in the doorway watching her. He had stopped shaving and the dark stubble on his face followed the contours of his skin, accentuating sharp bones and deep wrinkles. She hated seeing him like this. Not bothering to clean or even to care, resigned to letting the day pick things up each morning, almost challenging it to. Back before, with his job, he would come home in the evening exhausted, griping about neverending trash. She knew he wished he could be doing something else. However now he seemed to resent the day for taking it away.

They crossed paths and she watched him from the doorway open the cupboard and contemplate the bottles on the high shelf. He opened the

folding stool and pulled down a mostly full one. After pulling out the stopper he poured some into his coffee. He picked the mug up with two hands and turned and stopped when he saw her staring at him.

‘What?’ he said.

‘I thought you were going to look for work.’

‘You mean school’s back in session? Guess they forgot to tell me.’ He glanced up at the wall and pointed. ‘You might be late.’

‘Dad. That’s not what I meant. It doesn’t have to be a janitor or anything like that. We talked about hobbies. Niven’s dad told him about these union shops—’

‘No. Uh uh. Those idiots don’t know organization or labor or even who they’re representing. They think they’re gonna fake it till everyone makes it. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was really the same bosses grasping for their old levers.’

‘But you can’t just sit here all day. You need to do *something*.’

‘There’s still lots of day left. Plenty of time.’ He motioned at her with his cup. ‘Come on, you should finish your breakfast.’

She looked at his cup and shook her head and started slowly towards the table.

‘Say, that’s a nice dress.’

Cressida put down her milk and spun around. ‘You like it?’

‘You do realize it’s still winter, right?’

She sat down with a huff. ‘Is there a law against dresses in the winter?’

‘It’s just a lot of exposed skin. Frostbite can be very painful.’

‘But how do I look?’

He rocked his head side to side, hesitant.

‘What?’

‘Well, you know. It’s a little—’ He trailed off, looking down at his mug, twisting it in his hands. ‘Listen hon, don’t worry, you’ll grow into it. Your mom did.’

‘I’m not growing into anything, Dad. Nobody’s growing anymore.’ Cressida stared at her plate and then picked it up and took it to the microwave. She set it for a couple minutes hoping it would be long enough to cook off the batter.

‘Aww, you know what I mean.’ He took a drink. ‘You look nice, very nice. I’m sure he’s going to love it.’

Cressida gave him a look.

‘He’s not that shrimp is he?’

‘Don’t call him that, dad. And Niven is just a friend.’

‘Mmm. So who’s the lucky guy?’

Cressida buried her face in her hands. ‘Ugh. Can we please—’

‘Maybe I know him. Besides, I have a unique perspective, have been able to observe for many years...’

‘Dad. You can stop’

There were noises coming from the microwave. *pop pop*

‘...you don’t want to show too much too...’

sszz

‘Dad.’

pop

‘...or your hair. I understand the lion thing is in but a male cat is not...’

‘Dad!’

popop ssszzz

Cressida sent her father to another room while she cleaned the kitchen. He had started to lecture her about how it wasn’t necessary but she pushed him away rather than start a discussion. She wasn’t about to tell him that she wanted to make sure the house looked decent in case someone came over. Besides, she needed something to keep herself busy rather than hovering anxiously around the phone. If he hadn’t called when she was done in here she’d straighten up her room and then if there was still time the living room. As she worked there was a tingle in her nerves that she couldn’t clear. It seemed to emanate from high in her chest and extend down past her belly and all through her limbs and up through her cheeks and was making her fidgety and restless. She scrubbed furiously at a stubborn bump on a plate and then picked at it but it was just a defect in the glaze. Had she never noticed that before? She rinsed it off, put it in the other side of the sink, got the next plate. The telephone range.

Cressida dropped the plate and turned off the water and hopped over to the phone, wiping her hands on her apron as she went. She picked it up right as its second ring began.

‘Hello?’

‘When you coming over?’

‘Huh?’ Niven shouldn’t have been an unexpected voice, but he was. It took a moment for Cressida’s head to catch up with her ears. Then: ‘Not today.’

‘What do you mean? You come over every—’

‘I need to be here. In fact, I need to keep the line free. We’ll talk later.’

She could hear him protesting as she hung up. She felt bad for being so abrupt but was more concerned that Rip had tried to call while she was on the phone. She imagined him getting a busy signal and giving up. She hoped she didn’t just—

The phone started ringing again and she instantly answered it.

‘What was that? I want to talk to you.’

'Niven, you're tying up the line.'

'Are you kidding? I just got on. So you're not coming over?'

'I told you I can't.'

'Wait, is he going over there?'

'No. I mean, he might. He'll call first.'

'He said he'd call?'

'Well, I don't remember that, but that doesn't mean, you know...'

'What do you remember?'

'I gotta go. He could be calling *right now*.'

'He'll call back.'

'Anyway, I'm busy. I'm in the middle of cleaning the kitchen.'

'OK...'

'I'm serious! Listen, I promise I'll tell you all about it later. It just might not be today.'

Niven didn't say anything.

'Come on, don't be like that.'

Silence still.

'Alright, today. Just not right now.' She waited. 'I'm gonna go.'

'You promise? Today?'

'Yes, yes. I promise. OK? Bye.'

She hung up.

'Looks a lot better in here.'

Cressida spun around. Her father was at the doorway, leaning against the frame with an outstretched arm.

'How long have you been there?'

'Only right now.' He grinned like it hurt him to do so. 'You know that was your mother's apron.'

'Yes, I know.'

'Mmmm, well. Talking on the phone like that... You reminded me of her.'

'Did you need something?'

'No, I's just checking on how things were going.'

'Everything's fine. You can go back.'

'If he calls I won't answer.'

'Dad, please.'

'Just like her.'

'*Dad.*'

He nodded and turned and left. Cressida looked down and straightened the apron. The green crisscross warped and stretched and folded but always retained its fundamental structure, parallel lines deformed by and delineating the contours of an unshapely body. She remembered her mother wearing it, but had no specific memories of this, only vague notions of the two together. She slipped her hand into the front pocket. There was a distinct impression

of having done this before, searching for something while mom was distracted. She knew, of course. There was nothing. Cressida looked about the kitchen and sighed. For all her efforts she felt she had made no progress. The chaos seemed endless. And when it was gone — even if it went away — was there any way to forget what it had been? Perhaps this was its true state, not a sullyng but an uncovering, and all she could do was attempt to shroud what had been forever revealed.

It took a while but Cressida finally got everything clean. Not just straightened up and wiped down but a thorough, everything put away and organized, floors and countertops and handles and all else deeply scrubbed and spotless kind of cleaning. Or, at least as good as she could imagine. Certainly better than it started, maybe better than she'd ever seen. During the whole time nobody called, though her dad did keep peeking in, ostensibly to offer unwelcome help but quickly turning to more advice from his idling mind.

'Slouching like that makes you look like a boy.'

'Too much skin too soon and he'll be used to it, not intrigued.'

'Bright lipstick is for clowns and whores. Subtle is seductive.'

'I'm not wearing lipstick.'

'Just saying.'

He eventually lost interest in getting up or forgot about her. When Cressida walked through the hall to go to her room she saw him stretched out in his recliner, mug in one hand and paperback in the other, gazing indeterminately at the book or the television. She watched him for a moment, thinking he might have fallen asleep until she saw him blink. He didn't otherwise move.

She had just barely started on her room when Niven called again.

'I told you we'd talk later,' she told him.

'It is later. Did he call?'

He was exasperating and begged her not to hang up and asked to come over but she didn't want him to. He said they could at least talk for five minutes because if the line was busy and you really wanted to talk to someone that was how long you'd wait before trying again. She didn't disagree and besides talking to him did take her mind off of waiting better than cleaning, even if it also made her worry more. She said that he could call her again in fifteen and she started picking up, her eyes constantly peeking at the clock and the phone. Exactly fifteen minutes later he called and she sat on her bed and played with the spiraled cord while she told him about last night, or at least what she wanted him to know. She and Rip had talked for hours. Sports, school, music, books. Yes, he actually read. The future. He felt stuck too. He missed the summer. It would be nice to get away even just for one day. Why didn't anyone else seem scared? They talked and then he

held her and kissed her and then they turned off the lights and she'd never felt so close to someone.

'Go on...'

'That's it.'

'But what *happened*??'

'I'm sure you can figure it out. Besides, the details are between the two of us. I could never explain.'

'But I don't—'

Cressida interrupted him. The five minutes were up. He didn't want to go but there was no more time and she already had qualms about how much she had said. He was still talking when she told him bye and hung up.

She went back to cleaning her room. She crammed her clothes into the closet so that the door would close. Made her bed. Remade it. Turned the alarm clock towards the wall. Started to straighten her desk but there was too much stuff so she got a trash bag and swept most everything into it. She went around her room and threw out more until the bag was near ripping. Peaked at the time. Vacuumed. Wondered if the stuffed animals looked too childish and considered putting them all into the closet and instead rearranged them so they faced the window. Peaked at the time. Had she missed him? What if he didn't call back? She pulled her pillows down and was fluffing and resetting them when she had a panicked thought that her father was on the phone or had been and left it off the hook. She turned and grabbed her phone but there was a dial tone and relieved she put it back down.

It immediately rang.

'Hello?'

'Don't hang up. I've got something really important to tell you. I called Murst and Rip was there and talked—'

'Wait, what? Why?'

Cressida felt herself blush, felt nauseous. She slumped onto her bed, tried to focus, to not be upset. Niven told her that Ilss came over to get Brist and said she saw Rip pull up when she was leaving her house. Niven called over to see what was happening and Rip was just heading out with Kriet to Questline Park to play ball and said that she should come out. Afterwards there was a party.

'He didn't call.'

'He was in a rush so I said I'd tell you. He wanted to.'

'Oh. I guess I'll just wait until he's back.'

'No, you don't understand. I said you'd be there. If you don't go he'll think you're not interested.'

'Hold on, I don't know — maybe I should just wait til tomorrow...'

‘You have to go. It’ll be weird if you don’t. Plus, uh, I— I didn’t say anything about me going. But because we’re friends if you’re there I can tag along. I promise I won’t get in the way or bug you or anything. You’re already in and now I can be too.’

Cressida was still unsure however her doubts were already being overwhelmed by other thoughts: riding in his car again, holding hands as the day’s light faded, another kiss, and another...

‘OK.’

‘Yes? Yes. All right!’

She was smiling and laughing.

‘Want me to come over?’ Niven said. ‘No, it’ll be better if we go separate. I gotta get ready. You too. I’ll see you there then. Alright? This is gonna be great.’

He hung up and Cressida fell back onto her bed. Her head was swirling with thoughts of Rip but then she realized she needed to get moving and her daydream gave way to the anxiety it had displaced. She stood up and walked between the window and door a few times before stopping at her mirror. She looked at her dress and posed, wondering if she should change. It looked good — nothing fit her so well. She really wanted him to see her in it. It was just so cold outside. She went to her closet and wrestled open the door and dug out a long jacket. She put it on and it covered the whole dress and made her look like a creep but at least she’d be warm during the walk over. The thought of going through the neighborhood alone dressed like that suddenly felt strange. Maybe it would be better if Niven went with her. He could come over and make sure she looked alright and they could go together. She got her phone and dialed his house.

‘Howwuh!’

‘Welly? Is Niven there?’

A throaty noise come over the line that sounded like someone swallowing their own tongue. Cressida had a clear image of Niven’s brother in his underwear with his head lolling around loosely. She hadn’t once seen him wearing clothes inside since this all began. She heard someone else speaking and Welly grunting and then an ear-piercing scream blasted from the phone.

‘Hello? Hello?’ said Niven’s mom.

‘Hi Mrs. Pfluge. It’s Cressida. I wanted to talk to Niven.’

‘Oh, you just missed him. He *hey stop that* I thought *I’m talking on the phone!* Sorry. I thought he said you two were going to the park.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Did you need something?’

‘No, it’s all right.’

‘Sure? *ouch!* OK. Well, he’s already left.’

‘Yeah. Well, thanks.’

‘Mmmm, bye bye. *Get to your room, mister!*’

Cressida hung up and began to pace. She thought of excuses for why she couldn’t go. She got sick. Her dad wouldn’t let her. She fell asleep. What was she so worried about? He asked her to come. If she waited too long she was going to miss him. She needed to get moving.

She went into the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror. Everything looked off. Her ears were too small and her nose too big. Her eyebrows were crooked. Her skin was bland and rough and there was the hard mound of a deep zit on her chin. She had squeezed it many times before but it never popped only got more swollen or bled. She pressed on it and wished she could just smush it away. She tried smiling but looked stupid, awkward. Her stomach was fluttering. She didn’t have time. She quickly brushed her teeth and peed and felt both urgency and dread, wanted to get going and not go at all. A deep breath and last glance in the mirror and a sudden thought. Cressida opened a drawer and dug around until she found the lipstick. She opened and twisted it and leaned forward over the sink. Next to her skin the bright red seemed afire, and with care and haste she began to apply it to her lips.

At the gate to the park there was a wooden sign with flat, rounded letters standing in relief. The U was missing, its exact outline remaining as light, unpainted wood, legibility undiminished for its lack. At the opposite end of the field an indistinct group was moving around, crossing paths, waving hands. A dark ball, little more than a dot, rose up and dropped to someone running who was pulled down and then a swarm formed nearby and turned into a growing pile of diving bodies. Cressida tried to pick out Rip but it was too far to tell. She took a deep breath and took off her jacket and began to walk across the grass. She couldn’t find a way to carry the jacket without feeling goofy and looked around for someplace to put it but the only thing close was a trashcan, so she just dropped it on the ground. After smoothing her dress she put her hands to her side and straightened her back and continued towards the others.

The walk to the game seemed to take forever. Her legs felt numb, her motions rigid and unnatural. She crossed her arms in front of her, then uncrossed them then crossed, them again. There was a breeze which bit at her ears, tugged at her stiff hair. She wondered if she should have worn a hat. As she got closer, she scanned the field again for Rip, trying to identify him among the dirty, huddled bodies. They spread out and she spotted him, wearing dark, grass-stained sweats, running to the far side. He stopped, leaned forward, looked down towards the middle of the field. Someone was calling out and then everyone was moving and he ran forward and turned sharply, waving his arm madly. Something happened someplace else and

players were sprinting away. Rip ran his hand through his hair and then slapped them together. He went over to another guy and talked and pointed. The other player shrugged and Rip patted him on the back.

Cressida was walking along the sideline now, up towards the crowd that was gathered. A few kids looked over at her and stared but she just ignored them, instead watched the game, watched Rip, unsure exactly what was happening but impressed with his playing. The other team had the ball and one of them threw it and Rip dove and almost caught it and she clapped and cheered. She thought she heard her name and turned to see a line of popular girls from back in school bunched together under blankets, all wearing identical furry pink earmuffs. One poked her head up and glanced over at Cressida then slumped back to her giggling friends. Cressida raised her chin and shifted her gaze past the crowd and saw Niven standing down at the corner of the field. He was bundled up in his big blue coat, alone. He raised a timid hand.

From the crowd a whistle blew and all the players began to tramp off of the field. High-pitched cheers and the dampened patter of clapping mittens issued from the girls on the bench. A couple of upper classmen with full moustaches walked around passing out beers. Rip was in line waiting to get a drink from a cooler, chatting and laughing with those around him. Cressida sucked in her breath and strode towards him, past the bench, weaving between the filthy players, neverminding any stares or lulled conversations.

As she neared, somebody backhanded Rip's chest and pointed. Upon seeing her, his expression froze and his eyes went wide. Cressida looked down at his feet.

'Hi Rip.'

'Uh, hey.'

His face was scrunched up, like he had bit into something awful. Cressida looked around. It was completely silent, everyone turned to them.

'What?' Rip said impatiently.

'I—I wondered what you were doing, after the game.'

'Why do you care?'

'I thought that maybe, maybe we could...'

Rip started to laugh, looking at those around him, who joined in. 'Nice try. I don't think so,' he said with a derisive head shake. He turned away, talking loudly with the other players.

Cressida was shaking, unable to move. He continued to joke around with his friends, ignoring her. She dug her fingernails into her arms.

'Hey!' she yelled. 'Hey! What about last night, huh? You weren't too good for me then.'

'What?'

Cressida stepped forward. She uncrossed her arms and ran her hands down her body. ‘You sure seemed to enjoy this just fine.’

‘Are you mental? I wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole. Look at yourself, you’re gross. And what’s with the outfit? It’s freezing out here. Are you fucking retarded or something? Why don’t you get out of here and go back to your stupid life?’

Cressida spun around and pushed her way through the mass of bodies. Behind her there was yelling, jeering. Niven and Rip. *fuckyou asshole prick loogie dick dipshit* The noise rose and melded into an indistinct roar. She just kept going, running now, her body tight and ungainly, face like ice. She tripped and stumbled, slid across the brittle grass. Gasping. Sobbing. Picked herself up and didn’t stop, charging on like a maddened animal lost in panicked escape.

Cressida sat on her bed, blanket pulled up tight against her chin, shivering, staring at nothing as the room faded into darkness. She felt she could never be warm again. It was as if her dress was frozen, absorbing all heat, an endless torture. She would not take it off — it was her penance, a reminder of her stupidity and hideousness. The room turned to shadow and she welcomed the blackness, the blankness, the disappearance of everything. She was numb, beyond crying, beyond comprehension. She only wanted to sleep. Maybe this was just a dream and she would wake this morning as if nothing had happened. Forgetting, everyone forgetting. But it was not a dream and sleep was no escape. She wanted to be away from this, from everything, forever or even for just a minute. Yet the instant she closed her eyes she would be right back at the beginning, having to face a whole day once again, no dark to hide in, no place to be left alone. No, she did not want to sleep, she wanted to go away to where there was nobody else. Let them have this world, let her have her own. As the light vanished she imagined herself departing with it, the dress and the blanket falling to the bed, no longer held by anything living, collapsing flat as the air within them exhaled the last remnants of her memory.

The phone rang, piercing the emptiness. Cressida stared at it, the gloom still as if everything was static and soundless yet there was sound. She willed it to go away. It rang and rang. She would wait until it stopped — the caller hanging up or her father answering or the connection severing. The ringing continued. It would not cease. It would continue for the rest of time. She picked up.

‘Hello?’

‘Cress? Are you all right? I was— I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.’

Immediately the sobs returned, pulling at her face and neck, at her entire being. She could not speak, not at first, not until her anger rose and pushed everything else aside.

‘Why did you let me do that?’

‘I thought that was what you wanted. I didn’t expect everyone else... Or that you’d dress... After what you said, I thought ... thought he’d ... I thought he was different.’

‘Didn’t you talk to him? On the phone?’

‘Well, no—’ said Niven, his voice trailing. ‘Mrs. Faenestrom said—’

‘You set me up.’

‘That’s not true. I would never do that. I defended you. I just got my ass kicked for you.’

‘I guess I should be thankful.’

‘That’s not what I mean. We’re friends, Cress, best friends. That’s more than Rip will ever be. He never cared about you.’

‘Except he did.’

‘He didn’t. He’s an asshole, all of them are. Forget them.’

‘I can’t.’

‘But we’re not in school anymore. You don’t have to see him or any of them ever again.’

‘You don’t understand. It doesn’t go away. I can’t forget. Not now.’

‘Why not? Tomorrow they’ll all have moved on and forgotten you. Just do the same.’

Cressida put the handset down into her blanket, blocking out the light of its keypad. She closed her eyes and opened them and closed them again. There seemed almost no difference. She opened them and the room appeared strange, a stranger’s room. Warm, close. Touched. She closed her eyes. She was alone.

Far away someone was calling. She picked up the phone.

‘Cressida? You there?’

‘I’ve got to go.’

‘You can talk to me.’

‘You’ll never understand.’

‘But I want to. Maybe... Maybe if you gave *me* a chance.’

‘What?’

‘I’d treat you right. I’m not embarrassed by you, I won’t ditch you, I won’t pretend to forget you.’

Was this a joke? It wasn’t funny.

‘I fought for you.’

She couldn’t laugh.

‘I thought you looked great in that dress.’

She had no words.

‘Maybe *I* could give you an amazing night.’

She felt ill.

‘I’ve got your coat, Cress. I could bring it over...’

Her voice broke. ‘Screw you Niven. It’ll be here in the morning.’ She slammed the phone down, missing the base. The handset was on its side, casting a dim amber light into the murk. His voice continued, like a faraway robot. She picked it up and slammed it again, the light and sound instantly gone. Seconds later it started ringing. She lifted the phone and replaced it. It rang again. She brought the microphone to her mouth, the earpiece pointed as far away as possible.

‘Shut up!’ she yelled, ‘Just shut up! Leave me alone!’

She smashed the phone down so hard it made a sound like it broke. She wanted to grab the thing and yank it out of the wall and throw it across the room. She felt an urge to get up and pace around the room but instead just curled up and pulled the blanket tight around her. What was wrong with everybody? What was wrong with her?

The sound of unsteady footsteps clunked in the hallway. A light under the door. A soft knock and her dad calling her name.

‘Go away,’ she said.

The door cracked and a sliver of light appeared around it, broken by his shadow.

‘Cressida? Is everything all right? I thought I heard you shout.’ His voice was thick, tired.

‘Everything’s fine.’

‘You shouldn’t sit in the dark. It’s not good for your eyes.’

‘Just trying to rest, dad.’

‘Didn’t see you when you came in. How’d your date go?’

She fought to hide the crack in her voice. ‘It didn’t.’

He said nothing. Cressida stared at the shadow, swaying across the slit like inverted candlelight. She waited, crying silently, wondered if he’d fallen asleep. Finally he spoke again.

‘It’s OK. There’ll be others. Just give it time, you’ll grow into it.’ He paused as if waiting for an answer, then continued. ‘I made dinner. You should eat.’

Beneath the blanket, Cressida was grabbing the dress, bunching it in her fists. She sniffed and wiped her nose on the blanket, then spoke slowly, just barely audible. ‘Night dad.’

He waited a few seconds before closing the door. The light went out and she heard him stumble down to his room. He didn’t care, he didn’t want to care. He didn’t want to be bothered with her. She wished she could be like him. It wasn’t fair. He’d known love and now had found a way to detach, to be alone. She watched the spot where his shadow had been. It was the

same color, the same black, as if he might still be there, as if he had never been there in the first place. Her eyes lost focus in the emptiness, or maybe they did not. She had no way of telling.

The phone rang again. Without thinking she picked it up so as not to disturb her father. She put it to her ear and said nothing, strangely expecting the silence she had just effected to continue.

‘Uh, hello? Is Cressida there?’

It was not who she expected. Shock and confusion prevented her from hanging up immediately. Had she fallen asleep?

‘Cressida? Is that you? I can hear you breathing.’

‘Yes?’ she said, timidly.

‘Listen, I wanted to talk about earlier. I’m sorry for what happened.’ His voice was deep, calm. The one she had known. ‘You just showed up like that and I wasn’t expecting. You shouldn’t have done that, with everyone around, I mean. But I thought, I thought maybe you’d want to meet up later. Like, tonight. We really don’t know each other and never spent any time alone. I know a place. Um, hello?’

‘What about last night?’

‘Last night?’

‘We were alone...’

‘I was at a party all night— Wait, were you there? No, you couldn’t. Listen, I don’t know what...’

Cressida put the phone down on the bed. She wasn’t sure what was happening. He didn’t remember, couldn’t remember. She could hear his voice, only his voice, not the words. Soft and deep. A gentle embrace. He continued to talk and she listened, laid her head on the phone and felt the vibrations, like resting on his chest...

Voices. She sat up. Laughter? Was that Rip? She brought the handset back to her ear. There were other people. Everyone sounded far away. Yelling. Laughing.

‘she still there?’

‘stop it, shit’

‘hellooooo’

‘wherefore art thou.’

‘here give it here I got one’ The voice grew louder. ‘Hey, hey. What do you call a pig in a dress?’

She whipped the phone into its cradle. She was shaking. She felt queasy. The air was thick, unbreathable. The walls fell at her from all over, unseen. She needed to get up, get out. She couldn’t breathe. Her legs trembled. Pacing into something fell. There was no space. Fingers fumbled for the doorknob, found it. Out.

* * *

She went to the bathroom and immediately left because it was too cramped. She walked down the hall then turned around and walked to her father's door and hesitated, wanting to cry to him or turn the handle and go in or just lay right there on the carpet as close as she could without him knowing. But she couldn't and her feet shuffled her back around again, past her bedroom and through the living room to the front door. When she opened it freezing air blew over her arms and face and legs. It was not the escape she thought it would be but instead endless exposure and memory. No place to be free, no place to forget. She shut the door and turned her back to it and tried to blank her mind but it would not.

When she saw all those people she knew it was a bad idea. Why didn't she just ignore Niven? What if he never called? What if she'd hung up right away like she wanted? Run her hands down her side? Stupid! Why did she wear the dress? If she stayed at home nothing would have happened. Why did she go out? Why did she trust him? She shouldn't have gone. She should've turned around. What did—

Cressida had been walking all through the house and for the first time passed the kitchen. She stopped, stared at it in a haze. It looked as though a bomb had exploded. The counter was strewn with dried pasta, dirty utensils, crumpled and soiled towels and paper towels. Plates piled high and slopped with food. A container of parmesan with no lid. Open bottles of wine. Sitting over the sink was a tray of sandwich bread slices toasted to near-black and from beneath it rubbery tendrils of spaghetti reached out and hung over the countertop. The back of the stove was blotched in a spill of sauce, dried and sagging, pouring down into a burner well where it turned from a crimson scab into dark char. Splatters of the sauce were everywhere, dotting the cabinets, refrigerator, ceiling, walls, floor, the frame of the doorway she stood in. The air was heavy with the fragrance of burnt and herbs.

She stared at it in disbelief but also frustration. She had cleaned everything really good this morning and now this? What was he doing? He knew he couldn't cook. He'd tried after it was just the two of them but it never worked out. Why now? Did he think he could suddenly substitute for mom? Was he trying to get back at her for something? She felt disrespected. No, she felt forgotten. He didn't consider her feelings, he probably didn't even think of her. Did anybody care about her?

Cressida turned away and started to pace down the hall again, lonesome for her mother which made her remember something and she turned back around and headed into the kitchen. On a chair was one of her father's sweatshirts, flecked with red, which she pulled on. Then she continued past the rest of the mess and opened the door to the garage.

She flipped the light switch and a bare bulb turned on and also a fluorescent light over a workbench which was battered and stained but neatly

organized with trays and small shelves holding tools, hardware, variously shaped and sized cans and bottles. At one end was a vice, an old telephone, a radio cassette player. She walked down the steps and around the front of her father's car. It took up one-half of the garage and was faded and rusty and looked like it might never start again, even though at this point it had been less than a day since it was last driven. The thought of getting the keys and driving away crossed her mind but Cressida didn't know how to drive and also it meant going outside and even if she was inside the car that was the last place she wanted to be. The garage was chilly and smelled dirty like the outdoors but was dully quiet and enclosed with no windows and she felt sheltered, private. She pulled up her hood which pressed painfully at her stiff hair so she crunched and rubbed it until her scalp eased. She picked up a stool and took it over to the shelves on the far wall. When she found the box she stepped up and reached and dragged it out. It was heavier than she expected and she tried to lower it carefully but it slipped out of her hands and dropped to the ground in a thump of dust. She sat down on the stool and pulled apart the interwoven flaps and began going through her mom's things.

A wooden jewelry box. Her wedding veil, turned dingy and fragile with time. An old record whose cover looked like a goofy family portrait, everyone in cableknit. A shoebox filled with papers, pictures, envelopes. Cressida pulled out a stack of photos. A younger version of her mother on the beach in an unskimpy bathing suit, squinting. A black-and-white image of a child pulling a wagon with a baby and a dog. Mom and dad sitting on opposite ends of a hideous orange couch, cigarettes in hand, grinning at each other. Her mother in jeans and a turtleneck, arm wrapped around a handsome, blonde-haired man who Cressida didn't recognize. She was laughing, happier than Cressida ever remembered. Beautiful. Nothing like her daughter. She ran her thumb across her mom's face, imagining contours in the smooth image. She riffled through the other pictures, stopping at one of her mother, aproned, cradling a baby in her arms. She was smiling but looked tired, almost sad. The baby was reaching up, unable to touch her face.

Abruptly Cressida tossed the photos facedown into the box. She continued to dig. An old ratty blanket and stuffed doll made with the same fabric. A framed picture of her grandfather in a uniform. A row of creased and yellowed paperbacks. A trivet tile with a crest and blurred latin. A heavy muffin tin. A belt.

Cressida recoiled. Then, warily, she touched the belt again, picked it up with both hands as though it were alive and sleeping. She unrolled it, felt the thick leather, the cold of the buckle, the line of holes, regular except for the three near the end which were stretched and misshapen. Her eyes rose, searched the rafters. In the middle she found them: two hooks, bent slightly

downwards as if in repose. They became now and memory at once. Cressida stared at them, traced the outlines of the enlarged holes with her thumb, felt how they were pulled taught by her mother's lifeless body.

A wave of unease passed through her. Her stomach tightened. Memories came from everywhere. Her mother's embrace, she embracing her mother. Swaying. Her head on her lap, her head on him, their touch, mother swaying, he laughed, she couldn't go back. Her mother swaying. She was alone. It all seemed far away. How long had it been? Would it always be the same, forever? Could it? She couldn't breathe. She needed to get closer. She pulled the stool under the hooks. Stretched to reach them. Slipped the belt holes over then realized she'd forgotten the loop. Took it down and slid the end through the buckle and hung it back up, finding a different configuration for the holes that matched the shape pressed into them. Let go and watched it swing silently, erratically, the tiny loop barely big enough for her wrist. She took it back in her hands and brought it to her face, the buckle against her skin, inhaling the leather and metal which smelled like nothing.

Cressida gripped the belt and leaned, felt it hold her weight. She ran the buckle up, raising and opening the loop. Her arm was high above her and her other hand could just stretch the flat band under her chin. She closed her eyes. She was back with her mother, that last moment, the same space. She let go of the buckle and reached down for the girl at her feet, grasping her legs. The hand under her chin was slick with tears. Her head rested against the belt, nestled in its curve. Mom wasn't so far away.

There was a loud clatter and Cressida startled and the stool wobbled and tipped and skidded away. The belt tightened hard and fast around her neck and hand. She was swaying, twisting. She kicked her legs, reached up and grabbed the belt, dug at the cinched strap. She couldn't breath or cry out. The phone was ringing. Her finger found space at the edge of her trapped hand but couldn't get anything loose. It was too close. She writhed and kicked and thrashed and grabbed. It would not release. The garage was fading into darkness. The phone continued to ring.

...thought you'd never ever...

The car rumbled through the dark, led more by the lights of its fellow travelers than the path itself, a flow of glowing red beacons collectively drawing all towards destinations unshared except in direction. The cabin felt muted, almost calm, despite the onslaught of noise: the constant drone of the engine, the loud hum of rubber against asphalt, mostly forgotten until a surface shift altered the tone to something distractingly high-pitched or satisfyingly subdued, a creaking someplace in the car's structure as it gently rolled due to imperfections in the road, mysterious pings from unknown objects — gravel or a stray raindrop or a supremely unlucky, out-of-season insect — colliding with the exterior, the sharp whine of a faster vehicle or the deep, troubling thunder of an overtaken semi, the white noise of wind and softer overtones of the heater blowing its challenges to the inexorable pressure of the outside cold. Lulled into thoughtfulness, Grenadine wondered how many of the other drivers were just moving along on their way wherever not realizing that they've already been where they're going, that the day ahead was the same as the last. She'd seen it herself before on one of the trips, ferrying a group of business pricks out to an until-we-pass-out yacht party. At the dock some teenager wannabe who looked like he hadn't slept in days came strolling up asking what was going down and despite their dismissiveness his persistent banter soon made it apparent he had no clue about the repeating. The buddies proceeded to prod his amnesia with cruel amusement before bringing him on board like a wide-eyed child slipped into the side door of a funhouse, not realizing that he was to be the entertainment. Grenadine knew better than to interfere — it was their trip not hers, plus she needed to make sure that the boat waited until the other guests arrived — but she distinctly remembered the sense of being lost that she saw in the boy, moreso because he was oblivious to it. Glancing around at the other vehicles pulling away or

falling behind or hovering anonymously, she questioned whether any of them knew where they were headed or if they were all just following one another aimlessly, unprepared for the immanent future shock.

They passed under a green sign indicating an upcoming exit and Grenadine shook herself out of her contemplation. Remembering her dry runs, she placed the sign and established her bearings. A little less than an hour to go. She mentally stepped through her directions, reminding herself of her task and her current position, then pulled out her map and penlight to briefly confirm. Checked her watch — time was good, everything was on track.

She looked over at Silasca. He was sleeping against the window, his hands held together like he was praying, supporting the pillow she told him to bring. Even if there were others in the car, most front-seaters preferred to recline, and the solos usually lay down in the back. But he insisted that this was more comfortable for him. Whatever. If he had a stiff neck during his day out she couldn't worry about it. He'd probably spend all his time mostly immobile anyway, leaning over a blackjack table or laying on his back getting pumped by a hooker, so it wouldn't matter. He was still wearing his jacket. It was warm in the car and sleeping in it made him look skeevy, like he was ready to make a getaway, but when she suggested he throw it in the back he had just snorted and turned back to resting.

Taking a solo always made her a little wary. It was always a man — women never took trips alone, always with another man or a group of friends — and whenever a request would come in for a single she would take extra time to make sure there wasn't something untoward going on. There were always discussions with Gar and Jimmy about the clients, but in these cases she would be particularly probing, such diligence at first blown off by Jimmy ('tough it up kid') until she reminded him, with much portentousness, that the operation wouldn't continue very long if they got the reputation for removing customers.

Sure, groups had their own problems, but they always had a dynamic — or at least one person — which prevented any bad behavior towards her from escalating. Solos seemed riskier. She had never actually ever had any real problems, but there had been a few uncomfortable conversations, some creepy stares. She knew she wasn't much of a looker, and had learned to dress herself down — no makeup, hair unbrushed, thick glasses — however, her best protection was to mention the possibility of them getting on the wrong side of escrow. That would straighten things out quick, and whatever perverted shit they might have in their heads would be saved for their destination. And she knew that in case of a real emergency, she always had her insurance...

Silasca coughed and she looked over. He was sitting up, staring straight out of the front window. She had no idea how long he'd been awake. She had no idea how long she'd been driving. They were in a wooded section, no

markers, no indications of their progress. There were stretches like this all along the route and, especially in the dark, it was impossible to distinguish them. She glanced at her watch but had no clue if they had left on time or not. They were cruising down the highway, moving at high speed, a steering twitch away from crashing into other vehicles or the unprotected trees, yet she had no memory of getting here, having to trust the fact that they were alive and intact as proof of the competence of the forgotten, possibly unconscious, actions that brought them here.

‘I need to take a piss.’

The sound of his voice cut through the din and surprised Grenadine, even though she knew he was awake. They were never more than ten minutes away from a service station and she told him they would stop at the next one.

‘I can’t wait. Just pull over here.’

‘Are you serious? This is the highway. Can’t you hold it?’

‘I really gotta go. Just stop, will ya? I’m gonna fucking piss my pants.’ Silasca was bouncing his legs and leaning on his crotch.

Grenadine turned on her hazard lights and slowed down, pulling off onto the shoulder. She watched him, her hand down by her side, wondering if he was up to something, but before they even stopped he bolted out the door and to the edge of the woods, a vague shadow making unnecessarily loud sighs as he emptied his bladder. While his back was turned she quickly checked her map, reminding herself of the route. When he returned he smiled apologetically.

‘Sorry. I had to go so bad it woke me up.’

‘And they say women are the ones always having to use the bathroom.’

Silasca shrugged. ‘How much longer til we get there?’

‘Thirty minutes,’ Grenadine guessed. ‘You can go back to sleep and I’ll wake you when we’re there. You know, if you’re cold I can turn the heat up.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘It’s just that you’re wearing your—’

‘I’m fine.’

He was already laying on his pillow, eyes closed. Grenadine watched him for a moment, looking to see if she might catch the moment he transitioned to sleep. His breathing was effortless, silent. Had she already missed it? Maybe it was still to come. There seemed no way to tell. She checked her mirrors and pulled back onto the highway. She watched her speed, staying at the limit — not to avoid being pulled over (she’d never even seen a cop out here and even if one showed up what did she care about a ticket?) but to keep her timeline on schedule. If they arrived too early she wouldn’t remember the sendoff and would have to rely on the picture and notes. Jimmy didn’t seem to notice (or care) but it made her uncomfortable having to make up a story for him. She doubted he ever even checked for consistency with the clients —

why would he need to? — but the few times she'd gotten the timing wrong still bothered her. She felt uncomfortable trusting any rendition of the past that existed outside of her memory, even the picture, even her own notes. She was outside of it despite her supposed participation. Any authenticity attached to it was specious, multiple truths could be made to fit it. It was too easy to invent a narrative which she would then find herself believing. Knowingly deceived by her own lies.

This was one of the standard trips. Arrange for some escrow vouchers, drop the client off before dawn at the casinos, he gets to eat, drink, have a good old time. That is, as long as he didn't extend himself beyond the voucher limit and run himself into debt. Though a lot of them probably think that owing the casino is no big deal. What they don't realize is once their starting point is discovered the escrow will likely be sold to a local operation which in this case meant The House. Thus, other than free transportation and a chance to gamble in a different city the trip wasn't offering much extra over what could be done on their own. However, throw in some free vouchers and the hope of winning an escrow surplus and you've got one of the most popular options. Of all the trips she provided, Grenadine found this to be the dullest sounding (closely followed by the surprisingly complex to organize 'choose a movie and watch it in an empty theater') but it had high customer satisfaction and the drive was easy.

Keeping the clients happy was of greatest importance and she could feel her worth to The House increase with the number of successful trips. This was exactly the position she visualized for herself when she'd first started, though she had no idea of how complicated the work would be: planning itineraries, setting up destinations, doing dry runs, waiting for escrow negotiations, building up her memory. She was glad she had Gar, not just to wake her up — which was an essential element — but to help her train and organize and to talk through ideas.

Everything was working like a machine now, and she was meshed in it, part of it, part of The House, deep within it. And when everything stopped she'd switch over to Felantex and could bring Gar in and they'd really be big time. And to think that Jimmy wouldn't even give her the time of day at first. She was really proving herself now. A true asset. Not some two-bit hustler or a gold-digging pimp, but a real businesswoman. A big difference from those first days waiting outside of his building, begging for a meeting. Finally he relented and gave her a chance.

'I've got a business proposition for you.' She was so nervous she'd said it right when she walked through the door, before any greeting or hand shaking. She'd been so nervous. He laughed right in her face, falling back into his seat and looking at Marciro as if to say 'who the hell did you let in?' Indignant,

she stepped forward and let him have it before she realized what she was doing.

‘Screw you then, maybe I’ll go to the Osos, if you don’t want to hear it.’

Jimmy, still laughing, threw his arms wide in a look of indifference and threw back: ‘If they won’t have you I hear Dormit’s still around.’

At that time Dormit *was* still around, though it was known that The House had muscled in on most of his territory. Grenadine bit her cheek and resisted the urge to turn around and run out. She was unsure what to do but this might be her only chance.

Jimmy coughed away his smile and spoke. ‘Hey kid, you want to be in business, you’re going to have to grow a thicker skin. Turning red like that is not a good look. It’s OK to get hot, it’s good to get hot. I can appreciate passion. But you gotta look cool — never let them see you sweat.’

Grenadine stared at him, afraid to speak lest her voice crack, still biting her cheek, trying to will the blood from her face.

‘Listen, if I wanted you to go someplace else, I wouldn’t have let you in. I know you wouldn’t have waited out there forever, nobody does. I was just testing you.’

He winked and despite herself she felt her defensiveness dissipate. It helped that he had conceded an unknown point: she *would* have stayed out there forever. She had all the time in the world and she wanted to be in The House.

‘Let’s start over — why don’t you have a seat? My name’s Jimmy Felante. You can call me Jimmy. Not mister. And you are?’

Slightly abashed at having forgotten to introduce herself, she stumbled out: ‘G-Grenadine. Grenadine Ashnoski.’

‘Hehe, that’s a bit much. Maybe I’ll call you Nadine. Your friends call you Nadine?’

‘Grenadine. It’s Grenadine,’ she said with unexpected courage.

‘Fine, *Grenadine*, so what’s your proposition?’

‘I gotta piss.’

She turned to Silasca. His knee was bouncing furiously and he was biting his lip. ‘Huh?’

‘I need to pee. Can we stop here?’

Grenadine took the exit and pulled into a gas station. He hopped out and ran inside. Boy, he really had to go. She wondered how long he’d been holding it. And they complained about ladies having bladder issues. She pulled her map out and checked the time. About twenty minutes out. She should cross over any minute now. This was good. She looked out of the window and waited, her mind drifting. She thought of the time she first

laid out the idea for Jimmy. Explaining the homework arbitrage market she'd been developing, selling rich kids assignments and essays done by poor brains. Was about to make a big expansion when the repeating hit and school became so irrelevant even the rich kids weren't bothering with it.

Silasca got in. He asked how much longer. She told him to get some more rest.

She told Jimmy she'd always looked up to the Felantes and was sorry about his father and secretly hoped to someday work for them. She watched The House spring up, saw the transition to escrow, was inspired to find something that would work for this new economy. Then it came to her, the one thing, now that people had all the time in the world and didn't have to worry about health or work or money or nothing, the one thing that you could still sell to everyone.

Jimmy leaned forward. 'And that is?'

'Experiences.' She paused for dramatic effect, although Jimmy's blank stare indicated it wasn't having the intended effect. She continued: 'Experiences. People want to experience life. They want to *do* things. See something different. Live that dream they never had a chance to. Everybody's got time now, but they're stuck in the same spot, got maybe a day to get out, day-and-a-half if they're lucky. They don't want to be wasting time getting there. They want to maximize their time, the time they're going to remember, on their experience. So, what if there was a service that set up these experiences, transported them there before their day's begun, and let them enjoy the entirety of their time away from it all.'

'Kid—Grenadine, I'm intrigued. But I'll be honest, I'm not sure I understand what's in this for The House.'

'A whole untapped market — how many people are out there that you aren't reaching? This is something that everybody will want, something to look forward to. Something worth going into debt for.'

'Do you understand what it means to owe The House?'

'It's like bartering — you get a service, you owe one. Escrow figures out the balance.'

Jimmy smiled, not with condescension nor playfulness but admiration. 'I think I see where you're going with this. Right now most people don't want to get within twenty-four hours of The House. Escrow's something for junkies and johns, the criminals, the poor, the unlucky. But if we can show them we are a product of aspiration, not just desperation, then this "untapped" market might actually open up.'

'Now, we'll have to start slowly, at the fringes of our current accounts, let word of mouth spread, and see what might develop. So tell me, Ms. Grenadine, where do you come in?'

'You provide the clients, and I provide the planning and transportation.'

Jimmy's smile changed, just slightly. 'How about I pay you a finder's fee and I run the thing with my own team. Why should I keep you? Hell, why should I pay you at all?'

'I think you're a man of integrity. It's my idea, allow me to participate in the success. Plus, I'll work for free.'

'Free?' He started laughing again. 'Kid, just a second ago you had me believing you were pretty smart.'

'I don't have anything I need now, not escrow, not nothing. This is my opportunity to prove myself. When this is all over — and we know it can't last forever — you'll understand that Grenadine Ashnoski is someone you'll want to continue doing business with. We can discuss pay then.'

Jimmy was still laughing. He looked over at Marciro who grinned and adjusted the weapon at his side.

'And there is one other thing,' Grenadine said, 'something that's an essential part of this whole deal. I'm an early riser.'

The exit approached and in the distance the glow of the casinos radiated across the sky like a false sunrise, bright enough to mask the earliest hints of daybreak's imminence, though their greatest brilliance — when the flashing lights and neon stood before the true blackness of night — was already, if imperceptibly, diminishing.

This was familiar territory for Grenadine, and she made her way towards their destination without conscious thought, navigating the path through the city streets and intersections almost by instinct, like a moth drawn by some photonic gravity to follow a winding path towards a distant, transfixing illumination. This was the easiest part of this trip, not just because she knew it well, but because she was approaching her break. She'd do the dropoff, get her picture, take some notes, and then finally go and have a nice breakfast. There were still a number of never-closed options around here, and while they mostly traded in casino escrow some worked on belief (including a few union shops) so she could use her same old money to have a big meal and relax for a bit before the trip back. Jimmy wanted proof of the dropoff which meant returning with a photograph and sometimes a debrief. Getting up so early was tiring and she always had an inclination to just take a nap, trusting that she would deliver the proof when she woke. However, for these shorter jobs she preferred to ensure that she actually returned, choosing a little exhaustion over worry that she may not have delivered. What she really dreaded was getting caught up in some lie she didn't remember making. Not that she didn't trust herself not to be careful, but sometimes she had to improvise and it was easy enough for inconsistencies to develop even when you did know what happened let alone when you didn't.

She stopped at a stoplight and turned to Silasca. He was awake, staring straight ahead, the pillow in his lap. His leg was bouncing furiously.

‘Do you have to go to the bathroom again? We’re almost there.’

‘I didn’t say anything about needing the bathroom.’

She pointed to his vibrating limb. ‘You were doing that the last time you had to go.’

He stopped his leg self-consciously. In her periphery she could tell he was staring at her. ‘I went to the bathroom,’ he said. It was not a question.

‘Yeah, like twenty minutes ago. If you really had to go again already I might ask if you had a girl’s bladder.’ Grenadine laughed at her joke. Silasca just grunted. ‘Looking forward to your big day? Everyone seems to really enjoy themselves out here.’

‘Sure.’

‘Well don’t let the excitement overwhelm you.’

‘Sorry, I guess I’m still waking up.’

‘Well, you still have a couple hours before your actual bedtime ends, so that’s understandable.’ She pulled the car onto the main street and asked him if he had a preference for a casino to start at.

‘It doesn’t matter, but can we actually park? Far away, if possible? I want to get some air, walk a little, stretch my legs.’

They were in front of a palatial temple of flashing incandescence. Grenadine pulled over to double park and turned towards Silasca. His face was a blinking mottle of red and yellow.

‘I don’t know if that is a good idea. Your memory isn’t working yet. I leave you out there and you’re bound to wander off and get mugged.’

‘You don’t have to worry about that, I know why I’m here. I won’t forget that. Anyway, if you use that lot over there I’ll still be able to see where I’m headed and point myself in the right direction.’

This was something new, though she’d definitely had stranger requests. She could just kick him out here and in ten minutes he wouldn’t even remember. But he might refuse the photo or call someone immediately and screw things up. She looked to where he was pointing. The lot had lighting and was clearly visible from the street. She glanced around and saw a few people walking down the street. One of them caught her gaze and leered back and she turned away. Grenadine shrugged. Client is always right, right? She pulled back into the road and entered the parking lot, heading down past the assortment of vehicles, some inconspicuous some not, oddly colored under the dull, yellow lamps, tightly packed at first and eventually dissolving into a sea of blacktop evenly patterned with herringbone and pools of fallow light. They approached the far corner, defined by the intersection of a razor wire topped cyclone fence and a line of shipping containers. She pulled into a space right under one of the lights.

‘This OK?,’ she asked.

‘Perfect.’

She looked out of the windows. In the distance the casinos twinkled like shimmering mirages. Her gaze continued around through the empty lot to Silasca. He was watching her, smiling slightly. She felt uncomfortable, isolated. She let her hand drop down by her leg.

‘So, is that it?’, he said. ‘You let me off and I start my day?’

‘Actually, I need to take your picture first, to prove you were here. We can do it over there, with the casinos in the background. If you’ll open the glovebox the camera’s in there.’

Silasca pulled it out and handed it to her but held onto it, tugging slightly to get her attention.

‘Tell me, how does a girl like you get mixed up with all this?’

Grenadine pulled and he let go, settling back into his seat. ‘All what?’ she said.

‘This,’ he gestured around vaguely, ‘The House, the Felantes. Escrow. You’re young, you seem like you got your head screwed on right. How do you end up here?’

‘I’m a businesswoman.’ She opened her door and began to step out, hoping he would follow her lead. ‘This is business. This is my business.’

She closed the car door and bounced herself in the cold air, blowing into her hand. Silasca was still sitting in the car, looking at her through the window. She reached into her pocket, feeling around. He suddenly turned away and opened his door. Startled by his sudden movement, she grabbed the larger object and slid it out, holding it behind her. He opened the rear door and pulled out his briefcase, then looked at her over the roof.

‘Where should I stand?’

Still wary, she slipped the tube in her back pocket and pointed. He walked around the car, his jacket looking a sickly brown under the light. He turned towards her and his arm swung up, shifted slightly, showing a black handgun with a large silencer.

‘Don’t move, Grenadine. Don’t fucking move.’

She dropped the camera and froze. Her hand was behind her, against the car.

‘Don’t shoot, don’t shoot. Whatever you want, just tell me what you want.’ Her heart was pounding, Silasca was glaring at her. ‘Please don’t rape me,’ she blurted out.

‘Jesus Christ, what the fuck is going on here. This is insane.’ He was shaking his head. Under the harsh light the moving shadows made his face seem strange, like a despondent troll. ‘You’re too young. What are you doing messing around with Jimmy Felante? What did you think he was going to do when he caught you?’

‘I—I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ Her fingers were touching the cylinder. She began to slowly ease it up out of her pocket.

‘C’mon kid, we know about Garrett. Garrett Kewoup?’

Gar? How’d they—

‘Mhmm. We know that you’ve been working while you forget. We know about Mr. Rebustin.’

Behind her back, Grenadine’s hand stopped.

‘Rebustin? He never showed up. He was gone before—’

‘Yeah, yeah. I know you made yourself believe that. But just because you forgot doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. Some of us remember that day. We know what happened.’

She shook her head, not following.

‘You killed him. Car accident. Right off the road into a tree. Killed both of you. Only you returned. That’s some real ninja shit. Brilliant setup. Only you should have brought it to us, brought it to The House. I don’t know what you and Garrett think you’re doing. But I’ll tell you what I think. I think you’re a couple of dumb kids who got in over your heads and didn’t even realize it. Now I’m supposed to deal with you.’ He looked at his gun and lowered it. ‘What a waste. I don’t want to kill you. Just tell me who you were working with on the Rebustin job and I’ll let you go...’

He was lying. He was going to kill her no matter what. Grenadine needed to get her pill, get into the car, get out of here. With that gun down, this might be her only chance. She rotated the barrel in her fingers.

‘...I’ll tell Jimmy you’re gone and you and Garrett stay away and we can forget about this. I just need to make sure you—’

She swung her arm around and sprayed the mace. He screamed and she fumbled with the door handle and there was a *thumphump* and a dark mist and she recoiled reflexively, looking up just in time to see Silasca, jaundiced and eye crazed, lunging towards her, tackling her to the ground.

‘Stupid! Dumb! Stupid!’

Grenadine was writhing around, trying to free herself, trying to get at the pill in her pocket. But Silasca was all over her, holding her down.

‘Arrrgh! You fucking bitch. Why did you do that?’

She continued to squirm, twisting and kicking. Something hit her face and she seized up for a moment, then her arms were pinned, his weight on her chest, she could barely breathe. He was a shadow in a yellow halo, eyes squinted, grumbling, face dripping all over hers.

‘Stop it! Stop! Don’t be stupid. I told you I’d let you go. Tell me who you’re working with! Who set up Rebustin?’

Grenadine was flopping wildly, kicking at the ground, crying and spitting in disgust as mucus and tears sprayed down on her.

He leaned towards her, growling, furious. The wide, round barrel of the silencer pressed into her temple. ‘Quit fighting! What’s wrong with you? Just tell me who! Who?!’

She squeezed her eyes shut and struggled uselessly. There was nothing to say. The question had no answer.

...live on the dot...

Grav's eyes opened, or were open. They stared or were staring. A blink — not the first, by some count — an action without intention, momentary darkness unnoticed, the back half lifting a veil indistinguishable from waking. So he awoke, or was awake. Looked, was looking, around. On the bed, without thought or weariness, disinterestedly wondering at the unfamiliarity of the sunlit blur. There should be a window there, and his keyboard, and over there the dresser. But it seemed to be just a blank wall, the light coming from somewhere different. The presence of things maintained even if not seen. His vision uncorrected, disbelieved. What was and is misaligned. His mind stuck in a misinterpretation loop, steadfastly reinforcing a spatial logic that he knew to be disconnected from reality, yet whose internal coherency overwhelmed his doubt. Rather than search for a waypoint to recalibrate himself and rupture this distortion, he settled in, reveling in its oddity, the induced confusion as seductively separating from the world as the unknown dreams he'd just awoken from. As part of that thoughtline he contemplated a return to sleep, hastelessly closed his eyes and when they opened again was comforted that it continued, that his brain refused to let go of this lucid delusion that defied meaning or interpretation.

Then it broke. Like a psychical hypnic jerk everything shifted and he was thrust into awareness. The wall was just that: an old, dirty wall. His furniture and his stuff and the window looking out over the pool was just a memory, a point in the past, a location being reached for rather than the one being misconstrued. There was a smell he hadn't noticed before, something familiar, the stale odor of languish and neglect. A wave of dread rolled through him at the realization that everything — his surroundings, his situation — were far worse than the reverie he'd been lost in. Why did this happen every time? How could he not remember? Or, was there a way to

remain there? He couldn't relax, felt as through something was crushing his heart, pressing out his lungs. He knew it would pass, but that didn't make it better. He needed to get up, he needed to move around. He needed...

Grav fumbled for his glasses and looked over at the door, scanning the floor anxiously. He rolled out of bed, got caught up in the itchy blankets, stumbled to his knees. Crawling across the floor, he searched desperately for the package he knew wasn't there. He hadn't seen it for a week or more. But maybe this time was different. Maybe Dr. Caltrop had come back. He opened the door — first a crack, then wider when he was sure nobody was out there. Nobody and no bag, nothing. There was no clock in the room so he went to the window to find the sun. It wasn't early, she would have been here by now. He wondered if somebody was stealing it before he woke up. He wondered this every day. The door had been locked, but he was pretty sure there was a key downstairs, with those—

He wasn't going to think about them. If somebody got the stuff it was gone, Grav wasn't getting it back. And if Caltrop *was* still around, he'd have seen her in the afternoons. Somebody would've been by. The hospital was under some sort of guard, nobody knew what was going on. Not Venitia or Ratsch or Binaca or Duchess. Or they weren't talking. Somebody probably screwed up, fucking things up for everyone. Some asshole junkie or stupid escrow shit. As if it wasn't already bad enough. He paced the room, rubbing his hands and talking to himself. Why did this have to happen now, at the worst possible time? A year ago he had the loft — friends, parties, business about to take off. Then the old dick had cut him off. 'I'm not going to just fund you and those leeches to get wasted all day and night.' They weren't even doing that many drugs. Most of his money went right into the business. They needed the parties — they were marketing, they were hype, they were connections. They were right on the edge. Designs mostly done, test runs selling, brand getting hot. The old dick's investment would have paid him back millions. But what did he care? He already had plenty. Stranded Inc. why not Stranded and Son? No, instead he abandons his kid, hanging him out to dry rather than spending a little coin that he wouldn't even notice.

And for what? Now Grav was going to get it anyway. He could get the business started back up. They could be even bigger than what they planned. But none of that mattered while he was stuck in these fucking circles. Because everything started over each day money didn't work the same. Nothing did. He couldn't even get his inheritance. The old dick had died right before it started — they hadn't even had the funeral. Grav was going to have to wait for this to stop to get what he was owed. In all this time going nowhere his money was probably getting siphoned off by the lawyers. He punched his palm. If this could have just happened a month later, or the old dick croak a month earlier, or why did he have to cut him off? He

shouldn't be here, stuck in this wretched rathole, having used up all that he had last night whenever, hoping for a delivery that wouldn't come, agonizing about what lurked below.

His tension twisted harder, torque and pressure and unreleased energy making him restive, clouding his thoughts. He continued to walk the room restlessly, tapping at his legs, trying to find enough of a distraction so he could think straight. It was as bad as always. It wasn't getting any easier. He had believed he could kick it by just waiting out a few cycles, letting it clear out of him. Caltrop had said he could wean off, train the mind to need less and the body would follow. What a load of horseshit. She'd been screwing with him like a lab monkey, telling him one thing and giving him something else. Like a fool he fell for it, thought that he had a chance. Now it had been a week — or he was pretty sure it had been that long — staying in this room, not touching a thing, in agony. And nothing was changing. Sure, the withdrawal wasn't getting worse, but it wasn't easing any either. He already could feel it coming, his nerves pinging, the looming aches. Was he sweating already? No, he just needed to slow down, stop working himself up. He sat down on the bed and pulled the ratty blanket around him, trembling. Grav dreaded another day spent pointlessly trying to tough things out and he let his anxiety consume him, his immediate needs providing courage that masked deeper worries.

He washed up and picked out a pastel combo outfit — at least he hadn't cleaned out his wardrobe — first putting on a layer of long underwear to keep warm and fill out his thin body. After working on his hair he had to admit that he cleaned up pretty well. Even in a grimy mirror and the room's harsh light he actually looked really good. He still had it. Things were going to be great when all this was over. The last week showed he could go without the drugs. He'd get the old dick's money and everything would be great again. Better. But there was no point in needlessly suffering while he waited this out. It didn't have to drag, he could make time run faster.

A trench coat completed the look and with a final lean back to admire himself (smoothly slipping his kit into an inside pocket), Grav left the apartment. At the second floor he stopped, staring down the shadowed stairway towards the foyer and the front entrance beyond. He imagined rushing ahead, slipping past without notice, a few steps and free to handle his business. The door was surely locked, though, that was what they did. But was there really a point anymore? Why bother with a lock, wouldn't escrow be enough? It was possible, but if not...

A deep, faint voice resonated vaguely from down around the corner. Grav's chest tightened, he backed away. He couldn't understand what was being said but the sound was enough. Whatever momentum he'd had after leaving his room was crumbling. He looked around, wondering if it would be

better to just go back up. Down the hall, the silhouette of a window frame was blurred into opaque glass. There was a fire escape out there, but he knew from an earlier, almost disastrous attempt that it was nonfunctional, the bolts either rusted out or sabotaged so it could hold no weight. A facade of code-satisfaction, a masquerade of a safe exit. Grav wondered how high up it was on this floor. Maybe he could just ride the scaffold down, running off to safety as the still descending frame from floors above collapsed behind him. Or maybe it would fold up like a trap, enclosing him in a cage of rotted and mangled ironwork.

As he hesitated a different panic once again began to needle at him. He thought of another day stuck in that room, craving. The pain was real, he was getting sick. He couldn't chicken out, not now. He remembered himself outside and with a deep, resolute breath headed down the stairs, softly, trying to act cool, focusing on the doorknob, blanking his periphery. He scurried forward, putting on a busy pretense, an unworried preoccupation. It was easy, the door would be open, why lock it anymore? Just move along like you have things to do. See, they didn't even notice. Just reach for the door—

'Hey, look who showed up!' boomed a voice from behind. 'Where you rushing to, fancypants?'

Grav reached for the knob and twisted, trying not to appear too eager. It didn't move.

'Come on, you know that's locked. We can't just have anybody coming in and out of here, now can we?'

Grav slowly turned around. Roman was sitting on a turned-around chair, his legs spread wide. The dwarfed seat appeared to be straining under his mass. There was a giant bag of sunflower seeds on the table in front of him and a mottle of shells on the ground. Grav didn't look at the other man, attempting to deny his existence.

'I need to go out,' Grav said, trying to sound firm but relaxed. His heart punched in his chest.

'Down here a little early, aren't ya?'

Grav shrugged, feigning understanding.

Roman buried a huge hand into the bag, looked to his side. 'I told you. It doesn't matter what time it is, he doesn't remember a thing.' He tossed an impressive scoop of seeds into his mouth and began to gnaw at them. 'Aybe ee neeya jok hiss errorry.' As he laughed, bits of seed and shell flittered out. He chewed, dug around in his mouth with a finger. 'Loh?'

'I can't understand a goddamn thing you're saying. You sound like you stroked out. Can you make out this gorilla?'

That last part was aimed at Grav, but at the first sound of that raspy voice he'd turned away, staring down at his shoes, willing them to not break for the stairs.

‘Seems like he remembers something.’ The voice was sandpaper scouring into Grav’s head. It was approaching. ‘Something just fine.’

There was the sound of awkward spitting and then Roman spoke up, his baritone more soothing. ‘Hey kid, relax, will ya? Nits ain’t gonna do nothing. Ain’t that right?’

Grav felt a touch at his shoulder and when he spun around Roman was there, looming over him. Grav moaned involuntarily and slunk back. The big man’s body slid from view and was replaced by an old, long, wrinkly face, black eyes piercing across the room, mouth opened oddly, exposing grayed and yellowed teeth in some kind of smile or sneer or threat. Grav froze, unable to move from the horror. A deep voice and another touch to his shoulder and it was happening all over — he was pinned down and naked and though he was thrashing he couldn’t move. The old man was in front of him, scowling. He tried to turn his head but it was held, squeezed. ‘Look!’ Something flicked, a flash of metal. Then the grating voice. ‘You follow orders. You do what The House says. Don’t forget.’ A long arm reached forward and grabbed his balls, his cock, pulling them hard. There was pain, deep inside, up through to his throat, stretching, tearing. Then another flash and a release. But still pain, pain everywhere, pouring out with the blood, pouring out of his screaming mouth. Something slapped his face, a wet mass that rolled down his body and fell into the warm pool between his legs, a flop of flesh resting limply with newfound insignificance. ‘Don’t forget.’

Grav was screaming, facing towards the wall, trying to pull away. Roman held him tight, twisting his arms so that he couldn’t move.

‘Shut up, dude, shut up. He’s gone. Quit making a scene. He’s gone.’

Grav looked down towards nothing, kneading his crotch. Though everything had shrunk to nubs, the pressure was reassuring. ‘Just let me out,’ he said, ‘just get me out of here.’

Roman let Grav go and unlocked the door. Then he returned and helped him up, supporting him at the elbow like an infirm grandparent. Grav shrugged him off and shuffled outside, down the steps, stopping at the bottom to finally take a breath, feel the pressure release, enjoy the cold air nipping at his throat.

The building across the way was boarded up and charred black. Those on either side were covered in colorful spraypainted lettering, balloons and polygons of text stylized and overlapped to incomprehensibility. Leaveless trees that might as well have been dead, their branches frozen stiff in lifeless, forever slumber. A rusted car with a flat tire leaned precariously towards the curb. There was trash everywhere, the same trash that everyday filled the street, the block, the city. This was a miserable place, and being out in it was clearing Grav’s mind, restoring his spirit, bringing him back where he belonged. He wished he could wake up here, in the streets, away from that

room, from those... A shiver rose through him at the thought, or maybe from the chill. Or the sickness. No matter, he was out.

‘You gonna be alright, kid?’ The voice was behind him, closer than he expected. ‘I didn’t know — you always come down later. Nits ain’t around then, just me.’

Grav heard the words but didn’t register any meaning. He stepped down off of the red step and headed up the sidewalk, not even considering the thought of turning around.

‘Just be careful, you hear? The House don’t want any hassles. Wait til later next time, it’ll be better for everyone. I didn’t realize you’d remem’

The voice faded into the background, a low bass reverberating across the empty street. Grav looked ahead, walking quickly, almost wanting to hop into a jog, at last feeling free and eagerly awaiting his long-postponed relief.

It was getting late. The sun was well behind the buildings now, their high rooflines forming a false horizon that dusked the streets early in the pervasive winter. Walking mostly through shadows, the frigid, light-starved wind burrowed through Grav, aggravating his annoyance. It was freezing. Why did it have to be so fucking cold? Why did he have to get stuck in the winter? With fists clenched in his pockets and shoulders shrugged, he compressed himself against the weather, gnashing his teeth and trying to make sense of what was going on. How could it be so hard to score? There were no dealers. Nobody was talking, addicts or anyone. It was like a secret society, a street speakeasy that he didn’t have the password for. What was everyone hiding? Where did all the drugs go? They came back every day, right? They weren’t some diminishing resource. What the hell was happening in this city?

Grav screamed out at the ground in front of him, not caring if anybody else noticed or minded. Or better still if somebody finally acknowledged him. He screamed again, twice, twin burts of rage that did nothing to quell his agitation. He came to a cross street and looked up, turning the corner and walking even more briskly. Chef’s place was just up the road. He’d said he couldn’t help him but Grav was desperate. He’d come up dry. He couldn’t risk roaming the city all night like this. It was getting worse — the pain, the hunger. He’d left early so he wouldn’t have to be here again, yet now he was back at the edge, back in misery. Was this whole world just a hell created for him? Was it trying to teach him a lesson? Well he’d fucking learned it. He was ready to quit. He *could* quit. What was the point of it grinding him down? It just needed to stop.

He turned up to Chef’s building and rang the buzzer. Nobody answered. He rang it again, holding down the button. Finally a voice formed from static barked in response.

‘Go away.’

‘Chef, it’s me, Grav. You gotta help me, man.’

‘I told you earlier. No. You remember that, right?’

‘Yeah but I didn’t — I can’t find nothing. I can’t find anyone.’

‘I’m out of the business.’

‘I know you got stuff.’

‘You don’t know shit.’

‘I know Caltrop was getting it from you. I know you got it.’

There was no response. Grav stared at the speaker, leaning towards its almost inaudible hiss.

‘Hello? Hello?’

‘Did you go to The House? Like I told you?’

‘They won’t sell to me.’ Grav couldn’t tell him he wasn’t allowed. Then Chef would surely cut him out.

‘Bullshit. They sell to everyone.’

‘I don’t have any money.’

‘Who uses money?’

‘Please, Chef. Just this once. I’ll go to them tomorrow. It’s late. I won’t bug you again. It’s been over a week and I haven’t been out. I’m dying here.’

‘You’re an idiot and a liar. You’re here every night. Every night. When are you going to learn? I don’t have anything for you.’

Grav tried to follow. It felt like he was losing his only chance, like Chef was trying to trick him.

‘Let me up. I’m not leaving. I’ll buzz every apartment.’

‘Don’t be stupid.’

‘Somebody will let me in. Then I’m coming up. I’ll wait for you.’

‘You’re only going to make it worse for yourself. This place is escrow-protected.’

‘I don’t give a fuck.’ Actually he did give a fuck, but he wasn’t the only one. ‘Call out the guards. I’ll tell them some shit about between you and me and then you’ll be just as bad off. Worse probably.’

There was a buzz and the door clicked. Grav turned and looked at it dumbly, not processing the sound’s significance.

‘Fine. Come up.’

Grav grabbed the door handle and hurried inside, pausing in the lobby to enjoy the warm air. He rubbed his hands together and pressed them against his ears. There was no time to dally, though. Turning to the stairs, he bounded up two at a time, slowing with every pair, the last leap like stepping through concrete. He barely paused to catch his breath before heading to the next floor, slower, one step per step, his eager momentum sapped by a resistance he could not throw off. He struggled on, swaying and

pulling at the banister and pushing against his thighs, up to another landing and around to the next flight.

At the fourth floor he was hot and exhausted, about ready to collapse at the top stair when he saw Chef standing in the hall with his arms crossed impatiently. Grav lumbered down towards him, panting, using his hand to steady himself against the wall. Chef held out a white paper sack.

‘Here. Take it and go. This is the last time. Tomorrow I’m talking to The House about you.’

Grav took the bag and began to open it. Chef grabbed his hand.

‘Not in here. Just get lost. Don’t fucking shoot up in my hall. Don’t fucking shoot up in my building. Don’t fucking shoot up on my street. Go far, far away you miserable shit.’

Grav pulled his hand away and stuffed the bag into his pocket. Head down, he turned away and stumbled towards the stairs. Chef’s voice called out after him, calm and insistent.

‘I better not ever see you again.’

Downstairs, Grav contemplated shooting up right there in the warmth of the lobby, then thought better of it, then hesitated again when the cold walloped him through the open door. He knew if Chef came down and caught him that would be it, so he took one last warm breath and pushed out into the fading day. Two steps and he already regretted his decision. It wasn’t the temperature so much as the wait — he had what he needed right here and the walk back to his room would be painful, interminable. He should have just fixed himself up and left. He passed the corner of the building and looked down its side, into a narrow lot. Set back, deep in shadow, was a fence spanning the space between the adjacent walls. He peered into the darkness, having already decided what he was going to do but waiting for his mind to catch up. Standing there staring, he fondled the bag in his pocket, anticipated the inevitable.

Grav crouched in the gloom, between garbage cans and the corner formed by Chef’s building and the fence. A spear of light stabbed the ground next to him. He ran the flame under the spoon, careful to keep his hands still. When it was ready he filled the syringe and cleared it of air. He slid his arm out of his coat, rolled up his sleeve, tied off. Into the light to find a vein. Careful, careful — in:out:in. He slid the needle free and it dropped and he collapsed into the corner. It was heaven, perfect, better than he remembered. The moment was coming, was there, everything was right, everything was free, everything was falling, Grav was falling, was filling, filling from inside, his whole body full, his crotch full, his crotch his body, he’s full, he’s great, he’s perfect.

...and grow...

Her eyes opened wide. Not a slow rise from slumber, not a gentle rousing, just eyelids lifting as if from blinking — no recoiling at the brightness nor surprise that the day was already well underway. Not even aware if she'd been dreaming, not even wondering. Her first thought, in fact, was that Mom was shaking her, not because she sensed movement but because she woke so completely. At least that was what she associated with the moment, a sense built from the residue of unevenly remembered experiences, where subconscious post-perceptions of comfort and happiness were already implanting a nostalgia for her to return to. But there was nobody else in the room and being wide awake she was instantly aware of this, yet the feeling did not abate and brought with it irrefutable hope. So without further pause she threw her blankets off and ran for the door. The cold nipped at her bare feet and hands and through her thin, tight pajamas but she barely noticed, her excitement pushing away any hint of doubt. She rushed down the hallway (ignoring the lack of breakfast smells) and around the corner towards her parents' door (ignoring that it was closed) and burst into their room. The bed was empty and unmade, the clock on one side flashing and the other blank with a smoky, winding line running across its top and extending in both directions onto a nearby pillow and up a lampshade. There was a faint stink, like an overrubbed eraser. She ran across the room (ignoring the familiar scene) to the closet then back out to the bathroom and down the hallway to the kitchen, the living room, the front door. She stopped short, stood there, stared up at the doorchain hanging loosely in a golden, mocking smile. Naiden stretched up and slipped the chain off then ran her fingers slowly down over the other locks, disengaging each one in turn, until her hand rested on the doorknob. She turned it slightly before letting go and reconsidering. The deadbolt which could be opened with a key from the out-

side was relocked and then, after some thought, the others too. She took the doorknob in both hands and twisted it again, all the way this time. When she pulled it didn't move. The knob spun in her hands when she released it, a useless, discouraging motion, returning to a position as inconsequential as that which it had just been. With a big, brave breath, she turned back towards the apartment, exhaled into a slump, shuffled off to the bathroom.

The floor was cold and before taking a step onto it Naiden reached through the door and pulled down Gene's towel to walk on. She scooted over to the toilet and lifted the lid, hopping up on the seat with her pajama bottoms still on. The fabric slipped across the hard surface towards the hole, and she leaned forward to arrest the slide, maintaining as much contact as possible without feeling like she was going in or having to touch the seat with her bare hands. She sat there, arms and legs moving unsteadily in the air, balancing, until the dull chill on her legs was gone. Then she slid off of the toilet, pulled down her pants, got back up. There was a sliver of cold on one leg and she shifted slightly, aligning herself over the warm shadow she'd left. Only then did she finally pee, chin rested on her palm, pleased with herself for avoiding the icky awfulness of a frozen butt.

In her room she put on socks and slippers and her coat — not the big puffy thing but the thinner one she'd used right after school started. She pulled her chair out into the hall and climbed on it to turn up the heat. Not too far — higher than she was supposed to but only by a little. She could turn it down when they got home though even if she forgot they maybe wouldn't notice. After putting the chair back she went to her parent's room and unhooked the cable box, brought it to her room and connected it to the TV. She figured out how to do this during summer vacation. Mom was OK with it and even Gene didn't seem to mind that much as long as she put it back before they went to bed.

Naiden went to the kitchen and used the folding stepstool to get a big bowl and the box of cereal. She filled the bowl high and put the box back. Gene didn't like her eating this, said it would rot her teeth. Mom would shake her head and tell Naiden that it was fine. 'It's just one bowl, and it's not like she's eating it every day.' 'If it wasn't for me she would.' Gene would tell her it was important to not get into a rut, how he never ate the same thing two days in a row. 'You know that's not true,' Mom had said, looking at her, not him. He told them a story about someone he worked with who'd eat french fries every day and got curvy. 'Makes your gums soft and your teeth fall out. A big bloody mess.' Naiden felt her teeth with her fingers, squeezing and pulling. Nothing hurt, nothing loose. She tongued the twin gaps near the front of her mouth, where hard ridges were starting to push out. She wondered if he'd ever tried the cereal. Maybe if he had he'd want to have it every day too. It was that good. Even so, one day she tried to cook

instead, in case he asked. She put the eggs and bacon in the pan but one of the yolks broke and she couldn't get it out so she just left it. Then it took a while for anything to happen and when the good egg started to turn white she tried to flip it like Mom except it ran through the spatula and its yolk broke too and it was all over the bacon. While she was working on getting it off everything started to splatter and it hurt so she had to climb up on the other counter to get potholders and by the time she got back the egg was a hard blob and the bacon burnt shrivels. When she tried it she had to spit it out. She hadn't even wanted it in the first place, she was only thinking about her teeth. She ended up eating cereal anyway.

Before they left, Mom was making breakfast every morning, pancakes or waffles or eggs or french toast. Always with bacon. It wasn't like when Naiden was still in school, or during the summer. Back then Mom hardly cooked breakfast — usually only when a friend slept over or dad was coming to get her for the weekend. Everything changed when the zero time started. Soon, because of the danger, Naiden wasn't allowed to go out by herself. She stopped going to school and Mom became her teacher. Even before that Mom had started to cook every meal, had them sit down together to eat. Said she was taking advantage. In the morning the three of them would be on the stools at the counter, Mom smiling and rubbing her back, Gene worrying about work or business, never smiling. He never smiled much anyway, but it all stopped once they had to eat together. He would talk over Naiden to Mom, about stupid this or stupid that or another person being gone or why was he still doing this. When he finished he'd put on a tie and let Naiden tighten it up around his neck before kissing her on the forehead and telling her the same thing: 'Have a great day. You've been handed quite a gift, don't waste it.'

She poured milk into the bowl and pushed the dry bits that threatened to float over the sides into the center. After putting the milk back she got a spoon and, carefully cradling the bowl in her two hands, started walking back to her room. She was trying to hold it still but it seemed like the more she tried the more it sloshed around. To keep it from moving so much she tensed up and it was as though her legs were no longer working normally, like she had forgotten how to walk. The cereal waves were getting bigger and bigger and she was sure if she continued she would spill or trip or both, so she stopped suddenly. The bowl wavered in her hand as its contents slid back and forth and a couple pieces fell over the lip, clinging to the side. She watched it nervously, waiting for everything to settle down. Mom and Gene would be so mad if she spilled. One time she did, had to use a big towel to mop it up which she stuffed in the bottom of her clothes hamper. The carpet still looked darker there and she tried to move Gene's recliner over it but it was too heavy so she spread out some of Mom's magazines, made it look like

she'd been reading them. She was nervous the whole rest of the day but of course they didn't come home and now it was all back to normal. She wasn't supposed to be eating in her bedroom anyway. Finally the waves diminished and Naiden started walking again. All felt fine, her body seeming to have forgotten forgetting how to move, now able to glide easily down the hall, the formerly rough waters in front of her remaining placid.

Sitting cross-legged with a blanket wrapped around her, the bowl pressed into the carpet, Naiden pushed down the cereal with the spoon, making sure that all of it got dunked and coated with milk. She reached up and turned on the television. Immediately there was a faraway, high-pitched squeal that seemed to come not from the TV but everywhere, fading away as the screen's glow slowly came into focus. It was one of those soap operas Mom liked to watch. A man stared not quite at Naiden very intense and serious while his face slowly grew closer and music swelled. He reminded her of Gene. She took a big spoonful of cereal and moved the slider. Another soap opera, news, weather, static, a rainbow. More news. A dark-haired man in a suit, looking utterly confused. Sports. A painfully oversaturated background of solid blue with green bars and fuzzy, nearly illegible white writing that Naiden wouldn't have read anyway. A scrambled channel. She quickly pushed past the next which was also scrambled but whose sound was loud and awful. More scrambles. Another bite. Click click. A band with girly-looking hair and makeup playing to a crowd filled with girls and guys that looked the same. A cowboy riding over a barren landscape. An old black-and-white show with a woman cradling a candlestick like a baby. She'd seen this all before, nothing was interesting. Static static static. Then a clear channel — a man in a suit kneeling on a purple floor with his hands held high, like he was begging. Loud organ music made it hard to hear but it sounded like he was saying 'Repeat!' She scooped a spoonful and with her free hand ran the slider back fast in the other direction, letting it stop wherever. It ended up on one of the scrambled stations and she was about the change it when something caught her eye. Within the tangled mess of wavy lines and harsh colors, forms smushed and cut off and continuing in completely different parts of the screen, a thin triangular portal wobbled over a small area and gave a tinged but undistorted view of what was underneath. Sharp edges, distinct shapes. Spinning legs, an animal maybe. Definitely a cartoon. The scramble shifted suddenly and for an instant she saw a face, or mostly a mouth, snapping open and shut before it melted back to oblivion. The audio was clear, silly sounds and voices. She didn't even care what they were saying, yet she still turned it up, filling the air around her while she played with the adjustment wheel on the box, trying to see if it had any effect on the scrambling. It never seemed to get better and eventually she gave up and just accepted it for what it was, turned back to finishing her cereal while she

mindlessly listened and intently watched the show that she couldn't quite make out.

Except now her bowl held a spongy, gluey, grayish mass, congealed together like a soft brain. Using her spoon to press on the blob and tilting the bowl to her mouth, Naiden was at least able to slurp down the small bit of candy-sweet milk that could be liberated from the cereal. Then she stared at the screen for a few more minutes before getting up and returning to the kitchen. She scooped the cereal gob out into the sink and ran it into oblivion with the garbage disposal. After rinsing out her bowl she glanced up in at the cupboard, knowing that she could easily just get another bowl, but also knowing that Gene — and probably Mom too — would not be pleased to find out she had gone through a half a box of sweet 'n' cereal all on her own today. Maybe she could use the prize as an excuse, to say that she accidentally spilled a bunch trying to get at the bottom, except that Gene would probably check the trash for evidence. Not to mention she'd already gotten the prize the first day that they were gone and it was only a stupid plastic top that barely spun and wouldn't stand up for more than a second. Nothing like a hovering spaceship.

Naiden returned to her room and looked around to decide what to do. The television flashed a mesmerizing warp of confusion that still didn't reveal the elusive cartoon. The video game system sat on the shelf below and next to it the only three games she owned were lined up. The knight one was way too hard and she was already sick of the one that came with the system since before her parents got it for her, having played it *everywhere*. The third one, the sequel, that one was really fun but the passwords were impossible to remember and there was a point where she always got stuck. Also, it was boring having to play from the beginning every time. She went over and turned off the television. Across the way was her bookshelf filled with books and toys. The brightly-colored bear with a sun on its belly. The pastel ponies with cute brands and combable hair. The puzzle cube which she'd finally solved by peeling off the stickers and moving them around. The long, floppy spring that could walk down stairs. One time she had gotten it to slump all the way down to the next floor on its own without needing to push it along.

And books. All those books. Mom and Gene expected her to read fifteen pages every day and to give an oral report every evening over dinner. Since they'd been gone Naiden had attempted to keep this up, knowing that they would likely ask her what she had read while they'd been away. Except that reading that much was super hard and a lot of days she barely made it through ten. If she was lucky there would be a picture that took up an entire page or a chapter would end using only a couple of lines on the top of

a page and, if she were *really* lucky, have a blank page after that. Two pages automatic, just like that.

Unfortunately she picked the current book based on its cover and didn't think to look inside to realize there were no illustrations. Next time she would have to be smarter. She had already finished one book since they'd been gone and was pretty far into this one, and even though she'd mostly forgotten the details of the first she could explain the overall story which she hoped was enough. A few times she had pulled out her math or the capitals map, thinking that she might be able to impress them with her initiative, however the reading was what she was most anxious about. The last thing she wanted was for them to finally get back and immediately be in a mood because they thought she'd wasted her days.

It was going to have to get done at some point, so she figured she might as well do it now. This way if they came home soon she'd have something to talk about at dinner without having to try to remember exactly what she had read yesterday. Naiden picked up her blanket and went over and pulled the book from the shelf. Next to the bed was a heater vent and she curled up beside it, laying the blanket over herself and the register. She used her hand to see if she could feel any warm air coming out, hoping that it hadn't just kicked off. It didn't seem like it.

After a few minutes of attempting to remember where she left off, Naiden flipped through to page 100, which sounded about right. There was some weird writing that didn't look familiar so she turned back a couple pages and read a sentence. Back another page and she found something she recognized. She dogeared the page, then counted through the next fifteen. No new chapters, no blank spaces. With a sigh she folded the end page and went back to the starting one.

"Let me get this straight, kid," said the farmer, looking across his kitchen table at the young boy in the tuxedo. "You want to rent six of my cows?"

The heater kicked on and air started to flow through the vent, billowing the blanket up like an igloo. A bit cold at first, it quickly warmed and after a few minutes Naiden was getting toasty. Using one hand to hold open the book, she held the other over the air until it started to burn and then pulled it away, switching hands and trying again. She made it through a couple pages while doing this until the heater turned off and she realized she had not comprehended a single thing she had read.

She went back and started again, found that she actually did remember reading this, jumped ahead and was confused and proceeded to skip backwards and forwards until she got caught up to where she had been. Through three more heat cycles Naiden continued, managing to get more than halfway,

enough to figure out what the cows were for and what that weird writing was about. When the hot air stopped this time she was staring at the cover, examining the artwork, stuffing the golden bear's legs into the spring without looking or thinking about it. The blanket collapsed onto her. Her legs, long too warm, were outside, kicking in the air. *Attack Jelly*. That was pretty funny. She wished she could be outdoors too.

Naiden rolled and stared at the ceiling, listening for the sound of the front door unlocking. She had a feeling that they were close by, that they might come home any minute now. She wasn't sure how many nights ago it was that they left, going out on one of their dates. Mom said that sometimes they needed some special time, alone. They'd done this before, but only once were they not back by morning. That time Mom had been extremely apologetic, saying that they meant to get back before she woke up. To make up for it that day they had bagels for breakfast and Mom made a fancy dinner called coke oven that Naiden didn't care for. They promised that someday they would take her out with them, when it wasn't so dangerous. That was why she had to stop going to school, why she was only allowed to go out to play if Mom was with her. Every day kids were disappearing. Naiden didn't want Mom and Gene to come home and find that she had disappeared too. The outside could swallow her up, it was only safe here inside the apartment.

She stood up and got a writing pad and pencil from her desk. Laying on her belly under the blanket she practiced writing her name out in cursive. *Naiden Aprimus Klatch-Goomby* She liked having a long, fancy name with a dash in it. Gene wasn't her real dad but she liked him alright. At least he was around. She hadn't seen Dad since he left the country for business, and during zero time she'd only talked to him twice. Over the phone he never sounded like himself, it was like he was stuck in a storm. She could remember the way he smelled — it was handsome, not plain like Gene. She started her name again but a tear fell on the paper and her pencil just ripped a hole. Naiden wiped her nose and eyes with her sleeve. She was hungry anyway. Time for lunch.

In the kitchen she opened the freezer and pulled out the frozen pizza. She couldn't cook like Mom and even though she knew how to make soup or peanut butter and jelly the only thing she really felt like eating when it came time for lunch was pizza. Gene probably wouldn't like that but he was never here in the middle of the day so what would he know? She put the box on the counter and turned the oven to the right temperature which she knew by heart without even looking. Before going back to her room she went to the front window and looked down onto the street. Except for the parked cars it was empty. Sometimes she saw kids out there, riding their bikes around. Friends from school. Elliott and Judy and Cru and plenty of others. Early on they invited her out but it wasn't long before Mom wouldn't

let her go. Anyway, she didn't even have her bike downstairs anymore. Gene had given it away and promised her a brand new one when it was safe again. She wrote on the window with her finger then breathed on it, a milky fog exposing her secret message within before it slowly faded away, letters turned indistinguishable from the clear glass.

Naiden decided to play some video games to pass the time while she waited for the oven. She went ahead and picked the sequel game. It was based on a movie but she hadn't seen it. She'd watched the first one at a friend's house and thought it was real good. Exciting and funny, though there were some bad words that Mom wouldn't like. The game was kind of the same, but it was different too because it was a different movie. She unscrewed the cable box and connected the system, then pushed in the cartridge and turned it on.

The first thing she did was go to the password screen and attempt to enter one of the ones she had tried to memorize. It was impossible. She could remember writing them down and staring at them until she wouldn't forget but the letters were just a jumble in her mind. There were arrows and other symbols too and there was no way she could straighten out which ones to use or in what order. So she reset the game and started from the beginning. She'd done this so many times before it was going to be a total slog, but she only had to wait until the oven was hot. She started humming the music before it started, and in no time she was moving around the house, running and jumping and climbing, slingshots and yo-yos, snakes and spiders, bad guys, doorways, secret passages, caves and dungeons, transceiver messages, locked cells and warp zones and...

Naiden was sitting on her knees, the blanket over her head and wrapped around her, controller in her hands on her lap, eyes locked onto the screen, barely blinking. She was bundled up tight and the only things that moved were her thumbs, a rapid fire coordination which seemed to happen without conscious thought, as if her mind willed the action and a being separate from herself carried it out. For a while she had been telling herself she was close to stopping but just a little bit more, there was one more thing she needed to get or do or what about trying this thing which she wasn't sure if she had tried before and didn't want to forget. Finally, she realized she was stuck like always, and that she was really hungry, and that she needed to go to the bathroom.

She paused the game and stretched her arms and pulled off the blanket. It was really cold. Did she set the heater wrong? She opened her door and smelled something stinky like a bad fart. She crinkled her nose and went down to the bathroom. It was even colder out here. When she got on the toilet she let out a yelp and nearly jumped right off because it was freezing.

It took a while before she could start peeing because it was making her shiver so hard.

When she got to the kitchen the smell was really strong and she pulled up her shirt to cover her nose. The oven was not even warm and when she opened it even through her pajamas the odor made her wince and she started to cough. Naiden closed the door and then had an thought. She got down on the ground and opened the lower door and, sure enough, the little flame in the back had gone out. She'd seen Mom light it before and knew exactly what to do. Using the stepstool she opened the cabinet above the sink got the box of matches. Mom used a long wire to hold the match but Naiden didn't know where that was so she just got on her back and slid under the oven. She couldn't really see anything and there was a flashlight in the drawer next to the dishwasher however she realized if she lit a match it would give her light. It smelled really bad down there and being on her back was making her feel dizzy. She could barely move her hands together to open the box and pull a match out. When she rubbed it against the side nothing happened. She tried again but it slipped out of her fingers into the darkness. She fumbled around for another and when she struck this one she could see a flicker in the black like a tiny sparkler. She adjusted so that she had a better grip and tried again. This time there were more sparks and then the side of the box lit up as a flame burst out from the tip of the match and filled the dark with a great flash.

...another poison...

It was fire, lightning, pressure, agony. And it did not stop. It might have eased some after the jolt — possibly the initial shock wearing off, endorphins kicking in, an actual lessening — but they'd never felt like this before. Agnes gripped the sheets, dug her feet into the mattress, afraid to touch anything, afraid to push, just trying to be calm and breathe like she was supposed to and let the contraction pass. But it didn't. The pain, the tightening, it all felt different, not cramping or a wave but more like a continual explosion inside her. Then she could hold it no longer and grabbed her belly and screamed.

Head pressed back into the pillows, cries to bury the pain, cries that shifted in timber and then broke up into sobs as she felt her womb — the softness, the slack, the heat. It was all different, all wrong. It was so hot, like she was burning from within. Agnes hurt inside but also someplace deeper, someplace that knew something had gone bad, terribly bad. She pulled her legs together and started to roll. Something peeled off of her skin. When she reached down the bed felt warm and wet, just like it always did. That sensation, instantly familiar, a memory repeated into unexceptionality, made her feel like everything would be fine, like it was just another variation on the routine. Except this was too strange. The room was almost completely black, only the faint orange glow of the streetlight seeping from behind the blind and the red numbers on her alarm clock. It was really early. She'd never been up at this time. Maybe that was the problem — it was all starting too soon, things were out of sync. She'd just need to wait it out. If she could only go back to sleep, wait until everything realigned.

But there was no way she could sleep through this. She couldn't sleep during the other days either, never even once. The anticipation — of the next contraction, of the birth, of finally getting to touch him again, his skin against hers, resting, breathing, calm — the anticipation was always too much. But

this, this was something more unrelenting and miserable, torturing her with its denial of escape from consciousness. She needed to talk to Dr. Hatcher. Something was wrong.

She pulled the blankets away and just trying to lift them sent stinging currents through her insides. Agnes had been moaning with every breath but now they turned back to screams and she lay there on her side, half-covered and shaking, unsure how she was even going to reach the phone. She focused on her breathing: *deep in, deep out, deep in, deep out*. Gritting her teeth and keeping her breaths steady, she slid her feet out so that she could reach across for the telephone except one of them caught in a sheet or a blanket and she was yanked off balance. When she reached down to free her trapped limb she started to slip off the bed and spun and hop hop hopped before it loosed itself and she was thrown backwards into the dark, landing with unintentioned grace right in the center of the new rocking chair. Rock rock rock. She sat there staring into the black, teetering. The sensation of movement with her feet and hands free and no visual cue made her feel like she was not rocking but swinging, a pendulum down in some vast hole swaying at nothing. Back forth back forth.

As the momentary distraction dissipated the pain in her belly resurged and Agnes groaned and squirmed and her feet touched the carpet, halting her movement and resetting her spatial perception. Then, continuing her strained acrobatics, she contorted like a wide receiver reaching for an impossible catch and stretched towards the dresser, banging her hand around in search of the phone. Though her palm never found anything but the furniture's flat surface, her sweeping arm managed to connect with all manner of items, a crash bang clatter as things knocked and fell and she thought about her cup too late, a splash accompanied by her sharp yelp. She didn't stop, however, slapping around with more gusto, precariously leaning out of the precariously tipped rocking chair, wondering where that damn phone could be. A cord snaked around her wrist and she tugged it towards her only to find it did not give as she expected and she was thrust forward, pulling herself and the chair down onto the ground while at the same time the alarm clock's ruby numerals spun into view and the radio kicked on for an instant, blaring out a sharp, staticky screech *YENUS* before the plug released with a spark and the sound and display faded away into nonexistence.

Agnes was lying on her side, stunned, the chair on top of her. She pushed it off and immediately doubled over like she'd been punched in the gut. Her hand touched something which she realized was the lamp, hanging upside down from the dresser. She felt for the switch and turned it on. Spread across the carpet in front of her was jewelry and parenting books and the alarm clock, its cord still wrapped around her arm. The lamp was swinging slightly, causing the light and shadows to dance from side to side like they

were stuck in some sort of zoetrope loop. Looking up and around she didn't see the telephone. With a great effort she crawled across the floor and up onto the side of the bed. The phone was sitting untouched on the dresser amidst a clutter of spilled items and water. Next to it the list of important numbers was soaked, the ink blurred into an illegible blue fuzz. No matter, she knew the doctor's by heart. She had to call him every day.

She punched in his number and after only a couple rings the other end picked up.

'Hello?' It was a woman's voice, raspy and curt.

Speaking turned out to be more difficult than Agnes expected, groans and pauses as much as words while her diaphragm felt like it was being run through razors.

'Ahhh... Doc...?'

'No, this is Jalousie.'

'Uhhhhh...ohhhhh... Dr. Hutcher?'

'Did you hear me? Are you trying to sound sexy?'

'Please...mmm I need... Dr. Hutcher.'

'It's Dr. Haarkleftkin, thank you very much. And I'll have you know that I'm still up waiting for Hutch to get home. Seems like it's another one of his late nights.'

'Ohh...I...ohhh god, I'm in labor..'

'Ha! Think I haven't heard that before?'

'Uh...uh...uhhh Something's...wrong. Derrrutch I ohhh—'

'Then why don't you call the hospital, you tart? I'll tell you what — your precious doctor's probably already out on another house call so yours is going to have to wait.'

'Uggghhhmmmm.'

'Oh puhleeze. Do me a favor and don't call back.'

Agnes winced when the phone clicked. She had never talked to that woman before.

Anxiety swept over her. Troubled not just by her body but something else — a dream, right before she woke up... There was no Dr. Hutcher, just Trip. She reached for her baby, it was Corey this time, but Trip told her he was gone...

She remembered her breathing. *Deep in, deep out.* Everything would be all right. She'd had this baby so many times. Hours of labor. Cord around his neck. Breach. That first time Dr. Hutcher had done a caesarean, but she had almost bled out and he learned what her baby needed. Natural birth every time since, never lost him. That tense minute of silence right after, but he never failed. Always looked so exhausted at first and then would perk up when he saw her. Said it was a real gift, that it was the greatest feeling in the world. And he was right: finally hearing those screams and then taking him

in her arms, resting against her chest. Every day was torture followed by the most immense joy she'd ever known, each better than the last, a euphoria that negated the misery preceding it.

But now she was suffering like she never had before. It was the middle of the night, Dr. Hutcher wasn't home, everything was different. With that paper ruined she'd have to go into the front room to get the hospital's number. Or Trip's. 'Oh baby,' she whimpered, rubbing under her nightgown. For the first time she felt something move in there, like scratching, like he was trying to tear right through her belly. Agnes rubbed her stomach and tried to soothe him, to put the little guy at ease. He needed a name, so that she could talk to him. What letter was she on? After the first few times — when it was always George Andrew — she'd taken to running through the alphabet, finding a new name for each day. She'd lost track of how many times she'd cycled. Today would be C, though she'd used that in her dream. Corey. It was a fantastic name but to reuse it felt strange, ominous. Maybe she should use a different C, or skip to D.

The scratching intensified, scraping right under her skin. Agnes threw her head back and grabbed at her sheets. 'Oh Corey,' she said, 'it'll be OK.' It was too good of a name to lose. She fell into loud, distressed sobs and picked up the phone. Dialed 9-1-1 and waited. After what seemed like forever no one had answered so she hung up and tried again.

Agnes was on her back, knees up, trying to control her breathing. Deep in, deep out. Every exhale was a moan, every moment agony. It was as if he was chewing his way out. It never felt like this before. She ran her hands under her nightgown. Her skin felt soft and painful. 'It's OK, Darryl,' she whispered. 'It'll be fine.'

There was a buzzing in her ear and she turned to see the phone handset lying on the pillow. Who was she calling? Why wasn't anyone picking up? Behind it the dresser was a disaster, stuff spilled everywhere, the lamp hanging upside down projecting a harsh oval of light on the ceiling. The mess was familiar yet she couldn't remember how it happened. She felt violated, like somebody had broken in, disturbed things, watched her, left without revealing themselves. Had she been asleep? Did they try to hurt her? Her belly, everything felt wrong. She needed help. She needed to call the doctor. Maybe that was who she was waiting for, maybe she got the wrong number. She hung up and dialed him again.

'Hello?'

'Yes, L...uuuuhhh—' It was a challenge to speak.

'You again? I told you not to call back.'

'Dr. Hutch...'

'*Haarkleftkin*. And no, he's not here, tramp. Quit calling.'

The phone clicked and Agnes winced. Geez, was that his wife? What was her problem? What time was it, anyway? The window was dark and the clock on the ground, unplugged. Maybe he'd be at the hospital still. She turned and fire churned inside of her. Gritting her teeth she swung her feet over the side of the bed. There was a wet spot next to her with a streak of red. She touched it: cold. Then her belly: burning. The paper next to the phone was sopping blue smears. She'd have to get to her purse. It was in the front room. She could just call 9-1-1 but she wanted Dr. Hutcher. What if she couldn't get a hold of him? What would happen? She had to stay calm, to clear her mind, think outside of the pain. *Deep in, deep out.* He must be at the hospital. She looked up at the dark, open doorway. Focused on her purse.

She expected the contraction to ease off but it never seemed to, and when she stood up it was far worse, as though she were being ripped in half. She leaned on the dresser and waited for it to subside, or at least to get used to it. Eventually it or she did, and Agnes turned and took a small step forward, holding her arms out for balance as she tested her stability. Feeling more confident in herself, she took another, then another. On that third step she felt the lump under her sole before it registered and her weight was already shifted and it turned into a pinch then nerve shot right through her foot. She reacted without thought and pulled back to her other foot but her momentum was wrong and with her awkward center-of-gravity and pain-limited mobility she managed to only twist and stumble then trip trip trip across the room, slamming into the crib which collapsed onto itself with a sickening, splintering crunch.

Agnes was half in the crib, lying on a cracked and misshapened line of wooden slats. She tried to roll herself out but her arm was stuck and when she looked she cried out, partly because there was a shard of wood sticking through her forearm and partly because the shard's long point was aimed at and nearly touching her belly. Scooting backwards to create some separation, she grabbed her wrist and pulled her arm free. A stream of blood began to pour from both sides of the hole, joining underneath to form a rivulet that fell onto the plastic crib mattress. She stared at it in shock as it ran down the surface towards the well Agnes lay in, diverted by slats and folds into a spreading, crimson delta. It reached her nightgown and when she saw the dark stain bloom into the fabric she pulled it away and slid out of the crib and sat up. Her womb raged, her foot stung, blood coated both arms while she used her good hand to squeeze at the paired wounds.

At the side of the crib was a wicker basket filled with never-used diapers and she dragged herself towards it. As she did her insides began to pulse with rippling cramps which were alien to her — foul, heaving sensations she had not felt once in all the countless births. They swelled and seized

her, then rapidly faded, leaving Agnes shaking, ill, watching the dome of her midsection with trepidation. A drop of blood fell from her elbow onto her nightgown, breaking her spell. She grabbed a diaper and wrapped a makeshift dressing around her arm but by the time her blood-slicked fingers had finally managed to open a safety pin it was soggy and slipping off. With a frustrated grunt she tossed it away and got another. Then, using her mouth for leverage, she pulled it tight and used the pin to secure it with as little slack as she could manage. Beneath the pressure of the bandage her arm throbbed a dull, grievous echo of her heart.

Agnes glanced around, trying to remember what she was doing. Something about her purse. The baby was coming soon. She saw the phone and remembered she needed to get a number. She crooked her leg to push over and felt a stabbing in her foot. Maneuvering around her belly with her uninjured arm she pulled her leg up and saw a sparkling gem dangling from her sole. She tugged at the earring but it didn't release, just pulled at the skin painfully as if they were attached. With a growl of resolve she clamped her eyes and yanked, pulling it out and flinging it away in one movement. When she looked she saw dark, thick blood dribbling from the hole. Worse, though, was what seemed to be flowing from from the hole *into* her, a nerve tension that ran up her leg and grew until it resembled those sickening cramps, surging not just around her womb but from everywhere, a pressure that was misery and nausea and dread all at once. She shifted uncomfortably and felt an oozing sensation underneath her and when she lifted her nightgown saw a black, lumpy jelly seeping from the sides of her panties. In a panic she tried to pull them off but the hand of her wounded arm wouldn't work right and she had to writhe and tug desperately, incrementally, only managing to get one leg free before the cramps became too much and she flopped back onto the ground, screaming and sick and straining involuntarily.

She was stuck to the carpet, her insides moving, expelling. She wasn't consciously pushing, had neither the urge nor the ability to, all effort coming from somewhere far more primal and disconnected from her intentions than any time before. There wasn't even the sensation of waves, just a single crescendo that felt like anger and disgust pointed right down through her center and out of her loins. A high-pitched whine filled her head and she could not hear herself as she panted and screamed screamed screamed for it to pass.

Then it did, gone far more quickly than it had arrived, replaced with a rush of calm. Agnes struggled to sit up. She was weak and her moment of serenity giving way to panic. She didn't hear the baby. Something slipped through her mind. A memory, a nightmare.

He's dead.

It wasn't true, that didn't happen, that never happened. She twisted up so that she could peek over herself. A glistening, fissured circle of engorged flesh sat between her legs. She reached for it but before she made contact it twitched and she flinched and kicked away. As she moved backwards it started to follow her, sliding along the carpet, squeegee squeegee squeegee, so she moved faster and it bounced and danced after her until her back ran into the doorframe and her pursuer stopped, quivering. Only then did she notice the pale tail running up between her spread legs.

With an unsteady hand she reached over her sagging stomach, denting its curvature as she tentatively grabbed the cord and pulled. There was an awful tickle from deep within while the spiraled length slid out. When it drew free she held it up and it hung there, dripping on her distorted belly, a dead end blackened and gnarled into a scabrous stump.

Agnes flung away the severed link then cradled herself and her boy, feeling ill, unsure if she should push or wait, fighting the heaving in her stomach for fear of hurting her child. How long could he... He needed help... Help... Dr. Hutcher... She whispered, cried, stumbled over his name. C or D? How long... She fell to her side and began to drag herself through the door, into the darkness, talking out loud to distract from her anguish and vestigial contractions.

'... hold on Doc ... we'll be fine ... my purse ... help ... just wait Doc ... just wait ...'

Walking was impossible. She couldn't get to her feet without doubling over. Her body felt wrecked, hurting inside and out, the pain sharp blunt pulsing burning rending electric worse than anything she'd ever known. Struggling forward, Agnes slowly made her way to the kitchen, towards the telephone that hung between the refrigerator and the calendar, two once-necessities whose usefulness ended yesterday, long ago. Now nothing mattered anymore, nothing except her baby. Movement was torture. She held him while she rested, hoped that he couldn't feel this, forced herself to continue.

She reached the phone in a crawl, one arm bandaged and buckling, legs sticky, nightgown smeared with red stains. There was a foul stench everywhere. She tried not to think about what might have happened, who or what could have done this to her. Her only concern was her boy. Charles, Charlie, her little prince. She ran a hand across his sanctuary and shivered at the nauseating prickles that emanated from within it.

She had her address book with her, remembered needing to call the hospital but wasn't sure why. Why not Dr. Hutcher? She glanced at herself. Or 9-1-1? Or Trip? She tried to straighten her thoughts and memory. It was all scrambled. She opened the book and her eyes were drawn to an entry in the

middle of the page. *Papa Ashlayed* She brushed her finger across the depression of the writing. Such a great man. Nothing like her parents. Nothing like his son. She flipped the pages but was thinking of him. After Shammy left Papa remained, was more excited than her about the baby, that she would have it. Was so proud when she wanted to keep the Ashlayed name. His first grandchild. His name. He never even got to know it would be a boy. He would—

There it was, the hospital's number. She laid the book on the floor next to her. Supporting her belly, she got up on her knees and reached for the phone, just barely able to grip it with her blood-tackied fingers. She lifted it off the cradle but it slipped and she fumbled fumbled the receiver and even though she was only kneeling lost her balance and fell back flat on the ground, looking straight up to see a yellowed plastic bulge and coil hover hover peculiarly before smashing into her eye.

Oof! She grabbed her face and writhed about which only caused more pain to spark up throughout her body. Agnes calmed herself down — *deep in, deep out* — then drug herself up and dialed the hospital only to be met with a busy signal. She tried again but it was the same. When she slumped in annoyance horrible shocks set through her back. Everything was wrong. What had happened? What about her Chucky? They needed Dr. Hatcher. She reset the line and dialed his home.

'Duuuah—'

Wincing at the click, Agnes thought maybe she'd got the number wrong. She redialed and got a busy signal. Checked the number in her book and tried again. Busy. Grrrrr. Tried 9-1-1, and again and again and again: busy busy busy. She threw the handset which skidded across the floor and then recoiled back close to her. Reached for it and her hand, now limp and purple, just slapped against it uselessly. She looked down at herself and started to cry. What was going on? How could all the phones be out? They always worked. Weren't there workers—

Something pulled at her side and she grabbed herself, moaning. She, both of them, needed help. She was going to have to get out and find someone on her floor. It had been so long since she'd seen any neighbors. There had to be someone. At least they could get her to Trip's — he was close, had been through most every day with her. Maybe she could make it to his place on her own.

The phone started to beep, an incessant, insistent tone blaring impossibly loud through the handset's tiny speaker. Agnes used her good hand to pull it over by its cord. She stared at it, the attention-demanding note freezing her in hypnotic penance. *DA DA DA DA* Everything hurt. She couldn't move. What was she thinking? How could she possibly get to Trip's? She might as well try calling him. She flipped through the address book until she found

him. *Trip Patrois*. Moving as little as possible, she tapped in the number and waited, expecting another busy signal.

Instead it rang. Not expecting this, she found herself mindlessly listening to its faraway song with the same detached enthrallment as the off-hook tone. It continued to ring ring ring. At some point Agnes wondered why Trip didn't have an answering machine and at that very moment the line picked up.

'Hello?'

'Trreeuuu... Treeh...hip.'

'Who— Agnes? Is that you? Girl, do you realize what time it is?'

'Huuuuh... Trhiip...'

'What's going on? It's too early for this.'

'Heeellll...'

'What are you — oh god. Yesterday. Oh my god. Is...'

'Herrr. Iyuh. Hert.'

'I don't understand. Is he? Oh god. I'm sorry I'm so sorry. You— You gotta call Dr. Hutcher. 9-1-1.'

'Caannt...not'

'Oh my...'

'Help. Pleeess.'

'I—I'll be right over. I just—' There was a banging and rustling and a short scream that faded into the background. Then his voice from a distance back to close: 'Sorry. I'll be right there.'

Agnes heard the line click off and let the phone fall from her hand and laid her hand on her belly. It felt uneven and limp and she pulled away. She looked across at the front door, wondering how long before he'd arrive. She looked at the door so she wouldn't have to look at herself, focused on the poster hanging on it — mussy hair, mussy jewelry, mussy clothes. That look. She was no virgin mother. Agnes moved her gaze to the knob, then the locks. Shoot — how was he going to get in?

She turned herself around and, using the wall for support, got up to her feet. She was bent over at the waist and unbalanced and hooked her arm over the phone for support. She tried to straighten and the phone popped off and she went sprawling forward, limbs flailing, into a belly-first belly flop onto the floor. Curling into a ball, she rolled onto her side, trying to deep in, deep out but managing only to pant pant pant while her insides roared.

Something very bad had happened. Agnes could remember some but clearly the worst had been pushed out of her mind. She hurt all over — arm foot face belly body. It felt like the baby was pushing through her back and throat and all directions but the right one. There was blood everywhere, on her clothes and down her legs. Her panties were gone. Had somebody attacked her? Why would they do that? If they hurt her baby...

The phone was sitting next to her, ripped out of the wall. She thought she remembered calling someone, but maybe she'd dreamed that. Or they'd caught her and gotten upset. None of this made sense, it was all so different from how it was supposed to be, how it always was. A strange feeling came over her, an anxiety whose source was lost but felt unmysterious, tangible. Like she was abandoned in a maze she'd designed, its solution forgotten.

There was a sense that help was on the way, that she needed to clean herself up. Agnes got onto her hands and knees. Her bandaged arm could barely support anything and it felt as though every part of her, especially her belly, was being torn off by some massive, furious gravity. She crawled over to the table and pulled herself up. Her legs were unsteady and she couldn't stand straight, but she thought she could make it to the bathroom. She stumbled stumbled over to the wall, almost falling, catching herself at the last moment with her good hand against its stable surface. Using it for support, she shuffled along to the bedroom doorway. The room had been ransacked but the phone was on the dresser, seemingly undisturbed. Doubt needled her. Had she actually talked to someone? Was help really on the way? She felt the bump of her middle, it seemed an ill shape, to recoil at her touch. Her baby. Before she worried about how she looked she needed to make sure she had talked to Dr. Hutcher.

It was only a few steps across to the bed — shorter than it had been to reach the wall. Keeping her gaze fixed on her goal, she pushed out into the room, into the harsh shadows of the upended light: Step—step—step—slide—slipslipslip her feet had no traction and her arms were spinning and she flew back and her backside hit the ground with a giant splat. Agnes cried out in shock and pain, certain that her tailbone had been sent through her womb. *Deep in, deep out* as she checked herself. There was a bloody mess between her legs. The back of her arms and head and everything were wet with a dark, pulpy juice. She felt sick, panicked. What had she done?

There was a knock at the door. Yelling. The knob twisting. Bang bang bang. She rolled and pushed herself up and one arm collapsed, faceplanting her into the carpet. Bang bang bang. She got rebalanced and stood up and slick slick her feet were up in the air and she went straight down onto her stomach. Bang bang bang. Her breath was gone and her guts and lungs and baby felt like mush and she crawled on her knees and hand out across to the door bang reached up and bang undid the bang chain and then the deadbangbolt and rolled to the side.

The door burst open and Trip rushed in, saw Agnes, knelt down next to her.

'Oh my ah—'

Whatever he was saying was silenced by the spray of redbrown that she vomited into his mouth and face.

‘Aaaaaaa!iiyaaaaaaa!aaaaahhhh!’

Trip was running, running running running all over the place, hands to his face and up in the air, going in circles, freaking out.

‘... omigodomigod ... omigodomimigod ... omigodomidog ...’

It was all out of her now. The bad bad stuff. He’d be fine. Her head lolled. Trip was in the kitchen, head in the sink. Everything was turning dark. She couldn’t talk talk, move, nothing. Just fine just fine. Just get Dr. Dr. Hut. Sure. He’ll get him out. Always always always does. Trip in her face. She could barely see him.

‘What happened!?’

Dr. Dr. Hutcher. His number by the phone. No energy left left left. He was freaking out again. Pacing. Fading.

‘... how did I get here ... what am I doing what am I doing here ... the phone ... whadoido whadoido ...’

And gone. All of it. Black. The pain was gone too. Too soon for that, but before was never like this. Now that it was alright right right, no no pain, she could think about her dream. A bad dream. A real real real nightmare.

‘... oh god oh fucking god ... where is it ... oh my god where what what ...’

Good thing it was over. She did love that name, though though. Corey.

‘... can’t find him ... where did you put ... Agnes! hey!’

She shook shook shook shook — or had she fallen? Bumbumdum?

‘Fuck oh fuck oh fuck!’

Corey Corey Corey my Corey my Corey

‘I’ll get you to help. Here.’ Something under her. Trip’s face. ‘Oh you’ve — oh! It’s alright, not your fault. Stay with me. Up we go.’

She he rose. They were floating. It was going to be OK okay. Trip’s breath, huh huh huh. Floating floating bouncing bouncing. She just had to hold hold on for the Dr. Dr. Deep in, deep out. Huh huh. If if she was gone he could cut cut cut cu—

Trip fell away away and she was really really floating. Roll roll roll. A womb in a womb in a thud thud.

‘Shit!’ Trip was farther away, coughing and gagging. ‘Oh god, I can’t do it. I’m so sorry.’

Deep in deep out. Just stick around around. Dr. Dr. baby baby baby mommy mommy mommy Corey my Corey.

‘... I’ll get someone ... I’ll be right back ... I’m sorry ... I’m sorry ...’ Voice receded. Left. Alone.

Deep in deep out deep in deep out deep in deep

...just a shade...

Browsie stomped her thick-heeled boot onto the stage three times. ‘Alright, everyone quiet!,’ she yelled. ‘We are now in session.’ She stared out into the crowd and the noise diminished in a rapid hush, all eyes turned up to her. Waiting for full silence, she stood with her legs wide and arms akimbo, her tutu poofed out and her rainbow hair poofed up and her cheeks poofed porcelain from her kewpie makeup. Soon, the only sound was a murmur of expectant breath. Browsie put her cigarette to her mouth and poofed smoke then gestured to those seated next to her with the same hand.

Smyth thought she might be indicating him but before he could even check Axcel stood up, took a few steps, and spun around, facing Smyth.

‘State your name,’ said Axcel. Although he was not speaking towards them, his voice projected over the crowd, filling the space with confidence and clarity.

‘Smyth,’ Smyth replied, equally loud. His voice reached all corners of the theater and then ceased upon arrival, echoless, absorbed into the tiles of the tall ceiling, and the wall drapes, and the air, and everyone’s attention.

‘Your last name is not unknown.’

‘Smyth Cardian.’

‘Nicknames?’

Smyth turned to the crowd and spoke with a smirk: ‘Swangy.’ Nobody responded, not even a clap. It was going to be a tough crowd. He looked back at Axcel who was staring at him expectantly.

‘Schmitzy!’ someone in the audience cried out.

Smyth held one hand out in their direction and one at Axcel. What was the use of this if they clearly knew all about him?

‘Thank you, *Smyth Cardian*,’ said Axcel. Walking out towards center stage, he addressed those of the gang in attendance. ‘As many of you may

know, this trial concerns the recent removal of our fellow member Vic, full name unknown, which occurred ei—

‘*Allegedly* occurred,’ interjected Smyth. Almost immediately a wall boos and groans and whistles thundered at him. Tough crowd indeed. And he hadn’t even broached his last name.

Browsie slammed her foot down. ‘Smyth! Do you have an objection?’

‘It’s a distortion of the—’

‘Do you have an objection?’ Her pounding continued on after she finished the question, pushing against the din.

Smyth closed his mouth and sat up in his seat. An appeal to seven would go nowhere, especially when the second was against you.

‘Then you will shut up until it’s your turn. Otherwise you’ll be found guilty by reason of interference.’ She looked at Axcel. ‘Continue.’

Axcel stared at Smyth for a beat, milking his victory. When he resumed speaking he did not turn away, aiming his words, accusations indisputable. ‘The removal of Vic occurred eight days ago at the Greenmailer mansion. We will present evidence which shows that you, Smyth Cardian, are the cause for this removal, and must be punished in accordance with the hooligang code. *Rule 3: In order to preserve ourselves from threats inside and out, we do not kill.*’

Smyth knew he shouldn’t have come back. That little pang in his stomach that had kept him away for the past five, six, however many days was still there, he’d just been too bored hiding out or roaming dullsville to pay attention to it. Or maybe he’d started to confuse it with his longing to return to the gang. Whatever the reason, this morning had started out just as usual — he’d woken up before everyone else, grabbed the same cold slices of pizza and same can of beer, snuck out of the house and headed off to disappear into the suburban sprawl. Not that he’d really disappear — a big guy like him was conspicuous by default. He just needed to make sure he wasn’t anyplace he might be recognized, where some straggler or eager nobody looking to impress might report sighting him. So he would find a low-rise business complex and mope around the perfectly manicured courtyard, climbing trees and carving his initials into anything soft...plop himself in a forgotten corner of the public library, perusing books for illustrations to augment with mustaches and eyepatches and dickenballs...spend hours fruitlessly searching mostly empty parking garages for cars with keys left in them because he never did figure out how to hotwire...scrounge a decaying neighborhood in the industrial lowlands for junk food or stuff to break, knowing full well that any kids he might run into wouldn’t be caught dead at the mall... All of this driven by an anxiety about some unknown punishment — he could take a whipping or having his arm broke, he was sure of that, however he didn’t

want to get exiled. Smyth didn't know how much Vic would say but was worried that the smarmy shit would try to set Benzi against him, trick the boss into avenging his mother and his honor. Then again, Smyth wasn't sure what actually happened to her or if anybody had seen him jump out of the window. His gut was telling him that there would be trouble when he came back, that it would be easier to stay away for a while. Nonetheless, this morning as he was walking, Smyth let his mind wander, thinking not about his worries but about the hooligang and the food court and just hanging out again, and before he knew it he'd turned a corner and found himself standing right across from the Cyclomall's parking lot.

The Cyclomall was the product of hometown hero Selvyn Bigulpi, first generation native who, after leveraging his success in single-serve processed food distribution to become a luxury high-rise developer, wanted to make an iconic landmark for the city of his childhood. His first plan was to build a slightly scaled-down version of his Obsidian Primo Tower — representing both a celebration of his own achievements and an aspirational symbol pointing the citizenry to their technofuture — but was met with resistance from residents wary it would disrupt the unremarkable skyline they had grown accustomed to. Bigulpi persisted nonetheless, procuring land and obtaining permits and was well under way with preparations for construction when a proposed price list for tower's apartments was released, causing a revolt among the city council and a number of local elites who realized that they would never be able to afford even the least spectacular views from the edifice. Bigulpi resisted their resistance but a campaign against his 'ebony splinter' proved effective in convincing the populace that it held no public benefit, the death blow delivered by a political cartoon in the local paper featuring the developer laying on his back, the city flattened beneath his rangy body, while a giant black rod rose high into the clouds from between his legs. It carried the title *Shaft*.

Miffed and resentful, Bigulpi plotted architectural revenges. Pleasure Dome: a glass-walled hemisphere behind whose uncurtained windows would be unoccupied rooms thematically dioramaed with items of rapturous fantasy: carnal, dietary, prosperity, austerity, costumery, otherworldly, etc. Ostensibly built as a residence whose only entrance would be through a circular hole at the top (accessed via helicopter), it would thus offer delights, excesses, and offenses to passersby which could neither be accessed nor denied. Or The Park: the world's largest parking lot (the only enforceable city code with regards to such land-use involved the *minimum* number of spaces required). Or get approval for a generic, innocuous office complex and then abandon development after the site was partially excavated, leaving an ugly, cavernous pit at one end and a gargantuan dirt pile at the other.

Eventually Bigulpi decided to not allow his animus to spite his own wealth, instead choosing to sell out the townspeople with something they could not resist: a shopping mall. Still disgruntled (and struggling with inspiration for anything shorter than thirty stories), he held a local contest for the mall's design, secretly planning to pick the most ridiculous submission in hopes that it would also be the least functional, all to prove some contemptuous point. This attitude changed when Bigulpi saw the entry submitted by a disco acid burnout and self-described trans-dimensional artist named Phrentt which called for the mall to be laid out as a single, continuous, circular path that looped twice around before connecting back to itself. On one end the two loops were stacked in a two-story configuration while on the opposite side they were next to one another at the same level, connected in a large arcade. A shopper could traverse the building's extent without ever using stairs or escalators, or, if always crossing at the arcade, travel an unbroken circle that only covered half of the floorspace. The pair of the latter formed interlocking rings, whereas the former fused them to one. All three endless.

Bigulpi immediately recognized the thematic possibilities of the plan. With parallel rows of shopfronts, no clear endpoints, and comforting symmetry traced by gradually shifting directions and elevations, it would attract with its retail offerings but hold with the magnetism of its gentle infinities. The people of the city would concentrate and swirl amongst each other, disoriented from their outside lives to see themselves and one another anew, not trapped but freed, not lost but discovering and rediscovering. The space was self-contained yet open to all. Enclosed yet lacking boundaries. Not just a commercial locus but one of community, an eye within the storm surrounding it. The seductive isolation from and heightening of its social environment symbolically reinforced by the stainless steel clad exterior that gave the impression of an amorphous, inscrutably reflective surface melting into itself.

Finding himself invigorated by Phrentt's design, Bigulpi's zeal to make a positive contribution to the city was renewed and he pushed ahead, winning over political and popular support both through the innovative concept and the exciting prospect of new shopping center. Another cartoon was published in the paper, by the same artist as before — this time titled *Knot Together* — depicting concentric rings of joyous persons, arms interlocked, Bigulpi and Phrentt barely recognizable within the crowd, circumambulating around a glorious, gleaming pretzel. Retailers competed for spots in the exclusive building and its popularity quickly extended far beyond the city limits, becoming an attraction of regional and national significance. The Cyclomall won a number of awards and initiated the successful BigTT partnership that has seen the realization of a number of ambitious and inspirational projects. To this day, the Cyclomall continues to be a vibrant and beloved center of the community and Bigulpi heralded for his commitment to its fruition.

This history was laid out in detail in a glass-enclosed display along a wall at the west split. Next to it there was also a printout of Phrentt's artist statement which had been defaced with a black marker so that only a few indecipherable words remained. *genus two origamic lemniscate eight-fold transcendental sempiternal epitrochoid Möbius unknot amaranthine* Smyth had read this information many times, but as far as he was concerned it was little more than an abstract fable disconnected from the reality of the mall. To him, the building, with its unceasing tiled walkway and myriad shops, hadn't been constructed or designed, it wasn't the product of some high-minded aesthetic ideal or brilliant imagination or the outgrowth of petty sentiment, it just existed. It was the place the hooligang hung out, where they could gather and eat and laugh and fight and not have to worry about adults trying to order them around or tell them their stupid thoughts. The space was theirs, they owned it. Not a structure with a past but one that, for them, had literally always been there. An axiom whose presence defined their existence as much as it provided a hub of shelter and diversion.

Although at any given time pockets of the hooligang might be found roaming around the mall, the group would generally congregate on the flat end where the two loops converged into one another, an area ideal for hanging out. There the stores on the outer edge were deep and opened up to the parking lot, offering easy access and also abundant paths for escape (though this hadn't been needed since the earliest days). Across the arcade, the inner loop was made up of a row of fast food joints split by radial lines of tables and benches that ran through to the mall's central atrium. This fan of restaurants was the real attraction of this location, a magnet formed from the basic elements of meat, starch, salt, sugar, cheese, grease, and heat, where emergent from the statistical mechanics of insatiable appetites and primal cravings would arise a never dissipating mass of hovering loiter. Given that the gang was restricted to teenagers, there were plenty of members who knew how to run the cooking equipment. And neither was labor an issue, with a seemingly endless supply of youths who were either insecure and desperate to earn some phantom recognition from their peers, or total fuckups that always needed to pay off another debt, or the empty-stomached whose hunger wasn't going to last waiting for someone else to man the fires.

As he rounded the bulbous edifice gleaming in the low sun, Smyth was hankering something big and messy. Hot Flips was at the edge of the food court and he hoped to enter the mall from the split end and sneak around to snag a cheeseburger and some tallow fries before anybody noticed him. He came in through the western wear shop on the lowering level, a store whose novelty had long since worn off and would surely be empty of any members, then slipped out of the leathern air into the walkway and shuffled along, ducking between trash receptacles and potted plants and anything else that

would give him a modicum of cover. He had almost made it to the merge, just around the corner from Flips, when a voice called out, echoing in the open space.

‘Swangy!’

Smyth froze and spun around, searching for the source, acting inadvertently guilty. He spotted a group coming towards him, headed by Duxvan. Duxvan was a beefcake, a short guy who overcompensated for his height by focusing on his muscles and looks, creating a cartoonishly male presence whose vanity and contrivance actually came across as rather delicate.

‘Hey there, haven’t seen you for a few,’ Duxvan said with a snide, blinding grin. He was wearing a collared shirt that was right on the edge between perfectly hugging his pecs and being ripped by them.

‘I’ve been around.’

Duxvan was standing unnecessarily close, lifting his chest and chin up like a proud cock. The other guys spread out, forming a circle around them.

‘Benzi wants to see you.’

‘Sure, I was just going to get a bite to eat.’

Duxvan contemplated this for a moment, then motioned with his hand. ‘Nah, you’ll see Benzi first.’

Lost Bill and Fweep stepped forward and took a spot on each side of Smyth. Up to that point he hadn’t even considered running, but he knew it would be stupid now.

‘Is this necessary? I’m not going anywhere,’ Smyth said, looking around. He grabbed his belly in mock pain. ‘Come on, I’m dying here.’

The little bastard just laughed.

So now he was up on the stage, trying to ignore his aching stomach, trying to hide his discomfort so he didn’t look guilty. He should have pushed back harder on Duxvan or Benzi to at least let him get a snack. He was attempting to pay attention to the trial, forcing himself to not be distracted by his hunger and fixate instead on what was happening, which only left him distracted to the point that nothing registered. He shook his head and took a deep breath, refocusing on Axcel, who was pacing across the stage, asking a question of the witnesses in the form of a monologue aimed at the audience.

‘...heard testimony that when they were running through the house, Smyth Cardian was *chasing* Vic. Or, more appropriately, Vic was running from the accused. Keep this in mind if you hear claims of a four-a exception. Who was threatening deadly harm? If you were in Vic’s shoes, what would you think?’ Axcel turned to the witness section, a series of neatly arranged chairs on the side of the stage filled with various gang members. ‘Which of you observed the chase as it passed through the kitchen?’ A single girl stood up, someone Smyth didn’t recognize. She was wearing overalls and a

ponytail and had a look on her face like she had just been caught smelling her finger after a good ass scratch. Axcel asked her to tell what she saw.

‘Well, I didn’t notice them at first. Like, I was doing the dishes because I couldn’t find a clean glass and once I got started I noticed how everything was piled up on the counter and I—’

‘OK, OK. Just skip to when you saw Vic and Smyth Cardian.’

The girl turned bright red and stared off in a direction where there were no people. She shifted her weight nervously and opened her mouth a couple times like she was about to speak but nothing came out. The longer she waited the more the murmurs of the crowd died out, dropping the theater into deeper silence. Finally, Axcel broke the excruciating pause by prompting her again, at which point she let lose as if he had kicked open the floodgate holding back her dammed-up words.

‘So the big guy was at the door and he was yelling at Vic and Vic was yelling back but I couldn’t understand them because of the stereo and the firecrackers and the big one was like coming forward and I thought I was going to see a fight and I was like oh shit and then Vic opened a drawer and pulled out something but I didn’t see it because the big guy stopped and looked at me all crazy and I was sure he was coming after me and I didn’t know if anybody could hear me scream but the like next thing I knew Vic was gone and the big guy was running after him and that was it.’

The girl was panting and darting her eyes around nervously. An amused chatter rose up within the audience. Axcel had tried to stop her a couple times for clarification while she was going but she had just rolled over him. His opportunity regained, he stuck a hand in the air to ask for quiet.

‘To be clear, the “big man” is the accused, correct?’

The girl looked at Axcel dumbly.

‘*Who* was the big man?’

The girl rolled her eyes and pointed at Smyth. ‘Duh, that’s him.’ Smyth still had no recollection of her.

‘And it was a knife that Vic pulled out of the drawer, right?’

Before the girl could respond Smyth stood up and appealed to the judge. ‘Come on, who’s testifying here? He’s putting words into her mouth.’

Browsie lifted her high brows even higher at Axcel who raised his hands defensively and shook his head.

‘OK OK. I’ll rephrase.’ He turned to the witnesses. ‘A number of you can testify to seeing Vic run from the kitchen to the front door holding a knife. Will all of those please rise?’ A handful stood up. ‘Would you describe the knife?’

‘It was long and shiny.’

‘A big ol’ cooking knife.’

‘A cleaver.’

‘No, a cleaver is square. This had a point.’

‘Yeah, she’s right.’

‘Really? I thought for sure it was a cleaver.’

‘Nah, it had a point.’

‘Yeah.’

‘But it was long, like this long.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Yup.’

‘So a big, sharp knife?’ asked Axcel, holding apart his hands to show the length. The witnesses nodded or nodded and shrugged or in the case of cleaver stood silent with his arms crossed. Axcel spoke to the girl in overalls. ‘They all just testified that he came out of the kitchen with a big knife. Do you think that maybe it was possible that what he pulled out of the drawer was that knife?’

The girl looked around at those standing with her and nodded enthusiastically. ‘Yeah, that’s right. I remember now. It was a knife drawer, so it must have been a knife. Definitely a knife. I’m sure of it.’

Axcel told her she could sit down, then proceeded to question the others about how Smyth and Vic had acted as they ran out the front door. It was agreed that they both seemed excited, in a rush, and that only Vic looked back. With that, Axcel addressed Browsie: ‘This scene is through. It’s been shown that Smyth Cardian chased Vic through the house, that Vic got a knife to defend himself, and that Smyth Cardian chased Vic out the front door.’

The judge gave the floor to Smyth and he stood and looked out over the crowd, trying to collect his thoughts. Benzi was up near the front, watching attentively. Ma Tari and Duck were sitting to his side, messing with something in Ma’s lap. Fweep was on the other side, his head slumped forward. The judge coughed and Smyth knew he couldn’t stall any longer. He took a deep breath and began to speak, projecting out to and focusing on the indistinct figures in the back row whose indeterminate reactions would not mess with his attention.

‘We’ve all just heard Axcel *Coolcrunch* detail a number of facts about what supposedly happened that night. Don’t worry, don’t worry, I won’t dispute any of them. However, they are presenting an incomplete picture of the truth. Yes, I was chasing Vic through the house, but *why* was I chasing him? Axcel Coolcrunch has not even hinted at a motive. Perhaps that is because such a motive would throw his theories into question.’

‘Objection! He is implying a rule seven violation without any evidence, not to mention an *incomplete picture* of the theories he finds so incriminating.’

‘Easy, easy,’ said Browsie, ‘let’s give him a chance.’ She turned to Smyth. ‘Careful you don’t dig yourself a new hole to get stuck in.’

Smyth waited for Axcel to sit back down before continuing. ‘I’ll repeat the question: Why I was running after Vic? To understand this we must go back to the beginning, in a bedroom on the second floor—’

‘Objection! This is outside of the scope of the current scene.’

‘I disagree,’ said Smyth, ‘this is part of the chase. He can’t just limit the scene to what is convenient. It has to be complete.’

‘Where are the witnesses to this allegedly missing part of the story?’

‘Nothing is alleged. I know what happened because I was there.’

‘Which means nothing without a supporting witness. We can’t trust the accused to not lie for themselves.’

‘Who’s making a seven accusation now? *No information will be secret.* You won’t hear me? That makes you and everyone in here guilty.’ Smyth was hot but immediately regretted saying this, mostly because he knew Axcel was right. He’d wanted to slip in a description of what happened upstairs during witness questions but had screwed it up. He awkwardly searched for someplace comfortable to put his hands as the audience began to jeer.

Browsie thumped the stage. ‘Alright, that’s enough. Let’s defer to the rulemaster here. Quber?’

A pimply kid with a baseball jacket and a notepad came up from the front row. He spoke with a slight lisp and an air of condescension. ‘The accused cannot provide sole source testimony given the likelihood of opportunistic lying. Any unsupported ideas, including self-testimony, may be presented during opening and closing remarks.’ With Browsie’s approval he returned to his seat.

The judge walked close to Smyth and looked up and said quietly, ‘Sorry Swangy, but I think you knew that was coming.’ Her tutu tickled at his fingers and he curled them away. A few people began to boo them for having a private conversation. Browsie spun around and shut them up with a look. She backed away and indicated for Smyth to resume.

‘Can I cover events that happened earlier, before the chase, if they have bearing on the chase, and occurred downstairs in front of witnesses?’ Though he was talking to Axcel, Smyth was listening for the audience’s reaction. They were mostly silent, which was a good sign. He hadn’t completely lost them. Axcel first looked at Browsie then assented as if he were granting a favor. Smyth turned to the crowd.

‘Earlier in the evening in the Greenmailer mansion, before the chase, a young couple came down from upstairs complaining of an old lady peeping on them while they were, um, fooling around.’ There were some chuckles from out in the theater. ‘Is either of those people here today?’ The chuckles turned to murmuring as people glanced around but nobody stood up. ‘OK, how about anyone who remembers that couple coming down the stairs?’

‘Are you kidding?’ said Axcel, ‘I gave you some latitude but not to waste the day fishing for witnesses. We already have a full set right here on stage.’

‘*Your* witnesses. I didn’t have time to find mine.’

‘You had eight days.’

‘Give me a break. Look, there’s a bunch of hands raised. Let me just pick a couple of them.’

‘There’s two hands raised in the witness section. Just use them.’

Smyth looked over and saw a pair of girls sitting next to each other with their hands held high. They were like twins, with identical outfits and identical haircuts and identical, stiff-backed postures.

‘Just stick to the witness we already have,’ said Browsie. ‘You did have plenty of time to prepare.’

Smyth sighed to himself as he watched the hands in the crowd fall, like candles flickering out in the wind. He went over to the witnesses and asked the two about what they saw.

‘I remember them coming down,’ said the first. ‘The girl seemed really grossed out.’

‘Yeah, grossed out,’ said the other. Even their voices sounded identical.

‘It was right before they started setting all those fireworks off inside.’

‘Oh yeah,’ the other one said, mirroring a laugh at the memory.

‘But they didn’t say anything about a lady. Just somebody peeping on them. The way the girl was acting, I was sure they were talking about some creepy old dude.’

‘Yeah, yeah.’

‘But they could have been talking about an older woman,’ said Smyth.

‘Objection! He’s asking them to speculate on something they didn’t witness. They already said what they heard.’

‘Well,’ Smyth gestured to the audience, ‘maybe one of the others heard different. Maybe we should see what the consen—’

‘That’s enough!’ Browsie was pummeling the stage. The theater was turning rowdy and she was stomping with both feet alternating, her unmoving march sustained past the point when the people had finally settled down. At last she stopped and said curtly, ‘Smyth Cardian, I will not let you abuse this process! You are trying to warp and twist the rules rather than follow them. If you’re going to make a mockery of this and turn it into a sideshow, then I wonder why we’re here. What are you doing? Are you admitting guilt?’

Smyth looked at her, facial profile and hair’s multicolored perimeter luminous from some unseen stagelight. She turned towards him, away from the audience, her dark lips puckered tight, eyes glassy and unwavering. He hung his head.

‘Good. Now, do you have anything more about the scene for these witnesses?’

Smyth took a deep breath and attempted to relax. His stomach was a painful knot. After a moment he lifted his head and faced the crowd as he asked his question of the witnesses. ‘Does anyone remember an old woman in the Greenmailer mansion that night, or any night?’ He saw Benzi leaning back, his arms behind his head, with a broad smile on his face. Smyth didn’t even have to look over to know that not a single hand was raised. ‘Then I’m done.’

By the time they arrived to see Benzi, Smyth had begun to get concerned about the situation with the old woman. First there was Fweep and his whiny voice bantering across Smyth at silent Lost Bill about ‘what a day’ and how ‘Benzi don’t take no shit’ and ‘big guy ain’t so big now,’ rambling on until Duxvan told him to shaddup. Then it was the particular excitement of the crowd forming around them as they approached the *Pet ‘n’ Play*, held at bay by Duxvan’s entourage. As they headed into the store, Smyth heard somebody call out: ‘Killer!’

The aisles of the store were already packed with gang members so Duxvan and crew contracted around Smyth and they pushed in like a cell joining its organ, as if they were merely an indistinguishable part of the same, as if their encasing membrane would render their towering nucleus inconspicuous to the surrounding tissue. Smyth could only see stares as they squeezed past, uncomfortable looks of those gawking at the passage of a foreign body. He suddenly felt he wasn’t the one being protected, that he was part of an immune response escorting a germ to its dispatch. They made it to Benzi’s office and found him sitting at his desk, fingers steepled at his mouth, looking solemn. Duck was sitting at his side, legs crossed and arms crossed on them and her hand turned outward holding a long cigarette to her flat, puckering lips.

‘Hello stranger,’ said Benzi, ‘been hiding out?’

Smyth looked around uncomfortably at the mass of people piled into the room and out the uncloseable door. He didn’t see Vic.

‘What’s the matter, Schmitzy? You know we don’t do secrets around here.’

Thinking it a cue, feeling pressured, Smyth blurted out: ‘Listen, the bitch wouldn’t leave. She was—’

‘Whoah, easy now. Don’t impugn the memory of your victim.’

The interruption caught Smyth off guard. He stood speechless, trying to make sense of what Benzi said. All he managed to say was ‘Uh?’

‘You and I both know that Vic is not a girl. Just because he’s gone doesn’t mean you get to call him names. You ought to show a little more dignity.’

Benzi stared at him and Smyth stared back, stupidly. Then it clicked. If he didn’t care about the woman, maybe they didn’t know. This was about Vic, which meant—

‘Vic’s dead?’

‘Oh, so now you’re playing innocent? You disappear for days and suddenly show up and expect us to believe that? I thought you’d have more respect for yourself, and for the hooligang.’

Smyth tried to explain but Benzi wasn’t listening, just talking past Smyth to the crowd, telling him to save it for the trial. In no time he and they were walking to the theater, a parade of people leading and trailing. Benzi was up ahead, strutting tall, arms around Ma and Duck. Fweep was slithering behind him. Duxvan was next to Smyth looking excessively serious. Smyth was still reeling but nonetheless trying to work out a quick defense.

The idea was simple, like a wedge. Start out small in the opening remarks, barely hinting at ideas and strategy, then slowly introduce information about Vic and the lady, and finally tie it all together at the end in a crescendo twist. What seemed like throwaway or confused statements at the start would by the close be seen as part of a larger plan, a strategic arc which would appear brilliant largely because of its unexpectedly satisfying conclusion. Ordered structure from chaos, a hidden design laid bare with the truth. By finishing with a climax, Smyth could win the consensus by leaving the people with little choice but to agree with him, lest they undermine the fulfillment of the story.

It was a good plan, one which had found success before, most notably when Ma Tari won a claim-steal case by not only proving that she had no need for the claim, but furthermore that her accuser had stolen it himself and as a result deserved the punishment. That had brought her to the attention of Benzi and overnight she went from a nobody to one of the boss’ closest, although many quickly forgot it was her intellect which earned her that position and instead thought of her as an opportunistic bimbo whose only attributes were a good body and fawning boyishness. Smyth remembered, though. And Smyth knew it was his best shot. Only now he felt he had flubbed everything. There would be no build up, he would just drop bombs at the end. Rather than a narrative twist, he’d give the people a non sequitur. He should have mentioned everything in his opening. He should have planned for the possibility that nobody would remember the woman. As far as the trial was concerned, she never existed.

But she *was* real, Smyth had seen her twice. Who knew why she only showed up that day — likely just a one-time stop at the old homestead before

realizing it had been occupied by the gang. The reason didn't matter, though, she was no better than a ghost now.

It didn't help that the little shit was one of Benzi's favorites. Benzi was always a sucker for a stooge, and Vic sucked up to him with a shamelessness that Smyth could never stoop to. So this was surely personal with the boss, or at least he was playing that aspect up. Smyth wished he had a way to get Benzi to testify for his side. Maybe he could convince Browsie to let him be called as a witness, to testify that he'd mentioned the old woman before he knew about the trial — though Axcel would probably just claim Smyth was building an elaborate ruse. Plus, he had to be careful about how much he said, or they might try to pin her death on him. Although bailing out of the window should only been punished by some one-time pain, Axcel might argue he'd caused her removal and that would be much worse. Killing within the hooligang was severely punished but removing an outsider was grounds for permanent exile.

As they had approached the theater-turned-courthouse, such complications were far from Smyth's mind. He had actually been feeling pretty confident. Once he laid out the truth, it would blow everyone's mind, especially Benzi, who would finally understand what kind of despicable cheat Vic actually was. Benzi had stopped under the marquee and was facing Smyth, watching him with a smirk as he was led past the ticket booth and crowd-selecting bouncers and through the entrance doors. The theater was actually a replica of *The Eternity* from the old part of town, a historic movie palace whose glory days had long since passed. The original plan was to disassemble the aged structure and move it in toto for reconstruction inside the Cyclomall. However, concerns about cost and indoor disproportionality, not to mention that early attempts to part out the old building more often than not resulted in unsalvageable disintegration, led to a replica, shrunk-down facade being created which featured vacuum-formed plastic imitations of exterior detailing, a central (decorative) ticket booth pillar, a wall of glass entrance doors (half non-functional except as poster displays), geometric neon (replacing the original's distracting bulbwork), and an updated pastel color scheme. Within, some chrome accents, a real stage, fake balconies, and filigreed restroom signs continued the period look, while everything else — from the seats to concessions to sound system to arcade video games to toilets — was installed to modern expectations.

This history was presented, along with a few old-new photograph comparisons, inside of a framed case hung up in a corner of the lobby. However Smyth didn't have time to look at this as he was pushed through the crowd by Lost Bill and Duxvan. The snack bar was running at full tilt but his escorts had no interest in pausing to let him grab something, and soon they were in the auditorium, passing rows of battered seats, peeling their feet from the

sticky floor, grabbing the hushed attention of those who had already claimed their places for the show. Smyth could sense that those present were not on his side, though he felt little concern since his defense was sure to change their minds. His apprehension about the trial was turning to anticipation. In the week that he'd been away, Smyth had been worried about Vic turning Benzi and everyone else against him (and it looked like he almost had) but now it was Smyth's chance to take out the faker — there was no way he was actually gone though when this day was over he might as well be.

The trial was going better than Smyth expected. It turned out that Bullet had been outside of the house and was the only witness to his fight with Vic. Bullet testified to seeing them wrestling around, that the knife got knocked away and then Smyth punched Vic a couple times. At that point people started streaming out of the house because of the fire and someone grabbed Bullet's chair and wheeled him away. Axcel used this testimony as proof that Smyth had beaten on an unarmed man. What neither he nor anybody knew (or would know) was that the knife did not get knocked away — Bullet must have imagined that because he didn't see it in Vic's hand anymore. The truth was that Smyth had wrangled it from him, knocked him in the head a couple times with the handle, then gave him a good gut slice into the liver. At worse a bleeder wound, something from which Vic would pass out before dying. However, despite Axcel's angle, the no-weapon story was even better. Smyth wouldn't have to make a medical argument, and Bullet became a witness for the defense:

'Did you ask anybody to help Vic?'

'Well, I was caught up with getting away from the house, making sure my drunk savior didn't tip me or wheel me off a curb. I figured somebody else would see Vic and help him.'

'But what if nobody did? You weren't worried about leaving a man in that state?'

'I mean, it didn't seem like much of a beating. You're a big guy but a couple of punches? I've seen badder fights plenty of times.'

'Not exactly a deadly attack...'

At which point Axcel objected that Bullet wasn't a medical expert. The questioning went around a bit more however Smyth's point was made.

And then there was the subject of Vic being removed. There were a number of witnesses — supposed friends, people who knew him by face, even a sniveling 'girlfriend' with a giant forehead — all who claimed that Vic had not been seen since that night. Under counter, though, none of them knew where he woke up which raised the possibility that he could be hiding, just as Smyth had been. This sent groans through the crowd although they might have been reacting to highbrow whining unsympathetically about how Vic

‘wouldn’t just *leave me...*’ Smyth was even able to get in a remark planting a seed for what was to come: ‘I wonder how extensively you all have actually checked. For all we know, Vic wakes up every day in the Greenmailer mansion. Has anyone looked there?’

It was time for closing remarks. As Axcel started, Smyth was focused on putting together his final story. He’d been supplied with a small notebook and a pen, and was furiously sorting out what had been testified, the points he wanted to make, how they should be ordered, the beats to lead everyone through...

The crowd was getting excited. Smyth looked up to see what Axcel was saying. He looked like an eagle, strutting back and forth across the stage with his slicked hair, intense and unblinking eyes, sudden head jerks. His arms moved around in dramatic swoops while he squawked out a speech that was causing a commotion, the coop cackling in agitation.

‘...were running out of the burning mansion, everyone assumed that Vic was just another drunk, passed out face down, nothing to worry about. When in fact we now know that he was mortally wounded, beaten past the edge of life while unarmed, while no longer a threat, by a strong, angry, giant of a man. Someone nearly twice the size of Vic, a beast who stalked a young man just barely out of boyhood, stalked him through multiple rooms, out into a yard where he thought nobody would see him pound the life out of his defenseless prey. Vic was *killed*. Smyth Cardian killed Vic.

‘Yet we must not forget that are all to blame. Because not one of us thought to help Vic. Because we were too busy having a good time, shooting off fireworks, drinking, laughing, ignoring the little guy running for his life. How many times could we have stepped in? How many of us could have followed them out onto the lawn? Who among us stepped over a dying member of the gang? Who among us wouldn’t have done just the same?’

‘Except, although we all may be blameworthy, we are not all guilty. We may have failed to rise up to our expectations, but only one man is responsible for us being placed into this awful predicament. Only one man deliberately chose to break our rules. Only one man actually removed a life. The life of one of us. We cannot let this pass. We must have accountability. Vic is you. Vic is us...’

It was deafening in the theater. Smyth could barely hear Axcel through the audience’s cheering and stomping. He tried to get back to his plan but it was impossible to concentrate with the clamor and Axcel booming his voice above it. He was going on about Smyth hiding for over a week, mocking his phantom lady, warning against his distractions. Smyth’s confidence was evaporating. He stared at his notes, bewildered, insecure. Axcel came up next to him, exaggerated, thundering, pointing an accusatory finger.

‘We’ve all accepted our blame. Our conscience is our penance. Smyth Cardian has not accepted his. He must pay for his crime. Call on him to take his punishment. His guilt must not be ignored. Call on him! For the hooligang! For us! For Vic!’

The crowd was going crazy. Axcel stood there waiting, staring at Smyth. Sweat was beading off his nose. Smyth stood up and walked around him, pretending to ignore his following gaze. He took a spot at the center of the stage and looked at his notes. His plan didn’t matter. He would just tell them. Tell them about the woman, how she was Vic’s mother. And about the mansion. About what a slimy liar Vic was and how he was surely still alive. Not enough punches to kill and thrown in response to an immanent threat. Vic the liar just trying to get back at him and don’t forget about the house and *Rule 1: We are stronger together, among our kind.*

‘Vic wasn’t one of our kind,’ Smyth began, ‘we are stronger together.’

But the crowd was louder, was hearing nothing. A few had rushed forward into the pit, shaking their fists, slapping the stagefront. Browsie was banging on the floor but with almost no conviction. Benzi was standing in a corner having a discussion with Quber. Smyth tried to start again but couldn’t even hear his own voice. He turned around and kicked his chair across the stage, almost hitting one of the twins. Browsie sidled over to him and put a hand on his shoulder, speaking loudly, directly into his ear.

‘Sorry Swangy. You know how it goes. *The rules are enforced by consensus...*’

‘*...In the case of disputes, majority wins and all differences are set aside by the new day...*’

Quber was standing in the middle of the stage, performing the traditional reading of the rules as part of the final sentence. Smyth watched him from the side, numb, ears ringing. He looked out into the theater. It was more than half empty, a majority of his condemnors having no stomach for the conclusion or eager to get on with the celebration. Benzi leaned over and nudged his arm.

‘Tomorrow, this’ll all be bygones,’ the boss said quietly.

‘Fuck you, I’m not coming back.’

‘*...Rule 4: Killing is justified in two instances: a) When the victim threatens deadly harm. b) When the victim has killed another...*’

‘Don’t be so dramatic. You’ve returned before.’

‘*...only as necessary to preserve the hooligang...*’

‘Yeah, that’s what they tell me.’

‘It’s true, I saw it. And all this? It’s not your time to go. You were brought back once for a reason. Your purpose is still ahead of you.’

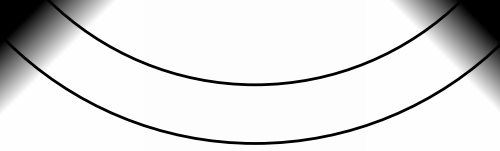
‘*...secret. Lies, plots, hidden agendas, etc. have no place here...*’

'I'm not coming back. Even if I do, you'll never see me again. I'm gone.'
Benzi nodded placidly, picked something off of his sleeve. Said nothing.
'...*Rule 9: Party.*'

A cheer went up in the diminished crowd. Smyth gnashed his teeth and turned away from them, towards Browsie. She was standing on the other side of Quber, looking down at a wooden box with an open hinged lid that she was holding in her hands. There was an irregular reflection on her face coming from inside of it, a scratch of bright against her white skin. After much heated wrangling it had been determined that a fair executioner could not be selected from the volunteers, and Browsie was chosen as the default neutral party. It wasn't fair, given their past, but she had no choice. She stared into the box, head lowered, motionless, a firework paused in mid-burst. Smyth looked away, sorry for her, sorry that this was their last time together.

Benzi patted him on the back. 'See you tomorrow, Schmitzy,' he said, then he and Axcel and Quber walked past him and off the stage, joining the crowd, a sea of impatient stares, leaving Smyth alone with the judge.

strike



...*stupid*
communism...

The newscaster had overblushed cheeks and eyeshadow that looked like fake twilight and a mane of electrostatic frizz. She was stumbling over her words but spoke with a glistening smile and was wearing a blouse pulled taut by her big tits. So Forsbin lowered his gaze such that it stopped at her mouth and tried not to listen too hard to what she was saying. Fain was talking to him while she worked on his hair and he let his focus slip between the two voices: a halting squeak that faltered out talking points they'd settled on yesterday and the singsong drawl near his ear, going over the schedule.

'...fortieth str— *fourteenth* straight day without a nuke...' '...route's been changed because the crowd's even bigger than...' '...President Wimple declared adabadaya celebration...' '...next stop a vehicle is being outfitted with bullet-proof panels...' '...parades across the country...' '...mobile, but here here you'll be riding in a typical...' '...President himself plans to at— be at— *attend* more pa— *multiple*...' '...gawd this girl is awful, so much for wordcrafting, can we change the channel?'

'Hey Hubba,' said Forsbin, 'can you turn off the volume?'

The man sitting by the door stood up. He was huge, his musculature bulging beneath a plain, dark suit. Without expression he walked over to the television and twisted the tiny knob between his thick fingers. The sound dwindled away but Hubba remained, watching the screen for a few seconds before turning to give an approving look. Forsbin nodded back but Hubba caught Fain's eye and his face settled back to a blank and he returned to his seat.

Fain came around between Forsbin and the TV, talking all the while. He leaned to the side and she shifted, keeping herself directly in front of him. She picked at his part and then leaned over to get a head-on look. The neck of her sweater opened and gave him a direct view of her boob crease. He

straightened slightly to see more, moved his hand up to touch the dip where her bra was restraining them from hanging free. Fain swatted him away before he got a feel.

‘You need to behave yourself,’ she said, standing up, pressing her sweater against her neck. Forsbin looked around her but the cute girl had been replaced by some kid in a too-big sports coat who looked like he had just swallowed a jawbreaker. ‘Did you even hear what I just said?’

‘Sure, sure. We’re in a limo here but don’t have enough time so we’ll swap cars so we can make the plane.’

‘And...?’

Forsbin stared at her. Her hands were on her hips and she tapped her fingers expectantly. Most women generated a devious attraction when they got angry but Fain had a nunlike quality that made her brutish. He reached down and picked up the burger from the plate at his feet and took a large bite. Not bothering to close his mouth while he chewed, he looked back at her and shrugged his shoulders.

‘And we’re having Evie play you for the second half of the parade.’

‘She’s just a girl!’ That was what Forsbin said, though it sounded more like ‘Eesbusdorool!’ He grabbed his drink to wash things down.

‘At most they’ll only see a hand waving because the window will be barely down. It’s freezing so everyone will understand. Of the people we can trust and leave behind Spud was the closest choice. I mean, we couldn’t use Clyde — with the size of his mitts no one would buy that.’

Forsbin stared at her, detected a little turn at the corner of her mouth. ‘Ha ha, very funny,’ he said.

‘It’s no joke. And you need to thank Spud when you see her. While we’re out having a good time city-hopping she’ll be stuck here for the rest of the day.’

Forsbin was looking down at his hands. He flipped them over, licked a smear of mustard from his thumb. ‘These don’t look anything like a woman. Anyway, I got it where it counts, know what I mean?’

Fain sighed and flattened his shirt against the vest underneath.

‘What? You need proof?’ He lightly pulled at her collar with his finger. ‘I’d love to show you.’

Fain stood back, hands held palms-out against her body. ‘What are you doing? Do I need to send you to the little boy’s room to take care of yourself? Hubba — didn’t you get someone to take care of him this morning?’

‘Oh, yes ma’am,’ boomed a deep voice.

‘I told you,’ Forsbin said, holding his hands out for her to see, ‘I’m a *man*. Besides, this is a big day, a great day, a special day. I feel good. Insatiable.’

‘I just, at least for today, I just need you to just show a little restraint. This is a legacy defining moment. You’ve already accomplished something

incredible. You ended war, *nuclear* war, maybe forever. Who knows how many lives you've saved. Thousands, millions. People are out there, filling the streets, waiting to see their president, the man who brought peace to the world. Because of you, we can finally start to live again.' She paused, blinking back tears. 'A wonderful time has already begun. We actually have a reason to look forward, to care. We're finally remembering again. Don't do something we'd rather forget. Especially not today.'

Forsbin looked down contritely and nodded. Then he picked up the end of his tie.

'Do you think the red with the blue stripes would be better?'

She took the tie from him and straightened it out at his waist. 'This one is perfect,' she said. He resisted the urge to press her hand into his lap. She went over and turned off the television. The cute girl was back and she collapsed into a glowing dot that quickly faded into the blank gray of the tube. Next to the TV, Fain opened a map on the dresser. 'I want you two to come look at the route so you understand what is going to happen.'

Forsbin stuffed the rest of the burger into his mouth then went over to the ice chest and lifted out a six-pack. He pulled off a beer and offered it to Hubba who declined with a warning nod toward Fain's back. Forsbin waved him off and opened the can and took a drink, swallowing it with the last remnants of food. When he lowered his head he saw that Fain was looking at his hand reproachfully. He ignored her and strutted over.

'So, what's the plan, Ms. Dayupth?'

Fain's mouth tightened but said nothing. She turned to the dresser and pointed to where the hotel was. Moving her finger over the map, she described what streets they would take, how the car's flags would be switched so they wouldn't have to get out, where they would leave for the airport. While she was talking Forsbin leaned back and motioned for Hubba to hold up his hand. Forsbin reached behind Fain and pressed his hand against the other's, twisting over to get a closer look, incredulous that his fingertips barely extended past the big man's palm.

They were following a big loop around a few city blocks, a holding pattern while they waited for a spot in the parade to open up. Things were running behind, due primarily to a bottleneck at the start caused by a disagreement between a high school marching band and a corps of lifted 4x4s over who would lead the procession. It had rapidly devolved into a volume contest, blaring brass and squealing woodwinds and rolling drums on one side versus air horns and engines revved to the red-line on the other. At one point the trucks tried to dominate their diminutive foes by flooding them with high-beams and off-road lights, only to be met with polished instruments and cymbals and uniform flair quickly coordinated to direct their reflections onto

the corps' standard, which was stretched between the two tallest vehicles and quickly began to brown and smoke from the focused heat of the musician's dazzle. A compromise soon followed, acceded to by the truckers while they were distracted by their smoldering flag, wherein the band would take the lead but every third block or so step aside to let the monster trucks move forward and perform their routine, a motorized interpretive dance that told an abbreviated history of the war through gas and brake and steering, synchronized to a rendition of the national anthem formed of glasspacked growls of exhaust. It began with chaos and horror then moved to a phase of retaliation followed by impasse and refuge and then finally a revelation, where the simple, bold idea of no longer fighting forced the enemy to reckon with the morality of their actions, leading to the doctrines of Intransmutability Forever and Mutually Accepted Disregard. This last stage was illustrated by the entire corps popping wheelies in a big circle and drawing inward to rest their raised tires on the bed in front, a spinning, reciprocated mounting that might have represented an atom or solidarity or maybe was just a flamboyant expression of exuberance via a totally radical trick.

Because of the delay, the president's motorcade could no longer take a position in the rear of the parade and still hope to make the next city on time. They would need to be slotted into the middle, and the motorcade's circuiting was necessary while a large enough gap was separated for them to fit into. Fain was up at the limo's partition, speaking into a walkie talkie and coordinating with the driver and navigator. Forsbin was in the rear seat, flanked by Hubba and another agent named Grace, a petite thing whose hair was pulled back tight from a face which had an attitude of utter indifference. Hubba was taking more than his share of the space but when Forsbin tried to scoot over towards Grace he was met with an unyielding elbow. He looked at it and then at her. She had smooth skin and an attractive profile. Her outfit masked any shape, yet he could imagine secret curves bound snugly under the sweater and pants. The bun at the back of her head seemed almost solid, as if the hairs had fused together to form a burl. He reached out and pressed his finger into it and a hand whipped up and snatched his wrist and threw it back at him.

'Ouch!'

'Hands to yourself.' She was staring at him with a frightful impassiveness. She had awfully pretty eyes though.

He moved his fingers into her armpit, twitching a tickle. 'You know, you should try smi—'

She grabbed his hand and squeezed. Forsbin let out an involuntary whine. 'Don't touch, Mr. President. I'm not a doll.'

He tried to pull away but she had him at an odd angle and her grip was like pliers. 'OK, OK,' he said, 'turn it loose!'

She released him and faced forward, her expression barren again. He stared at her in shock then turned to Hubba who gave him an admonitory look.

‘Better listen to her,’ he said, ‘she’ll chew you up.’

Rubbing his wrist, Forsbin leaned to see out of the window except Hubba’s body blocked most of the view. So he turned back to the opposite side, looking past Grace, careful to ignore her as much as she was him, watching the buildings roll by, buildings which all looked the same and not only because they had already been by here before. This was one of the zero grounds for the strikes and he reckoned that much of this brick and glass that seemed so stable and ordered had littered these streets many times over. People vaporized and ripped apart. Burned, tortured, disfigured, left in agony. Men and women, children. Indiscriminate suffering. Again and again and again. Did Grace fully comprehend what had occurred, what he had ended? She wouldn’t treat him like this if she did. Forsbin eyed her surreptitiously. Perhaps she had not seen the horrors that had occurred. It was possible that, like so many, her memories of the war were mere instants of cognizance. She should consider what she had missed, even if it was worse than she could imagine. He would like to talk with her, explain the past, the magnitude of what he had achieved. But she was in an intractable mood right now, he could tell. Maybe on the plane or later that evening.

He sat back and opened a beer from the cooler. Fain shot him a glance and silently shook her head and he looked off someplace else. Hubba’s leg was pressed into his and on the other side Grace’s hovered nearby, not quite touching. His gaze traced along her thigh to her hip and he thought he could see the faint outline of her panties. He had an urge to put his hand on her knee but placed it on his own instead. Her attitude was all wrong, especially for this day. If he couldn’t get her to ease up, to show a little respect for how he needed to feel, he was going to have to ask for her to be replaced. An ice bitch like her might be a good fit for the code protection team. They got up first thing every morning to secure and destroy the two remaining sets of launch codes, as well as confirm Aalex’s were gone. They needed people whose life was their duty. Couldn’t be military either, since they controlled the weapons. Yes, she could be perfect. He’d still have a go at her later, but was already starting to feel like he’d hit on an arrangement that would be more satisfactory for everyone. He took a drink, held out his hand as close to her as he dared, comparing it to the one that was resting on her crossed arm. His was definitely bigger than hers.

How had she landed this assignment, anyway? Even putting aside unfair comparisons with Hubba, she was not very big. Intimidating, perhaps, but what good was an iron pussy in a fight? Not to mention this was a prestige position and she acted like she’d rather be someplace else. Forsbin didn’t

even recognize her, though this was admittedly only his fourth full day without protection since the beginning of the war, and first in a week. Perhaps he had known her, perhaps he had *had* her. Maybe she remembered something he didn't. Memory had become a strange thing — uneven, incomplete, compressed in some places and stretched to great distances in others. And useful.

Take the code protectors, for instance. They were trained after their zero hour, which meant they remembered their mission, but they carried it out before their zero hour, which meant that even if they inadvertently looked at the launch codes, in a few minutes they would be gone. The secrets and all the consequences they contained had been neutralized. However, even after the code protectors had been established, there were still a few memorants with Mercan's codes that the remaining members of the V.P.'s faction were using to sustain the preemptive strikes. Forsbin had been told that some of his greatest work had been organizing the removal of these straggling jingos, and after they were gone so too, finally, was the country's ability to launch a nuke. Of course, some of the remaining officials were upset and claimed that he had invited the nation's annihilation, but they were dealt with by seeding some of the few remaining memorants with the notion that those opposed had actually agreed to the plan. Everyone was under protection, so denials were rooted in faith instead of knowledge, and the ensuing confusion gave Forsbin's government the space it needed to avoid a plot against itself. Besides, the codes were gone — there was nothing that could be done. And although there was a period where the other side continued to strike, eventually, just as Forsbin had been told he had predicted, they also ceased. It had all become pointless, nobody leaving themselves exposed for removal, everything destroyed mended upon the next awakening, accomplishing nothing except wasted time and misery. The two sides no longer mattered to one another, and the correct, most beneficial course of action was to just ignore each other's existence.

This was less feasible for those allies that did not have the advantage of a separating ocean, and while they would not disarm themselves the *détente* seemed to be holding with them as well (or so he'd been told). The forward deployed warheads were now effectively useless, but this could be ensured using one-point safety to create truly broken arrows, lumps of hot metal for which there was not enough time to return them to their menacing forms. If necessary, Forsbin would order the surrender of the military installations under his command. Basically, if anything happened over there, there was little reason to bring a fight here and even less to sustain it for multiple days. And even in the worst case, the country could just sleep it off.

Thinking through how well the plan had worked was making Forsbin antsy to celebrate. He drained his beer, crushed the can and tossed it to the

floor, looked at Hubba then Grace then out the windows then finally at Fain. He was about to ask her how much longer it would be when the walkie talkie crackled and a staticky voice said something he couldn't understand. She excitedly gestured to the driver then turned to the back.

'All set? We're heading in.'

Forsbin rubbed his hands together and reached for the cooler but Fain quickly stooped across and pushed him back. He didn't complain, though, rather enjoying the sight of her kneeling between his legs as she made sure his lapels were straight with a few gentle tugs.

They were moving down the street at a measured pace, driving past crowds a dozen or more deep on each side, people crammed together waving, cheering, crying, clapping their gloved hands. From the limo the scene was a multicolored scramble of winter gear and pink faces and waving flags and the occasional sign bobbing or arcing above everyone. Most of these were unreadable due to diminutive lettering or their ceaseless motion, however a few were clear enough even at a glance: a peace sign, bomb overlaid with a red circle-slash symbol, the president's name written out with the beginnings bolded and *the* added to create the phrase **FOR THE WIN**, a clock whose hands hung down loosely at 6:30, **FREEDOM** and **FOREVER** intersected to form a giant cross.

Forsbin had the windows open on both sides and would spend a few moments at one, waving and smiling, before sliding over to give attention to the other. The sound inside the car was deafening, a joyous roar that bore into him and left him giddy and inspired. Walking along outside were a number of agents, dressed in identical dark clothes, scanning the throng cautiously, seemingly immune to bliss. Grace and Hubba were on their opposite sides of the car, similarly looking around but also occasionally reaching out to touch the vehicle or turning to check on Forsbin. He stuck his head through the window and reached out towards the crowd, nodded at Hubba, then rushed across to Grace's side to do the same. The next car up ahead was the one with Evie, and he could see a tiny glove extended up out of the side of the door, moving and twisting slowly. He pulled back inside and waved for Fain's attention.

'Why is Evie waving right now?'

Huh? mouthed Fain, pointing to her ears. Forsbin closed the windows.

'Evie's up there waving.'

Fain looked through the front and turned back.

'So?'

'She's giving away the secret! How can we trade if they see she's not me?'

'Nobody will notice. The crowd here is completely different from the crowd later.'

‘But what if— She’s distracting everyone. *I’m* the one they’re here to see.’

‘Then roll down those windows and give them what they want, unless you’d rather her take over for the entire parade.’

Forsbin started to say something but just slumped back in his seat. Even though the windows had been open it was warm inside and with all of his moving back and forth he’d started to sweat. He shrugged off his coat and kicked off his shoes, billowed his shirt and waved his feet. Almost immediately Fain’s face bunched up in disgust.

‘Oh, pugh!’

She said something else but he couldn’t hear because the window was opening. He waved for a few seconds then looked back and saw Fain looking down at her notebook, a hand clamped over her nose. Forsbin picked up a shoe and sniffed it, recoiling at the odor. He put the shoes back on and went back to the window. This section had a wooden barrier and the people were pushed up against it, leaning over, calling out to him, laughing. Something flew up into the air and Hubba blocked the window briefly before backing away, showing a cloud of confetti flittering out over the crowd, a festive shower formed of elusive elements which seemed to hold no individual presence.

As they continued, Forsbin moved his gaze forward across the people, attempting to make eye contact with as many as he could, smiling with them, feeling their adulation. He paused at a young woman with a glowing face and stunning eyes who seemed to be having the time of her life. He followed her as she moved past, checking out her tight jacket and tight jeans and high-heeled boots then back up to her face just in time to catch her blowing him a kiss. She tilted her head back in elation and he was about to ask Hubba to go bring her over when she disappeared, seemingly absorbed by the surrounding mob.

Forsbin slid over to the other side and lowered the glass. As he began to give his attention the car slowed to a halt. He looked up at Grace who had a hand held to her ear. She leaned forward and spoke loudly.

‘Stall up ahead. We’ll be moving shortly. Close one of these windows while we’re waiting.’

He moved across and raised the other window. Before returning he opened a beer and took a swig and put it back into the cooler. When he reappeared at the window a cheer went up and he stuck both arms out and waved to everyone. Suddenly, Grace and the other agents began to converge towards the rear and through them Forsbin saw a sparkling blur of red and blue cartwheeling up the street. One of the agents stepped forward and intercepted it and a spinning propeller detached and skitted over the ground before rolling to a looping stop near the limo. Forsbin looked back and saw a small girl in a long-armed bathing suit being ordered back by the agent.

Her hair was pulled into two ponytails and the skin-tight suit showed the gentle curves of a budding woman. She was pointing towards her baton and holding up her other hand to block the approaching agents. Grace had come back and picked up the baton when Forsbin flagged her down and had her give it to him. He wanted to see the girl and Grace resisted but eventually relented and, after a short discussion with the other agents, returned with the kid in tow. Forsbin stuck his head out of the window and held up the baton. The girl looked at it sheepishly and then at him and her hands went up to her face in shock.

‘No way,’ she said.

‘I think you lost something,’ said Forsbin.

‘I was doing my routine and didn’t realize that they’d stopped and— Oh my god. Did it hit you? I am so sorry.’

Forsbin laughed and told her no and reached the baton out. When she grabbed it he held onto it and resisted, pulling lightly, taking a chance to get a closer look. Beneath her way-too-much makeup he could see a real cutie, face soft and bubbly with youth, hair glittering and tied with ribbons, eyes wide with free spirit. Her fingernails were painted in alternating colors, red, blue, white. Her hand was shaking.

‘You alright?’ he asked.

‘S-sure. Just a little cold.’

‘Why don’t you come in here and warm up for a sec?’

‘Oh I couldn’t.’

Grace began to speak and stepped between the girl and Forsbin but he waved her off. She didn’t say anything but wouldn’t move, just watched him like a piece of cold steel. He tugged at the baton.

‘Come on, it’s warm in here. Just until we start moving.’

The girl peeked around Grace and he opened the door. He let go of the baton and started to back away to give her space but before he had barely moved she hopped in and across him, her rear end sliding across his lap over to the other side of the seat.

‘Wow, it’s nice in here.’

Forsbin closed the door and the window. Grace’s stare became a brownish shadow behind the tinted glass.

‘Who do we have here?’ said Fain.

‘I’m Cryst. He said— I mean, the P— You are the *President*, right?’

‘He is, darling. You can call him President *Wimple*. Sworn in a few weeks ago, but you probably weren’t paying attention.’

‘Oh no, we watched it. My dad said it was a lesson in—’

Forsbin put his hand on Cryst’s shoulder. She turned and gawked at him. He had removed his glove and through the sequins she felt cool and lithe.

‘It’s alright,’ he said, eyeing Fain, ‘you don’t have to prove anything. You’re here on my invitation. You can call me Forsbin, by the way.’

‘OK, cool.’ Cryst smiled and shook her head. ‘I like, can’t believe I’m sitting right here, right now next to you. Narpas is gonna freak out.’

‘Narpas?’

‘She’s the other twirler. She’s back there probably wondering where I am right now. She taught me everything I know. She’s way better than me, but it’s easier for her since she’s been doing it since before the—’ Cryst spun her finger in a circle and tilted her head side to side. ‘My dad calls that remnants. I think that’s just a mean term for skill.’ Suddenly she scrunched up her nose and started sniffing the air indeterminately. ‘Mmmmm. Is that cheese? Do you have snacks in here?’ She glanced around hopefully. ‘I love stinky cheese. *Love* it. My friends think I’m crazy. They say it smells like a locker room but I think it tastes great. Less filling than some greasy burger, too. I don’t know how they can stand to eat flesh. Grosses me out. All that blood dripping everywhere. Cheese makes me feel like I’m getting close to nature, like a reward for eating something that didn’t have to be slaughtered.

‘So where is it?’

‘Actually, we don’t have any food.’

‘Hrm, bummer.’ She put her head back and smelled again. ‘I would’ve sworn you had some in here.’

Forsbin looked at her neck, followed her perfect skin as it spread into her chest, down to where her outfit swooped a low arc between the two small mounds of her breasts. His gaze continued downwards across her suit as he leaned forward to reach into the cooler, down her flat belly and between her legs where a shimmering blue line narrowed and disappeared beneath her. He searched around blindly and just when he felt something he noticed, near where her thighs met, almost hidden in the shadows, coiling out from beneath the glittering seam, a single, thin hair. He hesitated for a moment before he raised himself up, pulling out a set of plastic rings from which a single beer dangled.

‘No, but if you want something to drink...’ He pulled off the can and offered it to her.

‘Forsbin!’ cried Fain.

‘Oh, it’s OK,’ said Cryst, taking the rings instead. ‘My parents sometimes let me taste theirs. I can’t stand it.’ While she spoke she mindlessly pulled at the plastic, one-by-one stretching the loops until they snapped.

Forsbin shrugged and put the beer back, swapping it for the one he had already opened, stealing another glance between her legs. He took a drink and just then the car jerked and they started moving forward again. Cryst tossed the broken rings into the cooler.

‘I better get back,’ she said, ‘they’re probably starting to worry. Thanks for letting me warm up, Presid—, Forsbin.’

‘It was our pleasure,’ he said, tapping and squeezing her knee.

Cryst giggled and looked at him apprehensively, like she wanted to ask him something. Then she quickly stretched herself up and gave him a hard kiss on the cheek.

‘I don’t care what my parents say, me and my friends think you’re the greatest. You saved the world.’ She bit her lower lip and looked away and then back at him. ‘I know you won’t, but I’m going to remember this forever.’

‘What makes you think I wouldn’t?’

‘Dad says you wouldn’t come out unless you were forgetting. He says you’re a coward but I understand — we’re the ones who need to remember.’ Forsbin and Fain exchanged looks. ‘Besides, you’ve already been brave enough for a lifetime.’

‘I guess I’d better go.’

She picked up her baton and Forsbin had the driver stop the car. He was about to open his door when Cryst stopped him.

‘Can I go out this side? That lady out there scares me.’

Forsbin laughed and nodded and Cryst got out, nearly falling back inside due to what at first seemed to be the pressure of the crowd noise and cold but turned out to be her surprise at Hubba looming over her. He helped her climb out and the door closed and then immediately opened again and the girl’s head popped back inside.

‘Hey, do you want to meet Narpas?’ she yelled. ‘It’d totally blow her mind.’

Forsbin looked at her big eyes and adorable, reddened cheeks. Why not? He grabbed his coat but before he could move to the door Fain had rushed over next to him. She pushed Cryst back and began speaking close to his ear in a firm tone.

‘What are you doing?’

‘What? She’s a nice kid. I’m just doing her and her friend a favor. And while I’m out I can give some close attention to my people.’

Fain licked her thumb and rubbed on his cheek.

‘Well, don’t forget that everyone can see you.’ She pulled at his tie, smoothed his hair, felt his vest, wiped his cheek again. Locked his gaze. He understood what she said more from her mouth than her voice: ‘Best behavior.’

‘Yes ma’am, Ms. Dayupth.’

Forsbin stepped over her and exited the car and the crowd exploded, making it impossible to hear anything. A little bit down the road, Cryst was being escorted away by another agent. She looked over her shoulder and waved. Forsbin walked after her, Hubba staying in stride between him and

the crowd. Forsbin raised a hand in a generic wave but kept his focus on Cryst who was moving faster, skipping with excitement, pulling away from the agent and beginning to twirl her baton. She did a small jump, spun around, made like she was going to throw the baton but instead held it up straight into the air, the other arm parked on her hip, one foot raised like a flamingo. Then she relaxed and took off in a sprint, running into the arms of another wearing an identical outfit. A glinting mass of blue and red bouncing up and down. As Forsbin continued towards it it separated, not evenly, a small figure pointing up the road at him, pulling away from a meatier reflection. Forsbin stopped and looked at what was standing next to Cryst. It was taller, bent, with curves that seemed to be devouring any sense of femininity. The hair was a tangled orb surrounding a face that, from this distance, appeared to form a protruding beak. It brought to mind a grotesquely shorn sheep, costumed by a child.

Forsbin took a step back, reached out for Hubba and pulled him close. He had to scream to be heard. He wasn't going back there, no way. The agent nodded and shuffled him away, across to the other side, back up towards the front of the limo. When Grace noticed them she scanned the area defensively, as if expecting a pursuer. Forsbin forced himself to not turn back, watched the crowd instead, waved, smiled, moved his mouth like he was speaking to them. The car was slowly rolling forward and he kept up with it, turning occasionally to acknowledge the far side of the street, glancing ahead to where Evie's hand was mechanically flapping. There was an incredible number of people out. Heads stretched high to see, children on shoulders, even more signs. The entire sidewalk was jammed and spilled deep into side streets, a horde pressing not in but out, spreading to fill the entire city. The noise had become as substantive and omnipresent as the freezing air, the continuous summation of innumerable euphorias, individuals become one within his head, all at once and neverending. It pervaded his thoughts. Pressure at the threshold of pain. It was exhilarating.

He found he could no longer concentrate on any one person. His focus overwhelmed, to see one was to see another. The scale was incomprehensible. No matter all those removed so many still remained. These were lives that could have been lost, had he not saved them. And this was only a tiny speck — there were countless more just like them in this city and others across the country, around the globe. It was too much, he felt proud and lost, a hero and insignificant. Forsbin waved and grinned and pointed at everyone and no one, began to tear up. He looked down the street and back, catching himself before chancing a glimpse of the wretched lamb. The people were endless. It was so loud. Could he be responsible? It seemed too immense for one man. He imagined a high wall, white and gleaming, blocking all of the crowd. They remained before him, surrounding him, yet

now he was protected from being subsumed, his distinction intact. The sound turned sourceless, an atmospheric quality that was almost lulling. He began to relax. His mind wandered. He thought about the other side of the world. Their day started at midday — convenient for protection, bad for memory. It was an tough draw, starting with so many hours wasted. Maybe it was destiny, was what they deserved. It was unclear how they had stopped the strikes. Or started them. Forsbin had had faith that they would halt, that they had to. He didn't need someone to remind him of this, he felt it now. When working with eternities, faith was the only thing which could endure.

A hole formed in the wall, just large enough for his eye, through which he could see a single face at a time. A young adult. A businessman. A housewife. A white-haired lady, grinning enigmatically. A small child, hands pressed over its ears. A grown man weeping. An astonished gaze. An exhalation of smoke or steam. Two eyes, aligned with his, sharing an instant of connection. A broad smile, lips moistened, cheeks blushed, lashes curled. A look held. He moved towards the side of the road, approached the woman. The hole widened, keeping her in focus. He sensed Hubba's presence, hovering protectively. He stepped through the wall, reached out, took her hand. His view was wide now, but still consisted of only her. She was bouncing, saying something he couldn't make out. He put a hand on her shoulder, quickly looked her up and down, returned to her eyes. There was a shadow at his side, Hubba nudging him along. He started moving but kept watching her, arms stretched to maintain contact, her mouth forming the same words over and over: *thank you thank you thank you...*

Forsbin walked along the crowd, reaching both hands out to those in the front and those farther back, disembodied gloves and mittens grasping and being grasped. Even if he could not see who they belonged to, the physical contact helped to create a reduction, limiting his perception in that moment to those he touched along with whomever he was looking at. The wall was behind him now, but this was the same. These people had been brought here by him, he was their savior, however to enjoy their praise and attention he needed to fathom it, bound it, make it tangible. And now, as he moved along, passing from one person to the next, everything else — the rest of the multitude, the persistent roar — became background noise to the inconstant few which held his triumph.

He came to a woman, her face bundled up into a furred parka hood. She looked tired and weathered, but beneath her worn features he detected a beauty that once was. A single tear rolled to her chin, yet she seemed relieved. She gestured and Forsbin looked down and saw a child in a stroller, bundled just like its mother, fast asleep despite the din. He bent down and ran his thumb along its cheek. It shifted and sighed but did not wake. When he stood he looked ahead and noticed Grace had taken a position in front of

him. He continued down the street: A pale redhead with big square teeth. A pudgy, underdressed, spasmodic lady. A nerdy guy with greasy hair and thick glasses who was too nervous to look up from the ground. A small kid pushing forward an even smaller kid. A scraggly punk with a solemn expression and a safety pin in her nose, fist extended in approval. A burly man, then another, then another, each leaning against the throng, forming a protective shell around a quavering senior who seemed almost unaware of Forsbin. A cross-street blocked by a bus, hands reaching out of the windows, someone leaning from the roof, the driver standing in the doorway wearing a crisp uniform and a bright smile. Two people holding a large, rectangular sign that said **PEACE**.

A squeal of feedback cut through the clamor. An amplified voice wavered in and out of intelligibility.

‘...cost...born...debt(depth? death?)...over...over...’

Hubba snatched a sign and threw it away, exposing a man with a megaphone, pointing vigorously at the sky. He looked directly at Forsbin.

‘How many died while we took our beating? How does it feel to kill your own—’

Hubba pushed into the crowd and took a swipe at the megaphone. The man flinched and cried out and without warning there was a swarm around Hubba, pulling him away. In the front, people moved away from the fracas. The pair with the sign were wrangling with it, unfolding something. A woman backed towards Forsbin. Grace seized her from behind and she spun around in fright. She was gorgeous. Her jacket had pulled open and he could see her chest swelling beneath a turtleneck. She struggled in confusion and Forsbin stepped over to calm her down. Grace tried to push him back but the girl slid across to him for protection, grasping onto his arm. Grace yanked at her but Forsbin signaled it was alright and just then someone rushed out from the sidewalk, right at them, and Grace let go and intercepted the aggressor with an impressive tackle, lifting him up and back and hard to the ground.

Forsbin and the girl backed away. She held him close, her hands slipping inside his coat, grabbing through his shirt the edge of the bulletproof vest. There was a voice in his ear. ‘...scared.’ Forsbin squeezed her hip, reached around the front of her thigh, pulled her tight. He looked out into the crowd. It seemed to have turned into signs.

**WE WILL NOT BE SACRIFICED
DEMAND BALANCE
RETALIATE
GO BACK 2 ATTACK
DEATH CAN'T BUY PEACE**

‘You gave up.’

Her cheek was pressed against his. He couldn’t turn to see her.

'You gave us up. We do not surrender.'

He tried to push her away. There was a pinch in his armpit that drove through to his chest.

'We can't forget.

He gasped and it felt like his heart tore. His legs buckled, he slid away from her, fumbling desperately for support. She was standing over him, yelling, pointing a bloody knife. He heard screaming from everywhere, from inside. She disappeared into a green cloud. He tried to breath but nothing happened except pain. His head rolled to the side and he saw, up the street, a black car and a waving black glove which suddenly became Grace, running at him then leaping over, giving a perfect view between her legs.

...watch the pantomime...

As they approached the school they saw the lot was packed so they parked in the bus loop and hopped out. Though Ligna vaguely remembered where she was going, they powerwalked towards their destination as much by ear as anything, winding through roofed walkways and down steps and across a quad past buildings that seemed amalgams of many generations' architectural styles (some post-Ligna's, some pre-, why did they never seem of?), camouflaged into uniformity with a drab, two-tone, high-contrast paint scheme that in the day's fading light accentuated the discordance like a chiaroscuro penetrating unexpected volumes. Coming up to the double doors the noise was already massive and when Colby opened one Ligna felt like she had to lean into the pressure wave that was released. Nobody noticed them except the few people hovering in front of the door and then only after vigorous shoulder taps. These were followed by ad-libbed sign language requests for passage which were grudgingly granted once the gatekeepers grasped from the gesticulations that they were being passed not displaced.

The cavernous gym was thick with smoke and sweat and voice, overheated despite the weather outside. The floor was filled with seats and all the seats were filled, the perimeter lined with those who came late or preferred to stand, mostly male, their backs against folded bleachers and pep rally signs dense with multicolored spirals, arms crossed and hands on hips and holding onto thick, knotted ropes which were likely still stained with their own sebum from decades-ago third-hour P.E. class. Everywhere cigarettes, hanging and twitching and shrinking in mouths in fingers in mouths. Many in the crowd were yelling and pointing, some with their neighbors but most at the stage where a balding, round man in a suit was having an animated and inaudible argument with somebody or somebodies in the first few rows.

Ligna followed Colby along the side up towards the front. When they got closer she could see that Biz, the guy on stage, was primarily interacting with one person, a tall, fit, square-jawed, well-coiffed, T-shirt-neatly-tucked-into-jeans, looks-young-enough-to-be-in-high-school-but-old-enough-to-dream-about boy-man who was leaning precariously between two overalled fellows who looked to be holding him back as much as offering support. She could still hear nothing of what was being said.

From below the stage someone stood and signaled and Colby pushed forward, past the jostling throng and up to a row of seats facing the crowd. He and the standing man shook hands and spoke cheek-to-cheek. Behind them Ligna saw Shairree, who waved tentatively. Colby turned back and talked directly into Ligna's ear.

'This is Mikey Deelt. He owns the plant.'

Deelt extended his hand and bent forward. His suit was too small and his arm stretched a third of the way out of his jacket.

'Emcee Deelt. You can call me emcee,' he yelled, making squiggles with his fingers.

'Ligna Bombyx.'

'Bombeck?'

'Bombyx. Ligna's fine.'

'Linda.' He smiled and nodded. One side of his face looked clear and crisp, the other rough and greasy. Ligna glanced up, wondering if there was something weird with the lighting, but when she looked back he had moved next to her and was pointing at the stage and putting his mouth to her ear.

'That's Bizmarx Pard. He's the union rep. Completely lost control of this meeting. The young fellow is Glintcise Legwarm. He works at the station. Legwarm and a few of the others are talking about walking no matter the threats — have you heard of the threats against the — OK, so you understand. Well Pard told them to stay organized and that if some of them do something rash it would ruin it for everybody. Said that for their safety they needed to keep negotiating. Legwarm accused him of collusion and said a strike had no power if it could never happen and Pard's response was that it was too soon but if that was necessary that's what they'd do. At that point all the non-employees lost it.'

'How many of these people actually work at the plant?'

'Station. Less than half.'

'I'm surprised they're not coming after you.'

'They have no idea who I am. I haven't been there in years. I got this cheap suit as a disguise. They probably think I'm the principal.'

Ligna pulled back and looked at him, wondering if this was some sort of test. She had never heard of this guy. He was staring out over the crowd

impassively. The half of his face she could see looked fresh, alive. She leaned back towards his ear. He smelled...appetizing?

‘Then why are you here?’

‘I want to know if I need to start preparations.’

‘If all goes to plan you’re going to have a lot more employees. Whatever you can do to facilitate...’

He waved dismissively. ‘You’ll need to talk to someone at the station about that. I’m talking about fundamentals, primals.’

‘Like what?’

He put a hand on the small of her back. ‘Let’s hope we don’t find out.’

He turned to Colby and pointed to his wrist. Colby looked at Ligna, gestured to the stage. She scanned the crowd, took a deep breath, walked over to the steps. On the way Shairree reached out and squeezed her hand. When Ligna got onstage the volume in the gym began to reduce, respect or surprise or something else about a woman in a powersuit making a claim on the room. She was almost to the podium when Glintcise noticed her and stopped whatever he was fussing about and a moment later Biz spun around. At this point it was nearly quiet and Ligna felt like all eyes were trained on her. Without the din the air seemed thicker, weighted with portent and the bound-up energy of stoppered debate.

Biz deliberately checked her out with his eyes, down to her heels and back up to her face. ‘Ligna,’ contemptuous.

‘Biz. Keeping everything in order, as always.’

‘It’s not my fault, there’s all these—’

‘Never mind. Just—’ She tilted her head towards the wings. Arms crossed, Biz watched her step up to the podium but didn’t move. She looked over to Colby and gave a short side thumb. Biz followed her gaze and saw who she was gesturing at, deflating. He took a final glance over his shoulder at the crowd then slunk off the stage.

Ligna tapped the microphone and put her mouth close. ‘Is this thing working?’ The penultimate syllable rang piercing feedback at her from all around, sound looping replicated cycles, self-same once-was overwhelming itself into an unrecognizable present. She flinched. Paused to survey the audience. Noticed the cute disputant watching her intensely. Waited out the urge to rush. Waited. Then she began.

She introduced herself and the consortium she represented, first listing a stream of acronyms (including the consortium’s own, JIAR, technically standing for Joint Industrial Assured Reliability but which — since it existed primarily as a spoken word rather than a string of letters — had a number of competing variants, including: Generating Your Reliable Electricity, Distributed Zonal Utility Interminability Reliance Enterprise, Just Get Energy Everywhere Reliably) as an appeal to bureaucratic authority, then shifting

to practicality and assurances that they were focused on a quick resolution amenable to everyone, and finally to something more personal, local:

‘Many of you know me, we go back a long ways, before any of this. I grew up here, *we* grew up here, so did our parents, and grandparents. This is where we choose to raise our children. When we drive around we wave to everybody, friend or stranger, and they wave back. We chat with our neighbors, share meals, look after each other’s kids, are proud of living here. Because it’s a special place. A community. Home. And above all — *above all* — we help one another out. The nice old lady around the corner needs a wheelchair ramp? We chip in building it. See someone run out of gas struggling to get their car down the street? We run over and lend a push. The ballfield’s sign needs sprucing up? We’re out there at the crack of dawn on a weekend, paintbrush in hand, eager to make it look new.

‘I want you to keep that in mind while you listen to what I have to say. Because we’re not here to fight, or to point fingers, or turn our backs. We need to come together, like we always have. Because there’s people, in this room, who are struggling. They’re worn out, exhausted, frustrated. They need a break.’

‘They’re not the only ones!’ somebody yelled out. A buzz rose from the rear of the room.

‘This is true. This isn’t easy for any of us. We’re in a new world, something that we never expected. It’s been hard to adjust and we all deserve a break. But I say if we really look around, a lot of us are already getting one. Compared to these guys down here from the plant, we have it pretty easy. We don’t have to work that much, some of us not at all. There’s no bills. Always food on the table. Don’t even have to worry about watching what you eat. Just as long as the lights stay on...

‘Now I’m not saying that you’re just on some permanent vacation. But I’m sure there’s been a few times where you decided that the world wasn’t going to end if you had a day off. So you took a breather, you took a knee, maybe you even took a nap. And you know what happened? The world didn’t end. And you got your rest. And the lights stayed on. And nobody came to your house calling you lazy. Or a fuckin’ bum. Or threatening your family. Or—’

At this point Ligna couldn’t even hear herself, despite her yelling. The workers were cheering and clapping while another part of the crowd was jeering and fist-shaking. Everyone was standing. She held her hands up asking for calm and worried that a fight might break out but eventually they settled down and let her continue.

She talked to the whole audience, those who demanded change and those afraid of it and those who just didn’t know. To those who felt in the right and those who were wrong, to givers and takers, fighters and pacifists, optimists

and pessimists, the angry and scared and frustrated and hopeless. She spoke to them all, appealing to their individual sensitivities and also as if they were one, the same words heard differently towards the same end, not a reduction but an encompassing. She explained that the current situation was not sustainable, that they should already recognize that. That more people were going to have to make sacrifices — those in the room and a lot of others who were not there. They were going to have to step up and help out. Eventually they'd all be working at the plant. Everybody would take their turn, work a day or two and then pass it off to the next person, collectively making their individual sacrifice as small as possible. Unless the sacrifice they wanted was days without electricity. But, she told them as if she were reminding them, that might never end and a few days could stretch into forever. Yet if everybody did a little, just a little, then there was no reason that the power couldn't go forever. There was no reason they couldn't have it just as good as their neighbor, and their neighbor as them.

'How's that gonna work?' someone yelled. 'They don't know how to run things.'

Ligna said there would be trainings, that they would teach their replacements.

'How long will that take? I'm tired now, I don't know that I can wait.'

'Give me a break! How old are you? You chose this job, tough it out!'

'Why don't *you* tough out? Or can't you handle a day away from your precious TV?'

'Hey, hey, please,' Ligna interjected. 'Let's be civil. No one has to tough anything out, no one has to go without power. We all contribute a little and the lights stay on. This is nothing to fight about.'

The handsome boy stood up.

'Just how are you going to enforce it? What's preventing our saviors back there from just skipping out?'

Ligna emphasized that this was a nationwide effort, being organized across the country as she spoke. That gave the workers leverage, because they could truly move together. This meant maintaining solidarity — no wildcat strikes, leaning on one another and holding each other up through a little more discomfort and then there'd be a long, well-deserved vacation.

'What if they refuse to help? What if they won't go along? Will there be a strike?'

'Nobody wants to go without power,' said Ligna.

'But will there be a strike?'

'We'll do what needs to be done.'

A clamor of boos and skepticism rose up. She was trying to thread a needle and everyone could tell, none satisfied. One half thought she was

sanctioning strikes and the other that she was stringing them along. She was losing the room.

Ligna cupped the microphone until it squealed, until everyone stopped and winced and glared at her. She pulled her hand away, looked out over the crowd, a stare trained on each individual. Their attention held.

‘Let me tell you a story. I have a brother who played a little ball. Some of you may have heard of him. Salappme Bombyx. Sal.’ (a murmur in the crowd) ‘Hell of an arm, maybe best in the state. Recruited since before he could drive. Scouts at every game. A lock for the majors.

‘It’s senior year, regional championships. Maybe you remember it, played right out there...’

A cheer went up, dissolved into chanting. ‘Eddy! Eddy! Eddy!’ Mostly drowning out the competing ‘Sol! Sol!’. Ligna waited for it to settle down, resisted an ingrained urge to mention dizzies or whor(e)ls.

‘Now, Sal’s already pitched two games in four days, shutouts, three hits total, over twenty strikeouts. He’s sore, he’s tired, but he’s also young, strong, talented. Doesn’t want to let anyone down. Coach needs him to start again, says the game is too important, that the other pitchers don’t have it. That they need him.

‘So he goes in. Pitches a hell of a game. Better than the last two. No-hitter through five. Then in the sixth, he starts to get tight, ball control slips, and before he knows it five runs have come in. His team is still in the lead, but only by one. The bases are loaded, coming to the plate is the Whirlpools’ best hitter, Cudge Conmenudo.’ (more cheers, hisses) ‘Coach comes out, asks how he feels. Sal’s anxious, losing confidence. But he’s not going to let his team down. Tells coach he’s still got it.

‘Cudge comes to plate. Real quick Sal gets behind in the count, tries to push it, gives Cudge his best stuff and *crack!* — something snaps and the pitch doesn’t move and it’s a grand slam and Sal’s arm is blown. The Sols lose the game, lose the championship.

‘And Sal? He never stepped foot on a mound again.

‘My point is this: If you’re not careful, you might blow out your best resource and then you can’t play ball ever again. On the other hand, if you walk away without anyone in the bullpen then you just forfeit the game and the result is no different. You gotta play smart, pace yourself, let everyone — even the benchwarmers, the runts you stick out in right field when the game’s not on the line — let everyone take a turn. It’s not about winning today or losing tomorrow. As long as you can keep the game going, that’s all that matters.’

Someone stepped up from the front row, a big fella with a big belly who looked like he wouldn’t be able to make it past second base without a

breather. ‘But what if coach is pushing you, if you’ve pitched every game this season and he’s asking for one more and you don’t think you can do it?’

‘Well,’ said Ligna, ‘we’re going to have the ‘pen...’

‘But what if it’s empty? What if it just you? What if you’re all they got?’

‘You want to know if I walk.’

‘Yeah, I’m asking. Do you walk?’

Ligna hesitated, looked around, sensed the need.

‘Yeah, we walk.’

And the crowd went wild.

Shairree met her at the bottom of the stage, smiling proudly, arms extended. She grabbed Ligna by the shoulders and pulled her slightly closer, teetering and the precipice of an embrace.

‘You were really good.’

‘Thanks,’ said Ligna. She squeezed Shairree’s elbows. They looked like a couple of middle-schoolers trying to figure out how to slow-dance for the first time, absent the insecurity or confused emotions. ‘I think it went pretty well.’

‘It went great. Everyone seems on board. It’s actually going to happen, I can feel it.’

‘It’ll be hard times if it doesn’t.’

‘It can’t. I won’t last — you know I’m barely holding on now.’ People were beginning to push in around them, jostling for Ligna’s attention. ‘My kids need me, they need time with their mom. It’s only fair.’

Someone reached out and tapped Ligna. It was Colby, calling her over. She excused herself and pushed through to him, or rather to the space he had opened up around himself for her. He took her wrist and led her through a door into the kitchen. The door closed behind them and the babble from the other room was reduced to a murmur. Colby was looking past Ligna, as if listening for some secret in the hum. She turned and saw that Shairree was right behind her, a hand still clasped to her shoulder.

‘Are you going to introduce me to your friend?’ Shairree fluttered doe eyes and nibbled at the corner of her lip.

Ligna hesitated and Shairree stuck her hand out.

‘Shairree Tthuwa. Liggy and I are friends from back when we were kids.’

‘Shairree works at the—’

Colby nodded at her, shaking with the wrong hand. To Ligna: ‘We need to do the transition.’

He pointed off to a corner where there was a woman seated in a chair, half-observed by shadows. She stood up and walked towards them. Plain looking, simply dressed, modestly sized, hair pulled back into a tight bun —

she had the appearance of a fragile teacher yet carried herself like she could walk through a brick wall. As she approached, Ligna unconsciously took a step back, bumping into Shairree who had maneuvered into a hiding position behind her.

‘Ligna Bombyx,’ said Colby, ‘The Grace M—’

‘Grace is fine,’ holding a hand out. Ligna took it and the shake was curt, almost painfully firm. Grace turned her counterpart, ‘It’s just the one, right?’

‘Yeah, only her.’

‘Where’s your car?’

‘It’s just out front,’ said Ligna, ‘but I assumed we’d have another... How’re you getting back?’

Colby smiled. ‘I already am. I’m protected, remember?’

‘So you’re just stuck here? Doesn’t feel right to leave my guard stranded.’

‘Hey, I get it,’ said Shairree, ‘you’re Knots. Ligna, this really is a big deal, huh?’

‘Ehh, it’s the end of my shift,’ said Colby. ‘I’ll find something to do and then wind down. As they say, second sleep is as good as the last one.’

If you need someplace to stay until you wake up or, whatever, I live close by.’ Shairree had moved between him and Ligna.

Colby pulled out a pocket notebook and put it down on a stainless steel countertop. After scribbling something on the top page and then the next, he passed it to Grace who did the same. She ripped off the first page and handed it to him and put the notebook in her pocket. He pulled out a rectangular point-and-shoot camera and waved Ligna over. She was pressed between him and Grace as he held the camera out at arm’s length, aiming it at their lined-up faces.

‘I can get that.’

Shairree was standing right at the edge of Colby’s reach, both hands hovering around his. He lowered the camera, flicked his wrist, held it up to her by the strap. Shairree put it to her eye and backed up a few steps then moved forward one.

‘Say cheese!’ She waited. ‘Come on,’ she begged, then a click.

Colby moved forward and held his hand out. Shairree gave him the camera.

‘Maybe you’d like one with me?’ she asked.

He passed it to Grace who slid it into her coat.

‘Have you had dinner?’

Colby shook Ligna’s hand, nodded to Grace, then seemed to deflate slightly, an easing into a state of relaxation that appeared odd to Ligna, like seeing an always mustachioed man suddenly shaven. He turned his back on the two of them.

‘Miss Shairree, dinner sounds lovely. But I want to warn you that I won’t remember any of this, so I can’t be held accountable for anything that I might do before you fall asleep.’

‘Mmm, sounds mysterious,’ said Shairree, shuffling towards him. ‘What about after?’ Grace and Ligna walked past them and she called out: ‘Bye bye, Liggy, good luck. Do ‘em just like you did here.’

Ligna looked back and caught a glimpse of Shairree giggling and pushing at the Knot. Then through the door and they were back in the gym, which was much quieter now, moving past the mostly empty seats that had been left skewed and bunched and knocked over with little concern. At the exit they passed a janitor standing by a seat rack, contemplating the mess in front of him as if it was an existential challenge.

Grace led the way, which was good because Ligna wasn’t certain she could retrace the route in, especially now that it was dark. They passed a classroom that was lit up and full of people, movement in her periphery that Ligna ignored, then a noise behind them and somebody called out.

‘Excuse me, Miss Bombyx, excuse me.’

She stopped and turned and saw Glintcise jogging up towards her. Under the golden lighting his smile sparkled like a precious metal.

‘I wanted to thank you. I’m glad we have someone who understands, who’s on our side.’ While he spoke he kept looking up at Grace like he was unsure with having a witness. ‘Listen, some of the fellas were uncomfortable speaking in front of everyone and are asking about details and I’m doing my best but—I was wondering if you could come and talk to them. It would be helpful to hear it from you.’

‘We should really be going...’ said Grace.

Ligna put up a hand. ‘No, it’s alright, this is important. Just a few minutes, though, OK?’

‘Aww gee, thanks. Come on, let me introduce you.’

‘It’s Glintcise, right?’

He winced. ‘Oh, who told you that? Cy. Everyone calls me Cy.’

He held the door open. A man in plaid-under-vest recognized Ligna but stepped to block the way of Grace who seemed about to toss him when Cy intervened and she was let through.

‘You two want a beer? We got a keg back there.’

They both declined. In the far corner a throng was swarming about an unseen treasure. Elsewhere the room was less dense but still stuffed, men squeezing through, arms held high holding two-four-six beers, persons crammed into small, self-facing clusters, individuals sitting alone staring into flimsy white cups that looked like half-filled urine samples. Deep in the crowd Ligna thought she saw the emcee’s slicked silver hair, his brown coat.

Cy walked them over to a group of five sitting at desks that had been arranged in a line facing out the window. The farthest one was apparently too big to wedge into the seat gap and had plopped himself on the desktop, feet dangling, giving the impression of a pathetic child whose body had outgrown him. Cy dragged a desk through the crowd for Ligna and got the attention of the others. An awkward dance commenced during which desks were grabbed and lifted and slowly rotated, bumping against one another, overlapping, seize points hit, released, forced, fingers pinched, beer spilled, seats slipped into, until finally they had all turned 180°. All but the one sitting on the top, who merely (though with those unnimble legs it was still a production) spun in place and rested his feet on the chair now in front of him. Grace watched Cy pull over a seat next to Ligna and sit down facing the others. He didn't acknowledge her stare so she pushed aside some people and got a chair for herself, situated it on the other side of Ligna, did not sit in it but instead leaned on the seatback, tapping her fingers.

Cy asked for everyone to introduce themselves. Down the line: 'Vann Beschlemielage', 'Dorkan Tailwindy, lead engineer', 'Ovalbyte Ayeayegs, electronics', 'Nummi Nonobowow', 'Shyla Stempore.'

Ovalbyte spoke up. He was one of the ones wearing overalls from before. He said that what had been laid out sounded nice in theory, but when it came to implementing he was afraid that some of them would still be stuck holding the bag. 'My job is highly technical. You can't just grab some schmo off the street and expect him to pick it up. I've been learning this stuff since I was a kid. What you're talking about makes sense for someone like Shyla, but what if we can't find anyone who can do my work, let alone tens or hundreds or however many you expect to be rotating through.'

'Nobody's irreplaceable,' said Ligna.

'I don't think you appreciate what I do. Knowledge, experience, attention to detail. You've got to have the head for it.'

'Well, you weren't born knowing all this. I'm positive we'll find substitutes for everyone, including you.'

'Maybe we can find you a child to copy your whole genius life,' said Shyla.

'Won't be one of yours, I'll tell you that much.'

Ligna cut them off before they got going. 'Don't forget how much of the workforce has been freed up. There are many people, smart people, skilled people. People who want to help out, who will help out.'

'If we have thousands of people trained to do our job, that's a long break between each time someone needs to come in.' It was Vann, the big guy. 'How will they possibly remember how to do the work if they only do it for a short time and then take years off? I mean, I may forget myself.'

'That's a good thing,' said Cy. 'That's how you make sure your vacation lasts forever.'

‘What if there’s something important that we miss training them on, that we don’t anticipate?’

‘That’s not something to worry about,’ said Ligna. ‘It’s been the same day for a long while and I’m sure you’ve already had just about every odd situation you’re likely to encounter.’

‘You’d be surprised.’

‘Besides, if something bad happens then we just reset and don’t do that again. It corrects itself.’

‘What about liability?’ said the engineer. Ligna couldn’t recall his name — Dunkin? Darkun? ‘There are legal requirements and responsibilities with what I do. If I train someone and they screw up, will I have indemnity?’

‘I think what you mean is immunity, and yes, you’ll have it. You have to consider, however, what does a legal consequence even mean now? We’re beyond that. The expectation is that you’ll feel a moral obligation to your work, to train your replacements until you truly believe they are ready. It’s the same thing that keeps you coming in now, day after day. And the same thing will keep them coming in, following your lead.’

‘I come to work because my family’s been threatened. I hope you’re planning to offer security.’

‘Of course. But it won’t take long for you to realize it isn’t necessary.’

‘We’ll see. Sometimes I wonder if it wouldn’t just be easier to have rolling blackouts.’

‘Trying to get us killed?’ said Ovalbyte. ‘That’s a comic—’

‘Sleep. That’s all I want. After a long day of doing diddly squat.’

‘Personally,’ said Shyla, ‘if I take time off, I’d like to have power. So I’m sticking with this plan. Let me ask you this, though. I hate my job. It’s miserable work. I can guarantee that all these “replacements” are going to hate it just as much as me. What’s to stop them from ditching once they realize it sucks so bad?’

‘Remember, it’s not just you, it’s not just the people in this plant, it’s workers just like you across the whole country. If people aren’t stepping up then all of those that are, you and those who come after you, will act together and take command. It shouldn’t come to that, but if it does, all the anger and turmoil won’t be directed at you, it’ll be at all those who aren’t doing *their* part.’

‘What if they don’t care? What if they’re fine with the lights being out so long as they don’t have to work?’

‘Sure, a few might be like that. But we need to focus on making the world one *we* want to live in, not the one they do.’

Ligna looked at the man sitting next to Shyla. His hair was deeply streaked with gray and he was wearing a collared shirt that seemed to sag on his shoulders like a weight.

‘Nummi, right? What about you, do you have any questions or thoughts?’

He tilted his head and seemed about to speak, then lowered his eyes and shook his head and barely shrugged, as if trying and failing to lift the shirt.

‘Bah, don’t worry about him,’ said Ovalbyte, tapping Nummi on the shoulder, knocking him forward. ‘He keeps his nose down and his mouth shut. But he’s a master delegator, been planning his departure from the plant for years. Could take off right now if it wasn’t for these damned threats.’ He looked around gravely, then muttered to nobody in particular. ‘In retrospect, probably the smartest one out of all of us.’

Nummi glanced up and twitched a grin.

Grace put her hand on Ligna’s shoulder. ‘We need to get going.’

Ligna apologized and said there was still one more meeting she had to get to, at another plant. ‘We need to make sure we’ve got everyone united.’ She stood up. ‘I realize you’re skeptical. I know you’ve been let down before. But we’re on your side, with our help you can finally join as one, get an outcome that’s fair, get the freedom you deserve. You’re not alone anymore.’

Cy jumped up to lead them out but Grace was already making a path. He held a hand out to Ligna, which she took. It was thick yet soft, a gentle grip. He thanked her for taking the time and that he was sure that it made a big difference. He stopped at the doorway while Ligna continued out into the cold night, turning to watch him for a few steps, his teeth and eyes sparkling like some dreamed-of jewel.

‘You’re going to be late.’

Grace was looking down at a map, unfolded and backfolded across its seams and newly creased edges to form a perfect rectilinear circumscription of their route. It was illuminated by a small metal flashlight she held in one hand while the other pointed to their position. Fingers calipered to measure the distance, head tilted at her watch, glanced up through the windshield, leaned over again to check the speedometer.

‘It’s safe to go faster.’

‘I don’t speed.’

Ligna was driving, just as with the previous trip, ostensibly because of a quirky vehicle with a difficult clutch but in truth because it kept her mind off of where she was headed. She already knew what she needed to say. She’d studied up on the main players, the union situation, the insider intel. Obsessing over it now was not going to help anything, might actually make her stiff, unadaptable. Grace had insisted she could handle the car but acquiesced, now seemed to be offering again, though more out of courtesy

or competency than urgency. Ligna could feel her eyes in the dim, watching her, waiting, then turning back to the map.

They were on a two-lane road with soft shoulders, unlit except for the car's high-beams. Around them the countryside was dark, deceptively blank. Ligna had been through here before, she knew around them there were fences, fields, hills, barns, creeks. Yet it all had merged into a single blackness, merged with the sky, challenging any notion that there existed bounds or boundaries, difference, what had once been. Above them the moon would occasionally make an appearance, but its dull light seemed to extend no further than those clouds in its immediate vicinity, forming a halo containing incomplete edges and translucent, vaporous shadows which provided little hint as to the true forms to which they belonged, forms which would quickly reconsume the lunar body and return them all back to obscurity. Only the spread of headlight extending in front of them gave proof that the world she was certain surrounded them actually existed, and even then merely as ever-changing glimpses of a future which they would rapidly pass, forgotten to their replacements yet nearly indistinguishable from what had preceded them, as if they had actually become trapped on a closed loop whose repetitions were masked by an imperfect memory.

'That Cy was pretty cute, huh?'

'What?' said Ligna, briefly looking over. Grace was still hunched over her map.

'Legwarm. Cy. He's a specimen. Really filled those jeans. You gonna come back and meet up with him after you're done up here?'

'Oh please, I'm old enough to be his mother.'

'You don't look it. Besides, I saw the way he was checking you out.'

Ligna scoffed but felt her face get warm. A curve in the road approached and she focused on keeping them between the lines, both hands securely on the wheel, ready to downshift, glancing to check her speed, forcing herself to suppress the vague uneasiness that she was going too fast or that the lane markings were wrong or that there was something just beyond the field of her lights that she would not have time to react to. Grace was continuing on about how this was the best time to have a fling. No consequences, don't have to worry who you wake up with, use memory to your advantage. Everyone was looking to experiment. The road straightened to a slight rise and Ligna relaxed some, still peering off into the gloom for the unexpected.

'Are you, uh, fixed?' Ligna glanced at Grace who was staring at her as if she had been propositioned unprepared. 'You know, gone to sleep. So you won't remember.'

'Oh,' said Grace. 'Yes, I'm under protection.'

'I suppose it's safer that way.'

'I suppose.'

‘Seems dangerous too, though. Things fall apart so easy if you don’t remember, or remember wrong. Did you know we’re not trusting memorants anymore?’

‘Hmmm.’

‘I guess it’s more responsibility, but it doesn’t feel like a burden. Makes you tighter with the cause.’

Grace had turned her flashlight off and was staring at Ligna. Her face seemed defined by just a ridge of light.

‘Must be weird,’ said Ligna, ‘knowing this will all go away. What if something really great happens? You’ll never know.’

‘You’re there when it happens. You know then.’

‘But I mean after. It’s like you get less of a life.’

‘What happens when you go to sleep tonight?’

‘It’s the next day.’

‘No, the you that’s still around, asleep. What about when that you wakes up?’

‘It’s not me anymore. It doesn’t matter.’

‘What if that you experiences something incredible? Or something awful?’

Ligna looked out into where the road disappeared into murk, seeing in it not a rushing towards but a pushing out, a frontier of inadequate scope to divine the extent of the unknown. She felt a sadness for whatever passed beyond her awareness, yet she also felt nothing. Grace reached out for her shoulder, ran her hand gently across her arm.

‘Does one of us feel this differently than the other? Does your memory actually numb you? What if this is actually something special, but only for me?’

She took her hand away. Ligna felt a lingering sense of her touch.

‘You can’t really think it’s better to forget?’

‘What’s better? It keeps us fearless.’

‘I’ll bet. Maybe I’d take a stab at Cy if I didn’t have to worry about how bad it might turn out.’

‘Maybe you already have.’

‘Hey now! I swear I’ve never seen him before.’

‘That’s the beauty of it.’

The two women burst into laughter.

‘He sure seemed impressed with you, especially the way you handled that Pard guy.’

‘Who, Biz? That’s nothing to be impressed by. You know I dated him once?’

Grace snorted. ‘Really?’

‘Once. Once. And it was a long time ago. We were both just starting out and I was working at the plant then and he’d come around and schmooze with those of us he thought were connected with management. As if he might gain some secret insights from a secretary or junior accountant. Anyway, he had this air about him like he was a big shot and I was too young to know any better and one day he asks me out and, if I’m being honest, I was kind of flattered. So I said sure. The plan was dinner and dancing. He picks me up in this big fancy car wearing a really nice but dated three-piece suit like he’s an old-time gangster or something. We go out to a fancy restaurant and he tells me to order whatever I want which actually made me nervous because I’d never seen prices so high. I’m pretty sure I picked the cheapest thing and it was still more than a week’s pay for me. Anyway, we’re not really hitting it off but the conversation’s not horrible and then the food comes and after a couple minutes he starts talking about his car. Nonstop. It’s like he got the thing stuck in his head and he won’t shut up about it. Steering wheel this, tires that, engine, power windows, leather interior, on and on and on. He’d ask me about something, like the radio or the floor mats, and I didn’t care about it so I’d say something dumb and try to change the subject but he’d cut me off and get right back into it. Eventually I was done eating and there might have been dessert but all I remember was it seemed like forever after that where I just sat there, not saying a thing, while he rambled on about that damn car. Then at some point he looks at his watch and stops suddenly and calls for the check and asks me if I was ready to go like I hadn’t been sitting there bored out of my mind for half the night. The check comes and he pulls out this envelope and gets a bunch of cash from it and pays for everything with that. Then he makes sure to get a receipt and I have to wait even longer for him to write out what seems like an essay on the back of it before he stuffs it into the envelope and puts the envelope back in his jacket and finally, finally, it’s time to go.

‘We get back to the car and I’m a little peeved but looking forward to going to the club and having a good time. Biz starts driving and immediately is talking to me about our “conversation” and how the car is owned by the union and that if I ever get questioned, like by an auditor, remember that more than half of the dinner was spent discussing union business — meaning the car — because this made it an expensable meal. He keeps going over this as if it’s hard to understand and I haven’t really been paying attention where we’re going and that we’re nowhere near any clubs and then all of a sudden he pulls us into some big empty office park parking lot and starts trying to make a move. Yeah, I know, don’t worry, I was having none of it. So he gets huffy about paying for dinner and not getting anything in return and I tell him that he *expensed* dinner and that I just really want to dance and he says how can he dance in a suit like this and I tell him that’s not

my problem and he says fine and we take off. I'm thinking he's just going to take me home but instead he takes me to *his* house and wants me to come in while he changes into something more comfortable.'

'Oh no.'

'Oh yeah — just wait, it gets better. Now there's no reason I should have followed him in but at this point I was totally unintimidated and just wanted to get to dancing so whatever made that happen quicker the better. We get to the front door and he's acting real quiet like he doesn't want to wake the neighbors and he opens the door careful and is tip-toeing inside, leading me down the hall when from the other end of the house someone yells out "Bizmarx is that you?" He tries to ignore them but they keep calling for him and so he takes me back and laying out on two recliners watching TV are this old lady in a frumpy nightgown and curlers and this fat, hairy guy wearing only tiny black underwear covered in leopard-print.'

Grace was giggling. Ligna too.

'Turns out he's still living at home and these are his parents and he introduces me all embarrassed but I barely even notice because also in the room is his bony little brother, maybe ten years old at the most and decked out exactly like his old man. When we first come in he's bouncing around on this couch but when he sees me makes a bee-line and starts leaning against me and licking his lips and working his eyebrows and grabbing for my hand. I'm fighting this rascal off and trying to say hi to his parents who I don't think even hear me because something happens on the tube and dad starts yelling at it and mom at him and now brother's making funny noises and fondling my knee. Somehow we manage to peel the kid off and without looking mom gets him by the wrist and between the yelling slips in a "nice to meet you" while we sneak away to Biz's room.

'So Biz goes in to change and I wait outside the door and I— What's that? Someone else is behind us. A ways back. Anyway, the door cracks and Biz sticks his head out and says he needs my help so I come over and the door swings wide and he's standing there with his hands on his hips in a cape and these tight bikini briefs like you might see in one of those muscle shows, both made of the exact same print that his dad and brother were wearing. He puts his hand out and says, I kid you not, "Come fly with me."

'We're laughing now but at the time I was pissed off. I really just want to go dancing and I didn't even know what the hell this was so I let him have it and threatened to leave if he didn't change and take me to the club like he said he would. He grumbled and went back in his room and just then that kid pops into the hallway doing his eyebrow thing and swinging his hips and I was ready to just run out of there anyway when Biz comes out wearing the same suit as before. I don't know how he dressed so fast and I didn't care, I just wanted to go. So we leave and this time he drives straight downtown

and drops me off in front of a club and says he's going to go look for parking. And I never saw him again that night.'

'Wait, what? He just left you?'

'Well, later on — can you believe he actually asked me out again after this? multiple times! — later on he tried to say he spent hours looking for parking and that he really couldn't dance in that suit anyway so it wasn't his fault but, yeah, he ditched me. Not that it mattered. I actually ended up having a pretty fun night.'

'How'd you get home?'

'A lady's got to keep some secrets.'

'Even from herself?'

'Sure — maybe Cy took me.'

Ligna started to give Grace a coy look but the lights in the rearview caught her eye. Twin orbs floating at some indeterminate distance. She might have even questioned that they were on the same road except she was certain they were getting closer, which meant they were moving apart, stretching towards the edges of the mirror as if repulsed by their likeness. Ligna realized she'd been driving for a while seemingly without paying attention, her actions gone by without notice like breathing or blinking. She checked her speed (still right below the limit), checked behind them again, refocused on the road rushing past. Both she and Grace were still laughing however it was all inertia, the giddy feedback loop having been disrupted.

Grace cleared her throat. 'So he's not much in the romantic department, but Pard sure didn't seem like much of a leader out there either.'

'He's got the wrong vision of what they should be. He's still clinging onto a status which long since ceased to matter.'

'Do you really think there will be a strike?'

'There'll have to be. There's no way the public will go along otherwise.'

'I thought you said they already wanted to.'

'That's just throwing meat so the workers don't get too eager. We need them patient until we're sure everything's organized.'

'You sure they'll organize?'

'We're already almost there. Everyone's going to be shocked when they see what we can do when we really work together. I expect it won't take more than a couple weeks before—'

Ligna winced. The car behind them had come right up on them and the headlights were flooding into the car, shining off the mirrors into her eyes. She edged to the right. The centerline was dotted and there was nobody else around yet they didn't pass. Grace turned around, her hand held up to block the light.

'What's this asshole doing?' said Ligna.

'Just pull over and let them go by.'

As they slowed and rolled onto the shoulder, the other car appeared to be following their lead, then seemed to think better of it and swerved around and accelerated away, the inside of its cabin a blur. Ligna wasn't even sure if there was anybody besides the driver or not. When she blinked her eyes a strange residue of the headlights hovered in front of her, an inversion forming golden arcs that followed her gaze yet denied its focus. She pulled back onto the road and got back up to speed. Grace was checking her map again. It had become starkly quiet, as though the other car had robbed them of their sound. The red lights ahead of them disappeared into the darkness, into a space they would eventually pass, forgotten to their future. Ligna waited for Grace to speak. She didn't.

'OK,' Ligna said, finally, 'it's your turn. You have a bad date story to tell?'

'Oh, nothing as good as yours. Mine seem to end with black eyes all around.'

'Sounds interesting.'

'Not really. Some would say it sounds like marriage.'

'You married?'

Grace shrugged. 'You?'

'You don't know?'

'Why would I?'

'I just assumed... Colby seemed familiar with my whole life story.'

'We all have different views of what's important to know, ahead of time at least. So, you married?'

'I was.'

'Children?'

Ligna didn't say anything. She really didn't know, did she? Ligna started to tell her, then caught herself. There was too much. The failed pregnancies. The adoption that didn't happen, that drove them apart. The nieces and nephews she cherished, wishing they were her own. She didn't want to talk about this.

'I'm sorry.' Grace's hand was on the steering wheel, on Ligna's. 'I didn't mean to—'

'I know.' Ligna slipped her hand out and put it atop Grace's. She squeezed it gently, didn't release. 'Just tell me a good story, about you.'

Grace left her arm held out, shifted closer. Ligna's eyes blurred and she tried to blink it away, looked up and thought she saw two shadows in the mirror, doubled circles. She wiped her face on her shoulders, checked the mirror again. It was black. Grace reached across and ran a thumb across her cheek. Ligna sniffled and smiled.

'Alright, I got one,' said Grace. 'It's kind of stupid, so don't laugh at me too hard. There was this one time...'

...am I fighting...

Jenton stepped out of his building and was nearly knocked back inside from the frigid air. He wiped at his burning cheeks and felt something dry and stinging like sand scrape across them. He put his board against the railing and quickly pulled on his gloves then tightened his coat and scarf. It felt as though the cold had already seeped beneath his clothes and that he had trapped it there, prickling bitter and icy against his skin. He rubbed at his arms and chest and legs too, trying to drive it out or at least to stifle it with friction or the generated heat of his movements, but it did not help. The chill seemed stuck to him, or maybe they had joined and would not be rid of one another.

He stretched his toboggan to make sure it covered his ears and looked out at the sky. It was almost completely dark, all but a few lonely stars hidden by clouds he could not distinguish from the black of space. It was early morning though it just as well could have been the middle of the night — if he didn't look at his watch there was no way to tell when he was. No sun, no distant church bells or chirping birds or cry of an evening train, not even an intrinsic, circadian sense of the time. He could mistake the present for hours in either direction, fool himself into believing the horizon was about to show with the coming dawn or that it was still before midnight yesterday, a time which was so disconnected from what was happening now it might as well have been a dream. He searched for the moon but could not find it. Perhaps it was also blocked by the clouds, or his building, or maybe it was new (no, he knew better). Lower down, he could see irregular bits of yellowish haze from the city yet if he tilted his head back they disappeared completely, absorbed by the deep vastness above. It was oppressive, a vacuum that was drawing what little warmth or light remained away from the planet. Jenton did not know if an approaching missile would normally be visible, however with this veil,

this blinding layer, he felt certain that it would remain unseen. He peered into the darkness, found the few specks which indicated breaks in the shroud, listened, waited. He imagined a helpless rodent, foolishly dawdling, unaware of the owl silently descending with outstretched claws...

Geez, he thought, what was he doing? He had no time to waste! Jenton slipped his headphones over his cap and thumbed at the cassette player with his gloved hand, turning the volume wheel until he was sure it was at max. He hit play and a high-speed scream of metallic noise blasted into his ears. He jabbed at the stop button and more carefully started the player again, making sure to avoid hitting the fast-forward button. A high-speed scream of metallic noise blasted into his ears. With a shiver whose source he didn't care to think about, he grabbed his skateboard and rushed down the steps and out into the street. He dropped the board and leapt onto it and began pushing at the ground all in a seamless move that was so automatic he could have done it with his eyes closed, which was just fine because he could barely see anyway. The wheels rumbled over the rough asphalt, shaking and resisting his efforts to maintain forward progress.

The music was fast and dazzling and Jenton played the air along with it, hands held up tight to his body, fingers twitching and tapping at impossible speed, shredding while he shoved, leaning back and leaning forward and weaving across the road while his face and body writhed and contorted beyond his control. Inside his ears stabbed at the threshold of pain. His eyes squinted at the wintry headwind and his own passion. Suddenly there was a shrill buzz and a pop and then his left side was filled with a horrid electric static. There was a smell of burnt plastic. He yanked off the headphones and held them up. In the blackness he could see faint sparks glittering and rising from them a barely illuminated wisp of smoke. He slowed to a near stop while he considered the headphones, then reached into his coat and unplugged the jack and tossed them away in disgust.

He started forward again, listening to the wheels grind and scratch, in the music's absence feeling like he was going half-speed. Soon the road sloped slightly downward, however with the rugged surface he still couldn't coast and maintain his speed. Even though he was breathing hard and his muscles burning from his efforts, he was freezing. The wind seemed to run right through him, bolstering the clinging chill. It was miserable. Too cold and too dark and too early. Why couldn't the day have started at noon like on the other side of the world? Or happened during summer like down south? He was so tired — not the drowsy, wistful annoyance of one grasping for a few extra minutes from the snooze button, or the edgy delirium found in staying up all night, but rather the hopeless exhaustion particular to those roused after a few hours of sleep, a fog formed from the deception of rest and

the inability to fully wake from it. It was with good reason the streets were empty: this was no time to be up.

Still, he pushed on, letting his frustration propel him as well as a sense of duty, a knowledge that others, that the entire country, might be depending on him. And there was something else driving him, something he could not remember, something angry, less abstract, deeper, more personal. The residual glow from a fire whose flames he could not recall. It was still hot, though, perhaps the only warmth within him right then.

Jenton took another long, swinging step and realized he no longer knew where he was going. He looked around dumbly, searching his mind for something that had slipped away. He patted around at his pockets, felt the cassette player and something else like a skipping stone, though when he slid his hand in for it first found a sheet of paper folded into quarters. While still rolling down the street, he opened the paper but it was too dim to make anything out. He put it close to his face and it was still an indistinct blank and then he started to lose his balance and had to swing his arms out to avoid falling.

A few blocks ahead was an intersection with a stoplight and a streetlamp. When he reached it he pulled up in front of a parked car and skidded to a stop. He leaned against hood and took out the paper, opening the first fold while mindlessly rolling the skateboard back and forth a with one foot. There was a crude map with a star and an address that was a few miles away across town. In the corner was a message reminding him that he was being counted on, that **YOU MIGHT BE THE ONLY ONE LEFT**. The handwriting was his. Someone must have woken him and relayed this. He heard a sound and turned around to see two headlights approaching in the gloom. They moved up past Jenton and stopped at the intersection waiting for the light. It was an old pickup, loud and dented and painted in some color that under the light looked a dark, dull gray. The intersection was otherwise empty, as were the streets as far as one could see. Still, the truck waited, idling roughly, patiently. The sides of its bed were extended with wooden slats that looked like a fence.

He craned to see the driver but it was only shadows between the slats. Feeling a secret fraternity with someone who would obey the laws even when nobody was watching, Jenton imagined that it was him in there waiting, that he was looking at himself. Above the truck, he saw the light in the opposite direction switch to yellow. He pushed out on his skateboard, ducking low, reaching out for the truck and just grabbing onto its tailgate when the light turned and it ground into gear and growled forward.

Jenton kept his head down and held on while the truck moved through town. The wind was blocked and the warm exhaust spilled over him, making it surprisingly comfortable except for the stink of oil smoke and unburnt

fuel which made his eyes water and poked through his sinuses at his brain. He blinked and turned to look out at the buildings and streets rolling by and was excited to be making up time. Even though the truck was keeping within the posted speed limit (and thus, in terms of normal traffic, crawling) it was faster than he could have managed alone. It felt like the skateboard was skimming across the course road, and Jenton couldn't help himself from tilting his feet back and forth to create a swaying like a surfer winding across the surface of a wave.

Other than the occasional need to tighten his grip when rattling over an unexpected manhole cover, and that awful stench, the ride was easy and Jenton's mind began to stray. He thought of Brill and wondered if he had woken this morning. Surely he had — he'd let a mime's yawn wake him up if it meant having a chance to complain. Jenton could hear him tossing and turning and sighing with increasing irritation while Jenton patted around in the dark, trying to keep quiet while he got ready. Then Brill sits up and turns on the lamp and snaps:

'Here's some light. Don't worry about me — I was only trying to sleep.'

Or maybe:

'Oh, pardon me. I didn't realize nap time was over.'

Or

'Did you think I'd mistake silence for death?'

'Why don't you pull out your guitar while you're at it?'

'Why're you dressed like you're going to a funeral? Wait, never mind — I don't want to know.'

'Would you hurry up and save the world so I can get some fucking rest?'

'Sneaking out so nobody will catch us together? Don't forget this is *your* place and I'm not leaving until I've had the sleep'

The truck's brakelights lit up and Jenton was pressed against the tailgate while it slowed for another stoplight. Again, the intersection was empty. He imagined Brill in the passenger seat, giving the driver a stare of bored exasperation before finally outbursting: 'I know the lights purty and all but it ain't going nowhere and time's a wastin'. So giddyup!'

Jenton rubbed at his eyes, which only seemed to push the exhaust into them. Crouching was making his legs ache so he sat down on the board. The stoplight was blocked by the wood of the bed but he could see a red aura reaching around the edges, an ethereal mist against the colorless night, disconnected from the brakelight above his head despite the similarity of their signals. He was still thinking about Brill snarking at him for disturbing his beauty rest. The endless stream of sass is funny, distracting, insufferable. He doesn't sit there and watch, he hops out of bed and gets in Jenton's face. Asks how he could skip showering. (don't have the time) Complains about the cold. (go back to bed) Smells the back of his neck. (stop) Says he'll give

him a reason to shower. (stop it Brill) Critiques his choice of clothes. (I'm not you) Hand around the waist, picking at buttoned buttons, pulling at the tied tie. (now is not the time)

Jenton looked down and loosened his scarf, trying to see what tie he did pick, but could see only a blacks space. He stuck his hand in attempting to expose a bit when the brakelights flicked off and a cloud of smoke surrounded him and the truck began to pull away. He grabbed for the bumper, missed, scrambled up and pushed off and was just able to catch his finger on a hook and then get his other hand over the tailgate. He coughed and tried to catch his breath, keeping his head low and out of view. He imagined Brill sitting on the curb or maybe the bed of the truck, laughing at his panic. He chuckled along with him. The truck slowed briefly, shifting gears. It was easy to be the butt of the joke. But — though Brill didn't like to admit it — Jenton could give it back too. He thought through a comeback for this morning.

'You should quit bugging me and worry about saving yourself.'

'Whaa?'

Jenton looked at him solemnly. 'The nuke is coming. Here. Today.'

'Puhleez.'

'I'm serious. Why do you think they came to the door, to tell me in person?'

'No.'

'Yes.'

'No.'

'Yes.'

'...'

'I'm sorry.'

'This isn't funny.'

Shrugs, looks away. 'I know.'

'What is it?'

'The missile...they're sending it at me. Everyone's a target because of me.'

'Wha-what are we going to do?' Brill is looking around, grasping in all directions at once. 'When is it coming!?'

'It's OK, there's time. I've told you, it's only dangerous once you pass your zero hour. It's still a long while to when you woke up first. But you'll need to move fast.'

'Then let's go.' Stands.

'Not me. If I go with you then you're still in the crosshairs.'

'Can they do that? Follow one person?'

'I'm not sure. Don't worry about me, though, I have protection. There's a pill, but...'

'But what?'

‘It’s only works if the timing’s just right. Without knowing when you zero out, it’s useless. Your only hope is to run. Hitch a ride or steal a car and take off, as fast as you can, as far away as you can.’

The truck stopped at a four-way intersection, pausing for the driver to check each direction before struggling on. Jenton nodded mindlessly at the orderly operation, smiled at his own thoughts. They were totally improbable but true. He looked out into the dark emptiness of the street and sees someone freaking and stumbling about, a mad scramble for clothes and shoes and — no he would have to be presentable first. Brill hurries to the mirror and starts madly working on his hair and face. Some things are too important to rush, yet he can’t stay calm. Then a revelation. He looks up.

‘What about Uphie? We can’t just leave him.’

‘So take him along.’

A look. That look. Jenton can barely contain himself.

‘What am I supposed to do? Take the entire bed? Bring a nurse with us? To fit everything I’d have to find an ambulance — or a fucking hearse.’

Brill takes a deep breath. Puts down the brush or cream or whatever he’s holding. Turns so he’s looking at Jenton, not his reflection. His eyes are blinking like mad.

‘No, I’m going to stay. He deserves that. We can’t let him go alone.’

He’s right. It was so easy to forget about Uphie, wasting away in the hospital. Gaunt, spotted, a shell. Stuck in endless misery. You don’t just run away. No matter how bad it gets, you don’t run away. Jenton is crying, crying and laughing. Cracking up. Puts a hand out to Brill who knocks it away. He’s angry, confused. Jenton explains everything. It was just a joke. The guy on the phone said nothing about a bomb. Brill is glaring, hurt. Then he mutters out:

‘What would that queen say if he saw us standing here bawling over him? “Get it together bitches!”’

“We can still party like it’s our last day on earth!”’

“Put a *cocktail* in my hand. I may not be able to lift it, boys, but I can still hold my liquor!”’

It breaks. They’re both laughing now. Tears flowing. Relief and sentiment. Their fingers slide together. They pull towards one another, eyes locked, mouths parting, tongues anticipating at the back of their lips...

The truck slowed and turned a corner. Jenton stretched his arms out and leaned, trailing outside the path of his conveyance, tugging at the curve’s acceleration. They were approaching the center of town and the buildings were getting taller though this street was still dark, the only illumination coming from the truck’s lights and a diffused glow off in the distance. He adjusted his grip and looked around dimly and tried to remember where he was headed. Came up with nothing. Realized that for all he knew he

might be going in the wrong direction. A moment of panic, a sense of being late. Jenton let go, briefly hovering close to the tailgate and then as he fell back veering towards the curb across the street, giving an clandestinely appreciative wave to the driver. He thought he caught a glimpse of the driver waving back but his board caught something and he tripped off it, stumbling forward and jumping at the last second to avoid running into a car, sliding along his butt across its hood but also inadvertently turning so that he flew off backwards and plopped tailbone-first onto the sidewalk.

He hopped up, rubbing his backside and immediately thankful that nobody could have seen him, then annoyed when he couldn't find his skateboard. Finally, after getting on his hands and knees he caught a hint of yellow wheel under the car and was able to wiggle close enough to push it out. He went over and picked it up, then tried again to remember where he was supposed to go. In his pocket he found a tape deck but no headphones, a paper that he couldn't make out, and a lighter. A nice, heavy lighter with a raised pattern on its face. He didn't smoke. Why would he have taken this? Was he playing a trick on Brill?

Jenton opened the lighter and fumbled at it with his gloves until it lit. He moved it over his watch and his anxiety stilled — it was still early. He held the paper under the flame and saw the address which wasn't too far away. He moved the lighter to the lower half and saw in big bold letters:

BRILL DEAD

He yanked his hands from his face and stared into the darkness, hoping he misread. Using his body to brace against, he awkwardly flipped the paper around then brought the lighter back to it. His hands were shaking, causing trembling shadows and letters to intermingle, but was still able to see that he wasn't mistaken and immediately dropped the lighter and fell to his knees. He shivered, heaved, struggled to breathe, the cold air seeming to catch in his throat. Broke into sobs. Lost it.

How could this happen? It didn't seem possible. He could see Brill so clearly, feel his touch, hear him. Jenton reached out into the black, grasped at something just beyond his reach. Cried out a soft lament. Closed his eyes and everything looked no different.

He needed to go back and check. Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe it was a joke. Yes, that was it, a joke. Was that Brill's handwriting? That asshole, he had gone too far. Jenton felt around for the lighter and lit it and held it up to the paper. The ink was smearing from his tears but he could still see that it was all capitals, square, neat. Not Brill's style. There was a message off on the side, something he hadn't noticed before, written in a cursive that Jenton also recognized as his own.

Make those fuckers pay. Make the delivery. For Brill.

He closed the lighter and the words disappeared into nothingness. He tilted his head back and looked past the faint outline of the buildings into the sky, seeing a single point of light, a star which twinkled and then was gone. What else was out there that he couldn't see? The star reappeared, exactly as before — dim, impassably far.

He put the lighter and paper back in his pocket and stood up. There was a bitter taste at the back of his throat. He picked up the skateboard but could barely see the ground so just started to run. He ran in the direction where the light seemed closest, almost tripped at some unevenness and moved out into the road, ran with anger and fear and desperation, ran hard and then harder and when he realized he could see hopped onto the board and sped faster and harder with grinding teeth and throbbing heart and tears casting off his face into the cold wind.

Jenton rolled a wide corner in the middle of the street onto the main road. He tried to stay focused on his destination and moving as fast as he could but could not prevent his thoughts from returning to Brill — Brill posing like a statue, Brill eyeing him in public, Brill insane with laughter and that smile that stretched forever, Brill smelling of cologne and cigarettes, Brill in Jenton's room or his own, Brill brash and unconcerned, Brill lounging on the bed wearing a tight shirt and nothing else, Brill strutting, Brill leaning out the window, Brill playing it up for the neighbors, Brill running a hand across his face, Brill whispering in his ear, Brill holding Uphie's hand, Brill riveted with passion, Brill asleep, beautiful. All this flooding his mind at once and he almost lost it again, almost collapsed to the ground, almost couldn't imagine how anything could matter anymore. But then he thought of Brill this morning, or rather what he couldn't remember because it didn't exist. Jenton realized it didn't have to be over just yet. He could go back to a time when he wasn't gone, have at least one more day with him.

He pulled over to the curb next to a pay phone. He took out the paper and tore off the bottom half and, holding it up by its corner, lit it from the bottom. The flames faltered before catching and spreading upwards, lapping at his glove. Jenton tossed it on the ground and watched as the dark letters shone under the yellow fire then faded into a blackness that quickly turned delicate, threatening to crumble and blow away. While waiting for the last embers to subside he held the lighter up to his lips, feeling its warmth against his skin, taking a deep breath, smelling metal and butane. Then, impulsively, he threw it away backwards without looking and it skidded off to someplace he'd never know. He looked at the remaining paper, traced all the lines with his eyes, let the map fill his mind. The more he tried to push Brill away the tighter he seemed to cling. There didn't seem anything else he could do so he got on his board and moved along.

Two blocks down he crossed the road and took a left. It was another dark street except partway down one of the windows was emanating a soft, colorful light. Jenton skated towards it and as he got closer he could see the sign, neon alternating red and blue with the final letter a glowing white, the name confirming it as the map's endpoint. FlluxY. He kicked his board into his hand and warily stepped forward. Other than the sign, the windows seemed more like mirrors, showing differing perspectives of Jenton's figure in grotesque hues. There was a hum and then an electronic voice crackled from an unseen source.

NAME PLEASE

He looked around, searching for an obvious place to aim his response. He settled on the sign, if for no other reason than it wouldn't feel like he was talking to himself. He stared at it as he spoke, the letters seeming to approach and recede like a wavering flag.

'Jenton Triclent.'

Almost immediately there was a flash which left Jenton seeing spots and while he was blinking them away he heard the sound of a large bolt sliding from inside the door.

ENTER

Jenton flipped the last page of the tabloid, looked at the giant advertisement for mind-reading, and turned the whole thing over to read the front page once again. The thousand year-old man from the future's shocking insights couldn't hold his attention and he threw it back onto the stack and shuffled through the other options. Magazines, newspapers from the previous days, weekly classifieds. Anything that seemed interesting he felt he'd already looked at. He glanced around. It was as familiar as anything in recent memory, even though that familiarity seemed built up from repetition rather than deep experience, like a flicker of snapshots.

It was a small room, plain walls painted in nondescript off-white, floor a grid of lusterless vinyl tiles, fluorescent light even and dull. He was sitting on an overstuffed couch upholstered in ribbed fabric. In front of him was an oval coffee table with the reading material stacked into uneven piles. At the opposite wall a small television was sitting on the ground, its power cord cut and dangling off to the side. Next to that a door was ajar, revealing nothing of the dark bathroom beyond. To his left was another door and next to that, leaning against the wall, was a round clock. According to his watch it was five minutes slow. Up in one of the corners a camera was mounted looking down at the entire room, at him. Next to the couch was a wheeled cart with a VCR (also cord-snipped) on its lower shelf and on top a coffee maker and stuff to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

Jenton picked up his mug from the table. On the side it said *#1 Dad*. There was still a thin layer of tan liquid at the bottom which he tilted into his mouth. It was sweeter and colder than he expected and he almost spit it back out.

Just then the door opened and a tall man with wide eyes and bright white hair pulled back in a short ponytail entered. He closed the door and walked to the other side of the couch and plopped himself down.

‘Hey Jenton,’ he said with a smile.

‘I’m sorry, have we met?’

‘For you, no. Name’s Duunlow.’ He extended a hand. ‘Duunlow T. Ooslough. You can call me Duun.’

Jenton shook his hand. ‘I’m Jenton...which you already knew. So, are you in charge?’

‘Oh, no no no. I’m like you, just a faithful citizen,’ he tapped his forehead, ‘offering my skills for my country.’

‘And we’ve met?’

‘Oh sure, plenty of times. By the way, how are Brill and Uphie?’

‘Huh?’

‘Brill Fabledazz? Uphie Vendgrid? What’s wrong, did something happen?’

‘No, I— How do you...’

‘You told me about them. I’m a memorant, just like you. Of course I’m going to remember.’

‘I told you.’ Jenton tried to hide any apprehension.

‘Don’t be so surprised,’ said Duunlow, scooting closer. He put a hand on Jenton’s knee. ‘Like I said, I’m *just like* you.’

Jenton looked up at the camera without moving his head.

Duunlow leaned towards him. ‘Don’t worry, they don’t care.’ He pulled back and moved his hand away. ‘They got bigger problems. So Brill and Uphie are OK?’

‘I guess so. Probably still asleep.’ Jenton checked his watch. ‘Brill, at least. I actually don’t remember seeing them since...’ He gestured around at the room.

‘Sure, sure. Last couple weeks have been tough. It’ll be good when we stop gunning for each other.’

‘Wait, if you’re a memorant, aren’t you being protected? How do you remember talking to me?’

‘My zero hour’s before yours. In fact,’ Duunlow waved a hand at the clock on the floor, ‘I think it’s already passed. I’m actually expecting them to call me any minute now. See, my timeline’s tight compared to you — I actually just got here. So they fix me up first and then I’ll pass the goods.’ He turned to the TV and began to speak more philosophically. ‘It’s strange

having all this stuff bottled up inside your head that you aren't allowed to talk about. Doesn't feel natural. Sometimes I just want to let it out. Like, right now, I have an urge to tell you what they had me put up here. Maybe you already know, maybe we're remembering the same things, so it doesn't even matter. And if not, I know if I told you you'll forget anyway. You ever feel that way?'

'I would never do that.'

'Not even with Brill and Uphie?'

'Of course not. They know I've got an important mission. They probably can piece together what it's about, but I would never compromise what I've been entrusted with.'

'I totally feel the same way. I was just, you know, talking.' Duunlow took a breath and then slapped both knees with his hands. 'Well, I need to take a whizz.'

As the bathroom door closed Jenton wondered if this was something he needed to report. How would he do that? To whom? He looked around for something to write with, searched his pockets, grazed his knee. He looked up at the camera — what did it matter? They would know anyway.

There was a buzz and then a voice from above: DUUNLOW OOSLOUGH PLEASE REPORT

Jenton looked up and noticed that the pattern of holes in one of the ceiling tiles was different, circularly symmetric, like a galaxy in a random field of stars. There was a flush and Duunlow stepped out, adjusting his fly.

'That's me. See you later.'

He rushed across the room and was gone before Jenton could say a thing. Jenton turned his head away from the door while it closed, knowing he shouldn't be looking out. He had no clue where he was — in town or someplace far away, in a house or a high-rise or underground in a bunker — and they'd put their trust in him to respect and preserve this confidentiality. He had been chosen for the loyalty he'd shown, as a partymember and by extension a citizen. For his elemental patriotism, an innate understanding of the imperatives of a free society. Being a contingency, he understood he was, even now, likely unnecessary, however his was one effort among thousands that collectively were preserving liberty, whose success depended on each individual working as if they were the last. When he had stupidly blurted out, asking if they were nuclear codes, they would neither confirm nor deny, only say that they were useless to him but of grave importance. So he grasped what could not be said. Their future was his, his theirs, and the only acceptable tomorrow depended on compliance to his present duty, to wake early and receive instruction and take protection and observe security and remember, above all remember, for contained in that gibberish was a

map providing passage past those termini which were so tragic and frightful he could not fathom their existence, let alone allow them to manifest.

The door opened and Jenton cagily looked up from the comics page, ready to turn back if it swung too wide. A man slipped in — tall, wild-eyed, and with a shock of unruly white hair that made it appear as though his head was some sort of cotton bomb that had been halted mid-explosion. He jerked his head around, rapid glances at everything except Jenton, pausing for a second at the camera before swinging his head down to the clock on the floor.

‘Phew! We don’t have much time.’

Without looking he thrust a pill bottle back towards Jenton, who scooted over to reach it. Right when he was almost close enough the man spun around and Jenton flinched backwards. Though the man was looking at him his eyes seemed to be straying off in other directions, independent of one another. He rattled the bottle insistently.

‘Come on, take it! Zero hour is immanent!’

Jenton took the bottle, keeping his eyes on the man. He was completely unfamiliar and not at all what Jenton had expected. The man patted around his lab coat and pulled out a pen from the chest pocket, then patted around some more before finding a small spiral notepad from the same pocket. All the while his gaze seemed aimed into a different dimension. He scribbled something and ripped off the sheet and handed it across. It said *take pill after* and a drawing of a clock face, just as Jenton expected.

‘When the clock looks like that, you can take that pill.’

Jenton pulled back his sleeve and pointed.

‘You know, I think it’s actually slow—’

‘Ahh, I almost forgot! Give me your watch. Come on, Jenton, hurry!’ Jenton unhooked the band while the man twiddled his fingers and continued breathlessly. ‘Now, how many times have I told you? Time is relative! That paper is synchronized to that clock. There is no room for error. When the time is past, you take the pill. Not a minute before! Understand?’

Jenton nodded while he handed his watch over.

‘Do you have your instructions?’

‘You just gave them to me.’

‘No! The instructions from this morning. How you got here!’

Jenton felt around in his pockets and found his wallet, keys, and a folded piece of paper, the latter of which he gave to the fidgeting man.

‘Where’s the rest?’ the man asked, pointing at the torn paper.

‘I don’t know. There’s nothing else...’

The man reached down beside the couch and pulled up a jacket and a skateboard. He rotated the board quickly in front of his face and then dropped it back on the ground. The jacket he flung over his shoulder. He

reached out and took Jenton's wallet, making like he was going to look through it but instead just stuffing it in his coat.

'Hey!' Jenton cried.

'Don't worry, you'll get them back. Gotta go!'

'Wait,' said Jenton, 'don't you need the codes?'

The man cocked his head quizzically, his eyes appearing to wander in circles. A moment passed before he spoke: 'You already gave them.'

'Oh. To you?'

'Of course not, I'm just the doc.' He pointed at the clock as he stepped towards the door. 'Don't forget! See you soon!'

'Wait, we will?'

'Ha!' The man showed a maniacal smile and leaned forward and for the first time his eyes settled down and focused on Jenton. 'Always!'

'So then do you know if I'll be allowed to leave after this, to go back home?'

The man opened the door and Jenton turned his back. He stared at the blank TV, the details in the screen's reflection incomprehensible.

'We'll have to see what they say. That's precious cargo you've got up there. You can always see him again this morning.'

There was a pause and Jenton waited to hear the door shut. Before it did the man said one last thing:

'Watch the time!'

When he'd gone Jenton opened the bottle and shook the pill into his palm. It was shiny and black, not red like he remembered from training. He shrugged and put it back. He shoved a stack of magazines to the side to make a clear spot on the table and put the bottle and the note down beside each other. According to the clock there was still a while to go. He wasn't sure why that guy had been in such a rush. Jenton wished he could have talked to him a bit longer, clarified some things. Though the man hadn't actually said no, it didn't sound like he'd be seeing Brill today. Maybe he could have convinced him. Maybe he still could, except doing it *after* offered him nothing, right now or in the future.

At this point, Brill was like an apparition, something present but intangible, with which he interacted in a parallel world. Or perhaps Jenton was the apparition, trapped in his own awareness. Even if they did let him out to see Brill today he wouldn't remember. Would it even matter? It would, it must. Even if nobody knew, even if *they* didn't remember afterwards, its existence gave it importance, made it greater than any dream or fancy of the mind. It was easy to make something up, to actually happen was special. The distinction between being forgotten or not provided only a figment of consequentiality. The experienced instant became endless, love transcending

what was lost. When they were together once again, even if it was only for the moment, that would be everything.

Jenton sighed and looked at the clock. It seemed to have barely changed. At least there was tomorrow morning — Brill and he could have each other then. He got up and tried to pass the time. He made a fresh pot of coffee, cleaned out his mug, lined up the container of powdered creamer and packets of sugar and a stirrer. Refolded the newspaper and straightened out the stacks. Pulled the table out and tried to see how long he could ride his skateboard around it without pushing or stopping. Once he made it almost four times, and when he did a hip-scoot to complete the revolution the board got away from him and while he tumbled backwards it flew off at the television, lodging its nose in the wall next to it. He looked at the camera and then at the clock. It was just about time.

He sat down and spent a few minutes reciting the codes to himself, reinforcing them in his mind. He remembered them as a logical chain, each character associated with an object in a space which he traversed along a specific route. It was easier than his earlier assignments, not just because it was shorter but also because it never changed. There was no affording a mistake, though, so he made sure to practice every day before taking protection.

When he was done he fixed himself a cup of coffee and took out the pill and rolled it in his hand. It looked like a pellet of dark glass. He pulled it close to his face and could just barely make out his reflection in it, a tiny image of himself warped over the capsule's surface as if he had been replicated in miniature and trapped inside it. His mind twitched and for an instant he could have sworn he was looking at Brill, and when he moved his hand towards him they reached for one another. Jenton put the pill back on the table and sat back, clamped his hand over his mouth, closed his eyes. He moved his other hand in front of his face, clearly saw its shadow.

He got up and watched the clock then went and hit the switch by the entrance. The room went completely black. There was no light, not even from under the door. He felt his way back to the couch and lay down. His eyes were wide open and in little time Brill is in front of him, over him. He reaches to him, pulls him close, breathes him in, smoke and cologne and sweat. There is a touch across his cheek, gentle and hot, along his face and down his neck to his chest. A hand pulls at his tie, works at his buttons, slips below his shirt, feels down his chest, down around his body, down lower into his pants. It squeezes his ass, lifts it, moves them together. They press into one another, press tight and stiff, begin to move in unison. They rub with no space between, can feel each other's heat, skin, heartbeat. He pulls his head towards him, touches his lips, nibbles, smiles, reaches his tongue out, licks, tastes, shares, holds tight like the grasped pill for just a bit longer.

...it's out of sight...

The city looked dead, deserted. An alien texture of rooftops and towers and canyoned streets rushed by, hid suddenly by a blank sound wall, then revealed again, the same mysterious highlights and shadows arranged differently. Unlit streetlights flicked past with useless regularity. Moonlight rippled unevenly across the glass face of a dark building. An exit ramp descended into murk. It felt strange and arcane but also familiar, like a civilization recently abandoned. A few cars were on the freeway with him — ahead, behind, moving opposite — yet they seemed not part of the surroundings but wanderers just like him, a night driver, witnesses come upon an oblivion which might clutch them forever if they paused to consider it. There was a sign ahead and he turned on his high beams and white letters on green confirmed the name of the city, downtown ahead, distance irrelevant. Frunk checked his watch. There was a long ways to go but it was also still very early. He tried to think of Phibbley Park, bright, wondrous, magic. But the lifelessness outside was overwhelming. Anticipation thwarted, comfort vexed, he sped up, hastening their passage. Though he knew that escape was not far off, he couldn't shake the sense that the city fading away into the black distance actually had no end.

'Stop it.'

'What?'

'Stop. It.'

'Sssh!'

Silence for a while, then:

'Ouch!'

'I barely touched you.'

'Hey — your mother is trying to sleep.'

‘Her legs are all on my side.’

‘I can’t get comfortable. You have plenty of room, short stuff.’

‘Just stay on your half!’

‘Sssh!’ Frunk reached back and grabbed blindly in the space behind the seats. He got a hold of a leg and squeezed.

‘Hey! It wasn’t me!’

There was giggling and Frunk let go and swung his arm to the opposite side, flailing around, a double dunk swipe touching only seat. He looked in the mirror and in the shadows saw Clo scrunched up into the corner. Both were giggling now. Next to him Blonda made like she was going to sit up then twisted into a different position. Frunk shook his finger around at the back seat.

‘If your mother wakes up you two are in big trouble,’ he hissed. ‘You both need to go back to sleep. I don’t even know why you’re awake.’

‘I was until she started touching me.’

‘I can’t get comfortable, Dad.’

‘Well figure it out. And keep to yourself. This line, can you see this? Don’t cross it. Sssh, I don’t want to hear another peep. Go to sleep or at least be quiet. Mom needs to rest and you’re not helping. Got it? Got it? Good.’

Frunk returned his hand to the wheel and glanced over at Blonda. In the distance behind her a group of buildings or a town was lit up, yellow lights blurring into a hazy glow. The power hadn’t gone off yet. Maybe it wouldn’t, maybe it had already ended. He looked in the rearview. The kids were facing out their windows. He could see the light sparkling in Clo’s eyes, and he was pretty sure Snell’s were open too. He wanted to tell them there was no point looking right now, that they should save it for later. Instead he gripped the steering wheel, torqued it, trying to bend it between his hands. It didn’t yield.

The countryside seemed beyond dark. In fact, it was so dark Frunk wasn’t even certain it was the country. For all he knew, out there, not very far off the freeway, was a town whose extinguished lights rendered it identical to dusty farmland or a grove of trees or something else which he wouldn’t even know to imagine. He searched in the gloom for signs of manmade structures — powerpoles supporting barren wires, moonlight catching on a sharp corner or pane of glass, a horizon of buildingtops. As he scanned the sky looking for its edge he realized it was full of stars, innumerable stars, more than he’d ever believed existed. Frunk looked all over, awestruck by the immensity, trying to identify recognizable constellations but instead lost in the seemingly infinite patterns that formed against the night’s blackness. In one area there were so many stars they appeared to bleed into one another, dissociability dissolving

into a hazy streak. Checking the road ahead, Frunk realized the view would be even more impressive without the headlights, so he flicked them off and was instantly pitched into an vertiginous loss of bearing, feeling as if he was veering off the highway in both directions at once and also above it and into it and he quickly turned the lights back on and was frozen for a moment in disbelief that he was still centered in a lane that extended straight out in front of him.

When he had calmed down he glanced at the stars again and decided this was special, something the whole family should see. He knew none of them would remember it, but it seemed a waste not to share this moment. He looked at the kids in the mirror, about to call to them, when he saw a pair of lights approaching from behind. Even in the dark he could tell they were coming fast and he decided to wait until they passed before waking anyone. As they got closer they seemed to slow and when the car did go by on the left it was not the expected blur but a smooth overtaking. Slow enough for Frunk to notice the make of the car if he hadn't been distracted by the driver, a young woman illuminated by an interior light who was holding a mirror on the steering wheel and fixing her hair. Very young. So young that the more he thought about it the more Frunk didn't believe she should be driving, let alone in the dark and that fast and while distracted.

He floored the accelerator and though his car was struggling he eventually caught up and was prepared to flag the kid down and get her off the road when he got a good, steady look at her. She was without a doubt a fully developed woman yet had the appearance of a girl closer to Snell's age, as if she were at once a grown adult and just entering puberty. It was a garish and immature look which feigned immodesty and innocence. Frunk kept looking over at her, confused and intrigued, and it wasn't until the third or fourth glance that he noticed she was returning his gaze. Smiling, winking, she even blew him a kiss. He felt himself blush and turned forward, then stole another peek. She had her head back, laughing. He looked over at Blonda, then at the kids. It was so dark he could barely tell that they were asleep. So dark that the woman probably couldn't really see him. He reached up and turned on the interior light and winced at brightness and reflection off of the windshield. But by the time he'd acclimated and looked over to show her his face she had already pulled ahead like a dragster and was accelerating away forever. Frunk clicked off the light and adjusted himself and listened nervously as everyone shifted around in the once again dark until eventually they settled back down without waking.

Down the road there was a pair of red lights that were almost far enough away to meld into one. He'd been following them for the last few minutes, maybe longer. Frunk found they made the driving easier, a straightline sight

for him to aim at. When there was a curve he got advance notice. They were an indicator of the near future that lessened his need to concentrate on the oncoming unknown right in front of him. A sign passed indicating services ahead. The gas gauge was approaching E. He watched the lights to see if they would veer away or brighten. He was at the exit and they had not moved. He released the accelerator but hesitated, reluctant to lose his beacon. Then he realized he had no idea how much further until the next chance and he turned suddenly, cutting across a dirt shoulder and bouncing onto the ramp. The changes in traction caused the car to jerk against his intentions and it swerved and squealed across the pavement a few times before he was able to steady it and by then he had already blown a stop sign and was cutting crosswise across a thankfully empty two-lane road and into a darkened gas station.

‘Mmmm, everything OK?’ said Blonda, reaching out for him but still mostly asleep.

‘Just filling up,’ said Frunk, acting cool, trying to control his panting. He checked the back where the kids were slumped into the middle, curled over one another like adorable kittens.

The station was completely unlit, as was everything else within sight. He got out anyway and tried filling the tank but nothing happened. He walked over to the store and tried the door which was locked. In the glass he could see his moonlit reflection and got close to look past it. The view fogged from his breath and he wiped it clear and it was like he was actually entombed inside the store, too substantial to see through. Then something glowed in his mouth and his hand removed the cigarette and he fell back in shock. The door unlocked and a head poked out along with a rifle barrel.

‘You get out of here.’

Frunk told him he was looking for gas.

‘Power’s out, pump’s out. It’s the same everywhere. You ain’t gonna make it much further.’ The figure took a drag from his cigarette and blew it out deliberately. ‘There’s a rest stop down the road. I suggest you wait the day out there. It fills up quick’

He started to close the door and Frunk stopped him.

‘You wouldn’t happen to have any gas cans, would you?’

‘You trying to get yourself hurt?’

‘No, I—’

The gun cocked. ‘Then you better move along.’

Frunk backed up. He was supposed to already have supplies for plan B anyway, but didn’t actually know. When he got to the car he could still see the figure’s outline in front of the store, or maybe it was inside. Nevertheless he opened the trunk to check, lifting the lid just enough to confirm that he had not forgot.

* * *

Frunk shuffled past the cars in a crouch, peering through their windows for anyone inside. He slid between two and reached up to feel their hoods. Both warm. He slunk back, staring into the blackness where the bathrooms were, watching for anyone exiting, for anyone who might have spotted him on his secret quest. He continued down the line, past a number of empty spaces until he got to the end where a large motorhome was parked. He put the cans by the rear wheel and knelt and listened. It was silent. In front of him the freeway was lost to the darkness, the rest stop's exit seeming to go nowhere. After warming his hands with a few breaths he slowly unscrewed the gas cap and slid the tube down into the tank. With his face close to the ground, close to the cans, he began to suck fummy air, his lips barely able to hold a seal in the cold.

'Pee-ugh! What's that smell?'

'It's just a little gas. It spilled while I was filling us up.'

In the back Snell began to cough.

'Is that safe?'

'It's fine. It'll evaporate away in a bit.'

'It's giving me a headache.'

'Why don't you open your window?'

'It's freezing.'

'Put on your coat. Your father can turn up the heater.'

Snell was still coughing. Clo lowered her window and immediately a pulsing began to reverberate in the cabin.

phthumphthumphthumphchoughthumphchoughthumphthump

Everyone seemed to groan at once. Frunk pulled at his window's crank and the second it cracked the pressure wave in his head cleared. The air was ice on his skin. His jacket had gotten saturated and so he'd stuffed it into the trunk. He turned up the heat and aimed as many vents in his direction as possible.

'My head still hurts.'

'Just go back to sleep.' He had to yell over the wind.

'I'm too cold.'

'Just go back to sleep.'

In the din Snell's coughing was muffled. '*gorf*' Frunk looked back and saw he had wrapped a blanket around his face.

'You still OK to drive?'

He patted Blonda's knee then put his hand back up to adjust the vent.

'I'm fine. Just go back to sleep.'

* * *

It felt like they were in the middle of nowhere. Frunk checked the time but didn't know what to do with it. He looked around for something that looked familiar. It was just gloomy fields and further back hills or mountains, indeterminately far, their boundary defined by stars like he had never seen before, as if the sky had become littered with uncountable new worlds. An irregular band stretched across this lightpricked sky like a wound glowing with celestial blood. He leaned forward, almost touching the window, to follow its writhing sameness before it disappeared behind the threshold of the roofline. It seemed something to wake the kids for. An approaching sign pulled his attention away and revealed the distance to three cities. Frunk sighed, relieved — they were on schedule. The wakeup call must have happened just as planned. He looked at his wife, at the kids in the back seat, all contorted, slackfaced. He was amazed that he had kept them on time, proud of whatever he had done to get them up and out the door and on the road. He imagined grumbling, dragging, cajoling. Someone too long in the bathroom. Someone returned to sleep in bed. A scramble to get ready, panic that something was forgot. Then he saw smiles, joy, everyone walking, hugged together. Those now slumped forms come alive with happiness and excitement. It was going to be fantastic. He couldn't wait.

The warmth inside the car made him feel soft, lulling Frunk away from the harsh monotony of the road. He shook his head, turned off the heater. Put the thermos between his legs and unscrewed the cap and though he could tell it was empty tilted it back and got a couple drops of coffee. He straightened up, stretched, yawned, held his eyes wide. It was too stuffy. A faint smell of gasoline seemed to weigh on his consciousness. He started to roll down his window but the air sounded like a tornado and he yanked it closed. Though short, the blast of sound and cold provided a buzz and he thought he'd be fine again however soon he was struggling against the weight of a fatigue that seemed beyond resistance. He kept fighting: vents were opened to the outside air, the radio turned on (not too loud) but was only static, songs sung under his breath, his hand gently slapped his cheeks, then harder, and harder. They needed to keep moving, stopping to rest would only mean less of the day for fun. Given the hour they were hopefully well past halfway, though he really didn't know. He was running against the clock, a time pilot navigating through seconds known only to him, progress meaningless but for its destination, which was inevitable, which could not slip away, which was slipping, with him, slipping, easing into a comfort—

Frunk jerked up. He looked around. How long did he go? It seemed like only a moment. Yes, everything was fine, it must have only been a moment. He just wouldn't let that happen again. He rubbed his eyes, concentrated on the road lines in front of him, on staying between the solid and the dashed.

That was all he had to do. They'd come a long way, what was left was surely less than what he'd already done. He adjusted the air onto his face, cold to keep himself sharp. Where was his jacket? He didn't need it now but he hoped he hadn't forgotten it. The lines seemed to never change. Perhaps waver or lean or skip but that was barely a blink forgotten on their return to a straightness that extended off to some vanishing point beyond the car's lights, a terminus marked by Phibbly Park, maybe Everaft Castle no that was the center and these plain monotonous lines wouldn't hold inside and instead must touch just at the entrance because beyond that everything was curves and the boring order left behind and at last time was fun oh look the train was coming

Frunk shook and in a wave of panic the road and car and everything that wasn't where he was rushed into his present. He had definitely left — how did he not crash? He looked at Blonda, at Clo and Snell leaning on her. They were peaceful, oblivious. His heart was pounding but he could feel exhaustion still dragging him away. Could he trust himself? He'd rather have a shorter day than lose it altogether, especially after having made it this far, however far. Frunk wasn't sure he wouldn't drift off before they came to another exit so he just slowed down and pulled off onto the shoulder. While he was trying to make his mind work through whether he should leave the car running or not Blonda stirred and when he told her he needed a little rest she said she could drive.

'Give me an hour or two and I'll be fine.'

'It's OK, I've slept a lot. And look, it's already getting light.'

Frunk turned and saw a haze lifting at the horizon.

'Are we there?' Snell said drowsily from the back.

'No, your father needs to rest so I'm going to take over.'

'Hmm.'

Frunk yawned and opened the door and stepped out into the crisp morning to switch places with his wife.

Frunk weaved and jostled his way past the people who were converging around the entrance to the park. The crowd was getting less dense as he moved away, rather than one compressed mass it was now individual globules of families or couples or strangers spread around without purpose other than to maintain separating space. He improvised a path through the gaps and tried to make eye contact with as many as possible, sending his glare out in all directions in search of sympathetic frustration or as a warning for the just-coming-in who did not realize their eager delight was about to hit a wall. Or rather a locked gate. And a line of armed guards on the roof. Guards! Behind him he could just barely hear the megaphoned voice. The words were

indistinct now but he knew what they were saying: *Phibbley Park was closed, trespassers would be shot, go home.* How was this possible? The agent had assured him that they had backup generators, that the park would still be running. That they never closed.

A kid in a floppy-billed Mr. Phibb hat ran in front of him and Frunk had to skid and lean to avoid him. He watched the kid sprinting around aimlessly and his ire turned to disgust and pity. This was as good as it would get for this poor little guy. In a few minutes his joy would be shattered. Frunk felt like crying. He turned around and looked out at the tower of Everaft Castle reaching high up into the sky. It was *right there*. They had come so far only to be stopped when it was so close. He raised his fists and shook them at it and screamed. He turned around and the kid was right in front of him, no longer running around, staring up at him in blank awe. With shame Frunk looked away and stepped around and kept moving along.

They were supposed to be waiting by the ticket booth, but he couldn't see them. Or maybe this wasn't the right booth. He faced the entrance, trying to recall if this was the same angle as when he'd left them. Around the gate the crowd seemed to be roiling. It looked like one of the guards was pointing a gun down at them. Frunk was queasy. This was not what it was supposed to be like. This was not the Phibbley spirit. And where was his family? He looked to each side — there were dozens of booths, all identical, stretched across the plaza in an arc which appeared to have no ends. He didn't see anyone he recognized. How could he have lost them? Why didn't they wait? Suddenly, he felt the urge to just lay down on the concrete and close his eyes and let the day be through. He dropped his head and stared at his feet, at the long shadow stretching off from them, a languid image of his repose.

'Dad!'

He looked up. Nobody appeared interested in him. He figured it must've been for someone else.

'Dad!'

He spun around. Snell was running heavy-footed up to him.

'Didn't you hear us? We've been calling for you.' Snell pointed and Frunk saw Blonda and Clo standing out at the edge of the parking lot with a small group. They were waving. 'Come on, these guys are going to help us get in.'

When he reached them they all started out into the parking lot without introducing him. The 'guys' looked like high school dropouts. Clo was walking with an insanely tall skinny kid with a pimply face and a leather jacket who swayed like he might topple at any moment. In the lead were a mismatched pair, one wearing a loose dress sweater and slacks that looked filched from daddy's wardrobe. The other had on an wrinkly, unbuttoned, garishly-patterned dress shirt over a t-shirt and a pair of large, all-black

sunglasses. A single earring dangled from one side, glinting in the sun. Snell was rushing to keep up with them. Off to the side were two girls, each with their hair frizzed and teased high, their outfits seemingly composed not of clothes but hundreds of accoutrements patched together. One of them was wearing fishnets on one leg and shredded jeans on the other that met in the center with ambiguous modesty. Frunk watched her backside, trying to fathom what he was or was not seeing. He asked Blonda what was going on.

‘Well, while we were waiting for you Clo met Sidt and—’

The lumbering giant reached a hand out. Frunk took it loosely, afraid he might accidentally pull him over.

‘Sidt Rex, sir.’ He spoke like he was someplace else, like maybe ten seconds in the future or the past. ‘You have a beautiful daughter.’ Clo grinned up at him dreamily. ‘Your wife, too.’

Blonda had a look of demure appreciation. ‘Sidt’s father is the head electronic’

‘electrical’

‘electrical engineer at Phibbly Park. He has a key to the back door.’

‘Wait, the park’s closed. They’re not letting anyone inside.’

His family and everyone else already knew about that, and even though he already knew about it too Frunk felt out of the loop.

‘Is this safe? Those guards had guns.’

The kid in the loose clothes turned around. ‘Who, the Phibblers? They’re harmless.’

‘Phibblers?’

‘Yeah, that’s our name for people obsessed with Phibbly Park. They get season passes and are here all the time — probably way more than all of us put together. They’re real sticklers for the way things are run and expect a “magical” experience every time. As far as they’re concerned, they’re protecting the integrity of the park by not letting anyone in while it’s out of service.’

‘So those guards aren’t employees?’

‘Oh hell no. We got better things to do than spend the day worrying about the experience of a bunch of park crashers.’

‘Yeah,’ said Sidt, ‘pop says anybody dumb enough to come when they know the power’s out deserves what they get.’

Blonda snorted. Frunk looked away, hurt.

‘I’m sorry honey,’ she said, ‘this is great, it’s going to be a great day. Theo’s going to make it really special.’

‘Theo?’

Loose clothes raised his hand. ‘Theo Ruxtabin. And this here’s Grubby Roach. We work at the park. I sell monogrammed eyepatches on Isle Adrift and Grubby plays Phooey — you know, Mr. Phibb’s nephew.’

Grubby handed something to Snell and spun around. While walking backwards he launched into a cartoonish-looking soft-shoe which built to a wild pirouette ending with an exaggerated flailing out and Grubby staring over his glasses like a goof. The two girls were giggling and clapping.

‘Isn’t he cute?’

Grubby bowed and turned forward. They were far away from the entrance now, the park hidden behind a row of towering trees. The asphalt here was cracked and weedy. It smelled vaguely of trash. Despite the shabby surroundings and the ragtag group, Frunk had the impression that they were a vanguard leading the way towards undiscovered treasures. Grubby elbowed Snell who, after a second, handed him a cigarette and began to cough big clouds of smoke.

‘Did you see that?’ Frunk said to Blonda. Then calling out: ‘What do you think you’re doing letting a kid smoke?’

‘I’m not a kid, dad.’

‘Come on Frunk,’ said Blonda, ‘we’re on vacation. Let him experiment a little. It’s not like he can get addicted or anything. Besides, we were younger than that when we first started.’

‘Yeah but— Hey, you! What do you have to say for yourself? Think it’s OK to corrupt the innocent?’

‘Oh, he don’t talk,’ said Theo. ‘When he’s on site he tries to stay in character.’

Without turning around, Grubby put his arms up in an exaggerated shrug. Snell reached up to his outstretched hand and snagged the cigarette.

‘You need to lighten up, mister,’ said the bifurcated leggings girl. ‘Around here everyone smokes. You should see Princess Pearl — six years old and goes through a pack a day.’

The girl had turned toward him and Frunk found himself staring at her, unable to distinguish in the patchwork what was clothes or skin or something else entirely. She seemed intrigued by his gaze.

‘I’m Bindy.’

‘Uh, Frunk,’ spoken with an awkward wave. He could feel Blonda’s warning eye at his side.

‘We work with Grubby. We’re dancers...’

The other girl nodded. ‘I’m Barthe.’ She was wearing overalls that were mottled with something dark like grease stains. She was looking at Bindy more than Frunk.

‘...in the parades. *Hello New Day* in the morning and *’Til Tomorrow* at sundown.’

‘Alright, we’re here,’ said Theo.

The lot had narrowed to an access road bordered on each side by tall concrete walls covered in thorn bushes. In front of them was a large brown

dumpster blocking most of the path. Theo and Grubby went over and leaned against it. Nothing happened until Snell joined them, making a dramatic effort with his spindly body at which point the metal wheels slowly began to crunch as the dumpster moved over the rough surface. Underneath it was a flat metal plate secured with a round lock. Sidt tossed a ring of keys to Theo, then snaked Clo in his arm and pulled her towards him.

‘It’s hella dark down there but I’ll be your light.’

Clo wrapped her arms around him and tilted her head up and he leaned down and with wide open mouths they began to kiss.

‘Hey!’ cried Frunk. ‘Hands off! Get over here Clornetta.’

‘Oh geez come on dad. Sidt and I are in love.’

‘What? When did that happen? During this romantic stroll over the blacktop? Do you know how old she is? I could have you arrested.’

‘I doubt it.’ Sidt wasn’t even looking at Frunk, was watching Theo work the lock.

Frunk turned to his wife, searching for support. She wasn’t giving any.

‘What? We didn’t come all this way so our daughter could get seduced by some string bean. He could be a serial killer.’

‘You don’t understand, dad.’ Clo was on her tip-toes, stroking at Sidt’s hair. ‘He’s perfect.’

‘We’re not going anywhere if you keep that up. Come over here.’

Sidt had taken a step away from her. They were still holding hands. ‘It’s cool, babe, if you have to stay behind. I won’t forget you. I promise we’ll find each other again, someday.’

Clo started to cry, her back to her father. ‘I’m not going to leave you.’

‘Who said anything about leaving anyone behind?’ said Frunk. ‘We can all go, just no lovey-dubby stuff.’

Sidt was shaking his head. It looked like it might fall off. ‘That won’t work. If she’s not with me, then we can’t bring any of you.’

Frunk glanced around, dumbfounded. Everyone was staring at him. Theo, Grubby, and Snell were kneeling expectantly behind a round black hole. Bindy was leaning against Barthe and pouting, her hand pulling at whatever apparatus passed for a collar. Blonda’s face was disappointment. Clo was clinging to Sidt and sobbing into his jacket. This was not how it was supposed to be. This was a Growder family vacation! He thought of the four of them walking through Phibbley Park, arm-in-arm, laughing. Why did all these others have to get in the way? Why did the park have to close? He looked at everyone, at Bindy. Turned towards the park, saw the spire of Everaft Castle touching the sky. Maybe it would be fine. They would still be together. He looked at his daughter crying, started to tear up himself. This couldn’t be the end. He nodded and agreed, as long as they kept it away from him. There was a hum of approval, a few claps. Frunk was smiling

and crying. He held out his arms for everybody to embrace but they all had moved past him to gather around the hole.

The tunnel was nearly pitch black, the only light coming from the beam of Theo's flashlight swirling ahead and Sidt's wavering around from behind, mostly across the ceiling to check its height. Everyone was shuffling through in an unkempt line, their arms reaching out to feel for one another and whatever obstacles might be lurking in the dark chambers. Theo was talking, presumably to Snell, explaining how there was an entire underground world to Phibbley Park that most people never knew about, a tunnel system that extended everywhere and interconnected everything and even stretched beyond the boundaries of the park, perhaps in anticipation of future expansion, perhaps leading to secret destinations subterranean or not whose existence were beyond his purview. His voice began to get louder and Frunk realized they were bunching together, that Theo had stopped and was wanting to confer with the other employees.

'We're right below Rabble Square. This is the kitchen here and the elevator used to raise the guillotine is back there.'

Frunk was surprised that old act hadn't been retired. It was lighthearted but pretty intense for little ones.

Theo and Barthe (or Frunk thought it was Barthe) were discussing which way to go. Theo wasn't used to coming from this direction and was afraid of getting disoriented. They decided how they wanted to go and started off again.

'Do they still do the talking head in a basket routine?' Frunk couldn't tell who was around him, so he spoke out for anyone to hear.

'Oh yeah, that's one of my favorites.' It sounded like Bindy, somewhere just in front of him. 'I've seen it — it's all mirrors and springs — but I don't actually understand how it works. I know one of the girls who plays in it. She's totally rad, has a great time freaking everyone out.'

From behind there was a spooky voice. '*How long does a head live after the body's removed?*'

Everyone laughed. Frunk shuffled forward a little faster, put his hand out, felt hair, pulled back. He reached out again, felt something soft and smooth — a jacket? a shoulder? a chest? Someone giggled from a different direction. That sounded like Bindy. Frunk reached out to that side.

'Hey, is that you?'

That was Blonda, probably, from behind. Frunk moved over and reached back. Someone came up along his other side. He felt for a hip. Another giggle, over his shoulder. He moved sideways again and grazed his hand across the person in front of him.

'Whoops, sorry!'

Definitely Blonda, but now far out in front. Too far. He put his hand flat out, gently pressing on the coat. There was breathing at his ear. A trip of feet further behind and a girl cried out. Barthe? Bindy? No, he was sure Bindy was right in front of him. He pushed forward and swept his hand to the side and instead of soft coat it was a face.

‘Oh — watch it!’ said Snell.

Frunk jerked his hand away and apologized and slipped back behind his son. He let him know he was there and reached out to rest a certain hand on the shoulder in front of him.

Frunk struggled up the ladder and through the manhole, only the third one out after Grubby and Theo. He’d thought that his family was ahead of him, but in the rush to get into the park their order must have switched. He was in a small alley between two rustic walls with false windows a few clusters of painted-on stonework. Through an iron gate he could see across a lane to row of quaint, fairytale buildings with unsquare framing and wavy roofs. Even though they were dark inside he could imagine what was within: creaking wooden floors, well-used and patinaed furniture, an open fireplace, candles and gas lanterns for light, exposed beams, old glasswork. A woman wearing a puffy dress tidying up. Or a man in a tunic selling souvenir wares. Somewhere nearby would be the wishing well, the joust slide, the unicorn stables, the miniature door leading to the toadstool garden, the spiral stairs into the castle dungeon. Cobblehatch Terrace was his favorite part of Phibbley Park.

Grubby unlocked the gate and Frunk walked out into the street. Everything was shut down and empty but it was still like he had stepped into a different world, one tapped into his dreams and imagination, that felt of a past he’d never actually lived yet was deeply familiar, enchanting, comfortable.

‘It’s all a trick, you know.’

Frunk turned and saw Bindy standing next to him, gazing around thoughtfully. She was wearing a badge with the iconic Mr. Phibb circle-and-bill outline. It said: BINDULA SOTTER CUBBLE.

‘The buildings are actually slanted and curve away so we can’t see the end of the road. It makes it seem bigger than it actually is, like it could go on forever. It’s pretty incredible, though. I mean, like, I’m here all the time, I know what’s behind and underneath all of this, that this building is just a giant bathroom inside and that one has a water tank in case there’s a fire. I know that’s not wood, that’s not two stories, that door doesn’t work, that those four houses are actually a ride. Yet I come out here and look around and it’s like none of that is true. I *believe*. It’s not just that I want to, but I do.

‘I don’t mind it, I mean, I love the feeling. But I don’t think I could deny it if I tried.’

There was a nudge at his side and Frunk looked over to see Snell standing next to him. He put an arm around him and began to speak.

‘When I was a kid my parents took us here. I swear it hasn’t changed at all. So many things from my childhood seem small now, but not this. It’s like it’s grown with me, or maybe here we’re always the same. See that arch over there? A jester came through that juggling and doing backflips. He put on a little show and picked your Aunt Ada from the crowd and did this thing where he kept pulling scarves out of her ears and clothes and they were flying everywhere and by the time they all fluttered down she was holding a giant lollipop. It was as big as her head and wrapped in cellophane with a big bow. She came running over so happy holding it out for all of us to see and you know what happened? Your Uncle Ev grabbed that lollipop and smashed it on the ground. Shattered into a million pieces in the plastic. The jester saw this and came over, picked up the lollipop and ran a scarf over it and right in front of our eyes it turned whole again. Then he shook his finger at Ev, gave him a playing card (the joker, of course), touched the top of his head, and right in the middle of his hair a regular-sized lollipop appeared, a miniature version of what you Aunt Ada got. Ev didn’t even notice. The jester looked at me slyly and winked and then went back to his show. We were all laughing because Ev was too busy playing with that card and didn’t have a clue even later when the lollipop finally slipped off and Aunt Ada picked it up and gave it to him as though in forgiveness.’

‘Take this in, Snell, remember it. Someday it will feel really special.’

‘Close your eyes.’

He turned to Bindy who was staring at him with dreamy fascination. She grinned and nodded encouragingly. He looked back at Snell and shrugged and they both shut their eyes.

A voice arose. Cheerful, modest. Pitched high but not feminine. It was Mr. Phibb, Phibbly Park’s platypus mascot. ‘Awww, phew. We were afraid you wouldn’t make it. It’s going to be the best day now that you’re here. Take my hand and I’ll lead the way.’ Frunk laughed and reached out, half-expecting to actually grasp a gloved flipper. ‘On second thought, maybe you should go first. Hoo boy, I shouldn’t’ve eaten those beans last night. I’m a gas balloon. You definitely don’t want to be behind me.’

‘Hey, that’s not funny.’ Frunk’s eyes were open, the spell broken. Bindy and Barthe were standing to the side snickering. He stepped in front of them. ‘You can’t do that, especially here. Have some respect.’

‘Take it easy, man,’ said Barthe. ‘It’s just a joke, just words.’

‘Mr. Phibb is not a joke.’

'I thought it was pretty good,' said Snell. 'You had the voice perfect.' He lifted his butt and made a big wet fart sound with his tongue.

'Hey,' said Bindy, gently touching Frunk's arm, 'it's just kidding around. We didn't mean anything by it.' Her eyes glinted in the sunlight. His irritation melted away.

Barthe handed Bindy a cigarette. She offered the pack to Frunk. 'I'll take one,' said Snell and moved so quick that Frunk's objection never got past his hung-open mouth. All but Frunk lit up and he smelled the smoke and an old urge and left out and relented, gesturing for one. While she held the lighter out for him he noticed that Barthe had a badge like Bindy's: BARTHE DAIR. He asked her about it.

'These are our employee passes. It means we're allowed to be here, in case we get caught.'

'What about us? Should we get them?'

She laughed. 'You don't work here.'

'What happens if we, uh, get caught?'

'Guess you're on your own.'

There was a commotion behind them and when Frunk looked around he saw Blonda yelling and wagging her finger at Sidt while Grubby stood between them, holding her back. Clo was on her knees holding onto Sidt's leg. Frunk rushed over.

Blonda turned to him and went silent, grabbed the cigarette from his mouth and threw it away, then continued at her original enraged volume. 'He makes a big old scene about how it's Clo or nothing and now he's going to leave her. Look at her, he's breaking her heart.'

Sidt was dangled over peeling at Clo's fingers and shaking his leg to free himself. 'You'll only be in the way,' he said.

'But I want to be with you.'

'You are babe, always. I'll be right back.'

He got one of her hands unclasped and with a kick shucked her off. As Clo rolled away Sidt immediately began to jog backwards, loping like a stork. Frunk and Blonda both rushed to their daughter's side. She was reaching out to Sidt, calling for him. Blonda cradled Clo tight to her, barking at the retreating boy: 'Asshole!' She told Frunk to go after him but he was too far away and, besides, Frunk wasn't disappointed to see him go. Instead he asked Theo what was going on.

'He's going to try to get the power on for Cosmos Zoom.'

'Power?'

'Yeah, there's generators, but they're only hooked up to emergency circuits — lights and intercoms and stuff like that. He's trying to reconfigure things so that it'll run the coaster.'

'He can do that?'

Theo shrugged. ‘Hasn’t been able to yet, or at least that’s what Grubby tells me. How many tries?’ Grubby held up three fingers. ‘So we’ll see. In the meantime we’ll go in and run the thing under gravity. Get your daughter up and let’s get moving.’

‘Wait, I thought we’d spend some time here.’

‘Naw man, why do you think we brought you here? We’re doing the Zoom.’

‘Won’t it be completely dark in there?’

‘It’s supposed to be...’

‘But we’re already here.’

‘This place ain’t going nowhere. Come on, Forth City is just past the bend up here.’

Blonda had lifted Clo up and was rubbing the back of her head. They followed after Snell and the two girls, who were already a ways down the street.

Frunk looked back, saw Everaft Castle looming behind them. He hadn’t noticed it before. He knew on the other side of it was Hilo Corral and Lodestar Valley, Isle Adrift and The Lost Jungle.

‘We’re coming back?’

Theo wasn’t next to him anymore and didn’t stop walking away while he spoke. ‘Yeah, sure. When we’re done y’all are free to go wherever you want.’

Frunk took a couple steps then stopped and turned around. Cobblehatch Terrace was empty, suddenly lifeless. It had changed. It seemed constructed of little recognizable elements that had lost their synthesis. That they were recognizable did not give them meaning, that they had once appeared whole did not give them sense. It felt forced, an idea he was supposed to accept without challenge. He saw painted-on wood and concrete straw, plastic flowers and windows into nothing, an electrical outlet, a trash can, a skid mark. He tried to remember where the water tank was, which door was fake. It didn’t matter. He knew they were there somewhere and the illusion manufactured from references real and imagined collapsed. Could they really ever come back?

Someone called to him. He closed his eyes and turned and started to walk without looking. He didn’t open them until he tripped and almost fell over a crack in the asphalt or a manhole cover or maybe his own shoes. In front of him was the other half of Cobblehatch Terrace and his family walking through it with a handful of strangers. Blonda and Clo had their arms around each other. Snell was looking at something that Barthe or Bindy was pointing at. And then, just like that, without noticing when or how, as if a spell had been cast or lifted, everything returned. The buildings no longer seemed facades, he could sense the depth that lay behind them. Whatever supposed truth that resided within them had been dispelled. This

was the place he knew so well, a magical land, of love and family and forever memories. Frunk kept himself facing forward, increased his pace, almost coming to a jog so he could catch up before everyone turned the corner and left behind this time through.

Cosmos Zoom was a roller coaster enclosed in a structure whose plain cylindricality was masked by a wrapping of polished metal tubes resembling giant compressed springs which overlapped and intertwined and, near the top, released and spiraled together into a knotty spire that wormed off into space. Inside, the dull, cornerless shroud was hidden by a lack of light, as the coaster ran in almost complete blackness except for a few glowing optical illusion mesmerizers floating about and a ceiling filled with mock stars (befittingly accompanied by an otherworldly theremin and synth soundtrack). It turned out that those stars were not, as Frunk always assumed, electric lights, but rather thousands of tiny skylights in the roof.

They had come in through a service entrance, bypassing the endless intestinal windings of stanchioned barriers used to route queues through room after room of space-filling curve, turning switchbacking limbo into an illusion of progress while still maintaining a first-come-first-served sense of order. Theo — who had the only flashlight — led them through an interstitial hall that followed the perimeter of the building, up a narrow metal staircase that climbed high into the darkness, and through a door which opened up into the actual coaster room. They stepped out onto a catwalk that for all Frunk could see could have been at ground level, at least until Theo began to shine his light downwards over the scaffolding and track supports, showing them to be many stories up. Theo was discussing with Grubby how they would get to the cars, an audibly one-sided conversation which consisted of Theo talking and pointing with the flashlight and then shining it on Grubby to observe his reactions and gestures.

While they were waiting, Frunk listened to Bindy and Barthe trying to cheer up Clo. Something about a giraffe and a cute little soldier that he didn't understand but could hear Clo laughing through sniffles. Snell called for him and he looked around and saw the faint hint of his son's face and a waving hand. He stepped over.

'Dad, check this out.'

Apparently the starfield above them was uneven at its edges and at this spot stretched down low enough so that a single, toilet paper tube-sized opening was accessible for looking through. Snell's features intensified and then disappeared into a sliver as he pressed his eye against the miniature porthole.

'Something's on fire out there.'

He moved aside to let his dad see. Frunk peered through and felt a rush of cold air — it seemed that this was just a hole, no window or other protection from the outside. Frunk wondered if all those above them were similarly open to the elements. He pulled back and rubbed his eye and through the hole heard a couple of sharp cracks. He leaned forward again and through a still-watering eye saw a view across to Everaft Castle. Off to the side, farther back, maybe in the parking lot, a black cloud of smoke was rising up into the sky.

Something caught his attention and he looked back down and saw a single person sprinting madly through Cobblehatch Terrace. At first Frunk thought it might be Sidt however the body was all wrong. Then someone else appeared, and another.

‘There’s people out there,’ he said, ‘inside the park.’

‘Let me see, dad.’

Frunk moved out of the way. Called out to everyone again, told them what he saw.

‘They keep coming,’ said Snell.

‘I guess they finally got through. This is the first time it’s happened, right Grubby?’

‘You said it would take at least two weeks, maybe forever.’

‘I don’t remember that. Guess I was wrong.’

‘Oh god, what about Sidt! He’s out there all by himself.’

‘They won’t hurt anyone. They won’t even be able to find him.’

‘What about us? Are we safe here?’

‘They’re not going to hurt anyone. Besides, why would anyone want to come in here? You can’t see anything.’

‘Well, we’re here.’

‘That’s different.’

Nonetheless, they decided to hurry and try to get at least one ride before anyone had a chance to bust in on them. Theo and Grubby had figured out a path and they all stumbled their way down together, descending ladders and traversing more catwalks until they got to the entrance/exit landing where the cars were stacked together. They moved out to the front of the line and separated the lead train and began to push it down the track. Frunk moved carefully as they walked along the platform that ran next to the track, checking his steps in the dark while he leaned against the car. They pushed the train around a sharp turn and it started to pull away and Theo told everyone to let go. There was a smooth rumble which suddenly stopped with a loud *clack-clack*. Theo guided them to stairs that led up the hill and they all began to push again. It was much more difficult than on the flat and Theo chanted a rhythm for them to move with: ‘Heave!’ *clack-clack* ‘Heave!’ *clack-clack* ‘Heave!’

Frunk was panting and sweating and his arms and legs starting to burn. Everything was black and it felt like he wasn't actually moving, not forward or upward, instead just grinding in place, floating in uncomfortable pain. He could hear everyone else groaning and it was as if they all had no choice but to endure despite getting nowhere. Finally Blonda, who was right in front of him, called out saying she needed to take a rest.

Frunk slumped down onto the steps and caught his breath.

'Is this even possible?' he said.

'Oh sure,' said Theo, from down in front of him. 'Grubby says we did the Mine Ridge Runner the other day with fewer people, and that has more cars than this.' A light flicked across Frunk's eyes. He blinked and it was gone. 'We're already more than halfway.'

He felt Blonda's feet push into him. He stretched out and leaned back, lying across her legs. Below him someone did the same across his. Something ran across his thigh, like a hand. He reached down to touch it but it was gone. Nothing was laying against him anymore. Frunk tried to remember when the flashlight shone, who was there. It might have been Bindy. He looked into the dark, almost swore he saw her looking up at him, eyes ashimmer. His foot stretched, found nothing.

He laid his head back, staring up at the false night. It seemed better than any real one he remembered. The stars were brighter, clearer, more numerous. Closer. He felt he could stay here forever. The kids should see this, he thought, Blonda too. He was just about to say something when Theo called for everyone to get going again.

It was easy at first, but soon it was more struggle, more pain. Theo had moved up to the front to 'watch the balance.' His cries no longer rushed up past them, instead they flew away, fading ahead wantingly. Frunk was crying out with him, his voice breath effort all one. He was hurting. He was going to need another break. He was—

'We made it!'

Theo called everyone up and shone his flashlight on the train. The first car was just resting at the crest. There was a discussion about who would get to ride in the front. Clo and Snell were begging to. Clo seemed to have forgotten about Sidt. Everyone was fine with the kids in the front except Theo who wanted as much weight up there as possible. Frunk agreed to join them but didn't want to abandon Blonda. She said she was fine being in the next car back. Theo wanted to put Bindy and Barthe with her but they wanted to be alone and he relented. Theo and Grubby would push from the back and hop in the final car when they started to take off.

'Here's the thing,' said Theo, 'one of you in the front has to stand.'

'Wait, what?'

Theo said it was a tradition. That you had to prove you deserved to ride in the front. It would give everyone a show.

‘I’ll have my flashlight and I’ll be shining it forward so everyone can see.’

‘What about the restraints?’

‘They don’t work with the power off. Don’t worry, this is completely safe. Grubby says Sidt did the entire Mine Run on his feet and that coaster is way crazier than this one.’

‘I’ll do it,’ said Snell.

‘Uh uh,’ said Bonda and Frunk at the same time.

‘You should do it, Mr. Growder,’ said Theo. ‘If you’re worried you can have your kids hold on to you.’

Frunk looked towards where he thought Snell and Clo were, imagined himself trying to get on their shoulders and the two of them slapping at each other and dropping him on his butt. There was no way.

‘You can totally do it dad.’ Clo’s voice was next to him, not where he expected.

‘It’ll be awesome!’ Snell had moved near Clo.

The kids egged Frunk on. Something touched his hand, squeezed it. The grip was soft yet secure.

‘Yeah, you should do it,’ said Bindy. ‘It’ll be amazing.’

Frunk glanced back, looked around. Felt them waiting, hoping, for a hero. All caps: H.E.R.O. His chest puffed and his chin rose and he agreed and there were cheers. Blonda pulled him close and whispered in his ear.

‘You sure about this?’

‘Don’t worry, I’m not doing anything. They probably won’t even notice.’

Just then the entire space lit up and just as quickly turned to darkness again. A blink of track and scaffold and each other, setting the scene differently than he had in his mind, wiping the previous picture away forever. Everyone went silent and waited. Nothing more happened. There was banging on a door somewhere in the building. It echoed around heavily in the darkness.

‘Come on, we can’t wait.’

The Growders carefully got into the front two cars. The train was pushed forward and Frunk felt himself tipping and then he stopped. He heard Bindy and Barthe giggling. The train began to move again. One final grunt from behind and the push seemed to turn to a pull and there were whoops and hollers and it felt like they were falling all the way forward and were going to run through the ground. Frunk tried to grab the bar in front of him but the kids held his hands up and he was sure they would all fly out when he was suddenly pressed into the seat and they tilted and were running a giant sideways loop that kept going and going. They flipped straight and dropped

and he lifted in the air but only for a moment and then they were going uphill and slowing down before leveling out.

‘C’mon dad, stand!’

‘Yeah! Do it!’

The kids were pulling on his arms and from behind he heard chanting: *Stand. Stand. Stand.* They were going around a bend and he knew the next drop was coming soon. He raised himself up, but stayed in a nervous crouch. He felt two hands on each wrist, gripping like vices.

‘C’mon! I got you!’

Stand. Stand. Stand.

The train tipped and rushed forward and he straightened out, tall and proud. They were falling but it felt like he was flying. He could barely keep his eyes open for the wind, though there was nothing to see. They turned into another sideways loop and it felt like he was standing on a wall. He was smiling and gritting and screaming. His kids had him and he knew he wasn’t going anywhere. The lights flickered again and he saw a flash of the track curving in front of him and back to dark and it was as though he weren’t sideways but straight and spinning in a loop, like he’d been caught inverted. They rolled and he was being pushed upside down defying gravity and then he was sideways again and the lights came on stayed on and a line rushed right at his head too fast he flinched spinning again hard then stop and the only thing he could think was that he knew the answer which was it lives at least this long because he was looking up from his wife’s lap where his body should be at her red-specked and screaming.

...know the rules...

She was awake. She remembered neither waking nor dreaming. She was not sleepy, she was not confused. It was her room. Things were the same. She didn't even have to see to know. The brass bedframe. Her grandparent's bureau. The picture frame lying facedown. The light from the gap in the drapes cutting a thin strip across the floor and far wall and ceiling back to the window. The pillow lying in the middle of the room. The jacket hanging sideways from the chairback, one sleeve hooked and the other flopped onto the carpet, surrounded by a few spilled coins. The half-finished journal entry on the desk. The awful taste in her mouth. It was as if she'd been awake but only just now became aware of her present, the time leading up to it gone. She looked at the clock. It was the same too. Was her memory of it from yesterday or a year ago? Was two weeks any different from two hundred? How could she locate when she'd first known him? She sighed and slipped out of bed, went to the bathroom to brush her teeth and potty, gazed at herself in the mirror. In the gloom and shadows she looked like a ghost, not of herself. She turned her head and the specter seemed to remain still.

She walked through the doorway back to her room, over to the window and opened the drapes. A hint of chill from the outside made it through the heat surrounding her. Over the balcony was the expanse of the city, buildings and buildingtops, trails of steam. Below she could see the street, lined with parked cars but otherwise empty. Unfamiliarly barren. She waited and watched for movement but saw nothing.

She stepped into the closet and turned on the light and began to flip through the dresses. White with tiny red dots, sailor uniform blue with gold buttons, bright lemon yellow. She'd worn that one yesterday. A green dress caught her eye and she pulled it out. It was slim and long-sleeved and she did not remember ever wearing it for him. She held it out and then

against herself and ran her arm across it. He would like this, she thought, imagining his touch through the fabric. She took it to the bed and spread it out, smoothing it, pleased with her choice. She knew the perfect shoes for it too.

She went to the intercom and pressed the button and said she'd be ready in an hour. There was no response. She tried again and waited for an answer. She looked down at the her desk and saw the scribble of her handwriting, incomplete, the thought long irrelevant. *I'm, I am without space* She flipped the journal closed. On the cover, in neat, childlike cursive, was her name. *Sajal Ellune*. She stroked it, felt the indentation of the letters. Binny still hadn't responded. That was strange. She reached to ring again but stopped. He was probably in the bathroom or something. An image crossed her mind and she shook it away. Everyone did it but she didn't need to think about it. She'd call him again after she showered.

She returned to the window and looked down at the street. It was still empty. She felt a surge of loneliness, as if everyone had gone away, as if she was the last person left. She desperately wanted to be with him, to hear his voice, feel his breath, to be held. She touched her arm. She wanted that too. It wasn't the craving, that had been gone a long time. But she needed it anyhow. She saw a twinkle and she realized there was a star still visible in the clear day's sky. Closing her eyes, she wished for another wonderful evening like the last. Then she opened them to look at the star again and it seemed bigger, much bigger. It was like her wish had caused it to swell, bringing at last warmth and

...wondering how I knew...

The solder and iron unsteadily approached each other and the lead. Through the magnifying glass they appeared still far apart but the flux began to melt and with the slightest movement — indistinguishable from the trembling — all three met, the solder wire seeming to disappear faster than the growth of the silvery pool that consumed it. The smell of hot flux that lingered in the air was sharpened by the trail of smoke rising from the new connection. Wheez Aqsn put down the iron and adjusted the light and magnifying glass to examine the joint. It looked good. He went over all the other modifications, cross-checking them with his notes — unnecessary given his familiarity but the redundancy was comforting. He'd performed the mods so many times he knew them by sight. The notes had been written just a few hours before from memory, yet to ensure that his recollections from earlier in the day matched what he had just now completed felt like an independent confirmation not only of his work but of a stability that always seemed on the precipice of faltering.

Loosely putting the cover back on, Wheez plugged everything in and configured the radio to its new mode. He put on his headphones and pulled the microphone close.

'What lesser action can there be?'

What he heard sounded like a robot voicing a spectral tongue. By switching the sideband's position the frequencies inverted and the result was reminiscent of speech but unintelligible. A different setting moved the sideband back and reversed the effect. He switched his input to run through the delay/interlace circuit he had set up using the breadboard. He began to speak and after a few seconds was tripping himself up. Chuckling, he took the headphones off, plugged the signal into the tape recorder, and tried again. When Wheez felt he had enough he rewound the tape a touch and hit play.

so here it goes ngsters are watching my show important words growing up still to get interested and maybe you'll take a little one of them suggest where you wouldn't take it walk behind the gym to dadad thing a few a few im its up to you when you start is its probably the opposite sex ll get to see it ests taking a little walk

After rewinding the tape all the way, he swapped the interlace circuit and adjusted the phase by ear. It only took a couple jumps to hone in and he heard his voice as it was minutes before:

still growing up, still in school, and maybe you'll take a little advice from me where you wouldn't take it from your mom and dadadad. So here it goes, a few a few important words. When you start to get interested in the opposite sex and one of them suggests taking a little walk behind the gym to show their...thing

The circuit split the input in two, each channel formed of alternating periods of signal and silence. Stitching them together would reconstitute the original, but instead a delay was introduced to one such that the final mesh was a mixture of present and recent past. Some of the other operators ran their units off of digital delay pedals but Wheez had most of what he needed to build it up from parts using a base design that had been passed around early in the loops. He did have to make a run out to The Ham Hock every morning to pick up a few components, which meant first stopping by Symos' to get the key since with the power out nothing was open. But that was a minor inconvenience.

As with the other measures, none of this offered true security, but by layering the obfuscations together the hope was to confuse, misdirect, and protract such that it didn't matter. Wheez, along with everyone he knew, was in full support of the power plant workers and ready to chip in to get things running again. However, the naughts had control and had used their authority to convince those who were afraid or unable to see through them or just assholes that any solution which allowed the strikers to get off without punishment was unacceptable. It was said that since the strikers were getting their vacation now, the fair outcome was for them to go back to work as before with no allowances for relief. It was said they acted in bad faith, which was obviously bullshit. They didn't want this. They weren't killers. The naughts were the ones acting bad faith. Demanding a return to the way things were, refusing progress in the name of a supposed order, spreading lies about who had let down the country. All the while everything shut down to prove a point. Fucking naughts temporal.

So he supported the cause as he could. He had a generator, he knew the protocols, he could transfer their messages. His communication network was surely one of many. For all he knew, it was just an obfuscation itself. Wheez doubted it, but nobody could be sure. Though being a false link would

serve an important purpose too, and the fact that even he didn't know gave him confidence. He worried about the equilibrium they had gotten stuck in, worried about what further kinds of misery or chaos might yet be sustainable, and knowing that their resistance remained unbroken pointed to a way out. Better days, stable days, might be as close as tomorrow.

Or weeks away. Or months. Or years. These words didn't mean anything anymore. What happens when your existing language no longer has the capability of articulating your circumstances? Or, rather, forces you to think in ways that are misaligned with actual experience? Were new words the solution? Would that break tyranny of history, of custom, of tenet? Perhaps new definitions were required. What was seven days? Why not two? Or one-thousand? Or fourteen? Yes, fourteen was more natural. Enough to keep in one's head before it began to slip away. Call it a year: This has already been going on for a year, high time things got fixed or else they might perpetuate for a couple millennium or so before we know it. Perhaps they already have. If you can't remember more than a year back how could one tell? Once you forget the start you are lost. He at least had that, a memory of the beginning, how far back it was. Though counting was just as suspect as words. Did he really know how many had passed, or was it just a guess? And was that even the right thing to measure, since, in terms of duration, no day was equal, for anybody?

Wheez looked at his watch. It was almost time. He lit a cigarette and cleared a space to work on the table by pushing aside the solder and iron and other junk. He got a notebook and a few pens from the spots where he'd already found them. The last thing to do was to take a piss and get a drink. A few minutes later he returned to the basement with a tumbler of ice and a bottle. It used to be he rarely drank and then only in the evening, but he didn't worry about that. It helped him relax, it helped him find his groove.

He disconnected the interlace and turned off the inversion. After lighting another cigarette and pouring a finger, he tuned the radio to the group frequency. Wheez waited to make sure the air was clear then spoke into the microphone.

'Crucifer Paleson is ready to receive.'

There was no response at first. Nobody waiting must have done a send yet. Or perhaps nobody was waiting. He started the timer on his watch. Just a few seconds later the radio crackled.

'Superphreak James is ready to send.'

And a second later: 'Esotrope Sphere is ready to send.'

Wheez picked two frequencies, then spoke. 'This is Crucifer Paleson. Tonedeaf Yip,' and gave the first, 'Dizzy Alopecian,' and the second. He repeated the assignment.

One at a time, the two frequencies were read back without any identification. The paired aliases were used as minimally as possible, to indicate who was speaking or being spoken to. In theory it blocked outsiders, since the only way to establish an alias was through a physical exchange, though impersonation was trivial. They did no station identification. The authorities had little means to enforce that, or didn't care. Wheez switched to the second frequency in de-inversion mode and connected his de-interlace circuit. The frequencies and targets were always swapped, so he would actually be listening to Tonedeaf/Superphreak. After a minute he started to hear numbers and adjusted his phase until the rhythm was correct. He took a drink and got another smoke. There was a pause and he pulled over his notebook and prepared to take notes. Then the transmission began, starting with a repeat of the numbers:

'10 23 21 18 15 25 91 21 31 97 52 08 62 23 14 11

'Superphreak James.

'Quackquack the doctor and Quent the president of Atom-R have made assurances that their company's food irradiation process is safe and poses no danger. In reality, they have been performing secret radiological experiments which have produced tons of toxic waste that they have been dumping into Barrel Hollow. Downriver of Barrel Hollow, of course, is the town of Zvelda. As we already know, Zvelda is a quaint place with tree-lined streets and friendly neighbors and lots of secrets that nobody wants to talk about. You may remember one of these secrets is that Quarol the cat lady has been running a puppy mill underneath her run-down mansion to supply dogs as test subjects to Atom-R.

'One night a mischievous cat got into the basement and opened a cage and a group of dogs chased it around and outside of the house and now they are a feral pack that roams the outskirts of Zvelda. Under the Slick River bridge the pack has found a safe place to hide and sleep. They come out at night to sniff around, rummage for food, maybe find a wandering cat to run off. It has become more difficult lately, though, because Quliff the dogcatcher has started coming out after sundown to search for strays. So lately the pack has been increasingly paranoid about getting caught or their den under the bridge being discovered and having to go back to Quarol the cat lady's basement. Now, they actually didn't hate living in the basement and still have no clue about the gruesome fate that would have awaited them in the Atom-R test labs. Experiencing true freedom, though, has made them deeply fearful of being trapped in a cage again. All this has resulted in the pack, for the last few days, huddling scared under the bridge and getting hungrier and snippier with each other and more fearful about their future.

'Returning back to town, it is a beautiful spring day and high schoolers Quraig and Qualeb and their twin girlfriends Quathrine and Quathy have no

interest in wasting the day in class. Quraig and the other three putz around in his car and eventually steal some beer from his dad and head out to Barrel Hollow to drink and fool around. They park at the old abandoned cabin by Slick River and sit on the porch, drinking beers and cracking jokes. Giggling and a little drunk, Quathy suggests they split up to get some time alone.

“Go inside and take the bed, we’ll stay out here,” says Quraig.

‘Unfortunately when they get to the bed Quathy and Qualeb find the mattress is stained and stinky and there are mushrooms growing out of the side. Returning to the porch they say they’d rather be outside and go down to the river instead. Nearing a riverbend, Qualeb can’t wait and pulls Quathy close but she looks back and can see her sister on the porch maybe watching them. Teasing Qualeb, she pushes him away and runs off laughing. Expecting him to easily catch her and wanting to be out of site of Quathrine, Quathy sprints as hard as she can, following the curve of the river.

‘Except it isn’t Qualeb who stops her but rather the sight of hundreds of drums piled up along the riverbank. Steel and plastic containers are strewn all over the edge of the water and into it and stacked into dozens of little pyramids. Qualeb catches up and starts breathlessly hugging and kissing on her but stops when he sees she’s completely distracted.

“What, haven’t you seen this before?” he asks.

‘Frozen at the sight, Quathy says nothing.

“Obviously this is what this place is named for,” he says. “Once upon a time it was called Crystal Hollow but I think that was before we were born. Down in there we used to play hide-and-seek when we were kids.”

‘Qualeb asks if she wants to go see it and Quathy reluctantly agrees. She takes his hand and follows him into the maze of drums. He guides her through the casks of various colors and states of decay. Nasty brown foam is bubbling out of the side of one. Green slime puddles under another. Rust streaks down into the water. Yolk-colored crusts smell of sulfur or worse.

“Gawd, I can’t believe you were allowed in here as a kid,” Quathy says.

‘Underneath their feet the ground is starting to get mucky.

“Everything seemed a lot cleaner back then,” he says.

‘Something catches Qualeb’s eye and he runs up ahead. Taking a big leap he is on top of a line of drums and then hopping from one to another. Suddenly, he is gone.

‘Quathy calls out to him hesitantly.

“I’m in here,” he says.

‘Exactly where here is isn’t clear. Nudging forward, she says she can’t see him.

“Dude, I know! Look around and try to find me.”

‘Edging closer to where he first jumped, Quathy can see the line of drums is actually the perimeter of a circle. Set a few feet inside of it is another

drum circle, then another, and so on. Scanning over them looking for a sign of Qualeb she realizes it is actually not concentric circles but a spiral. But she still cannot see him. Layers of thick, greasy dust cover the drums which she does not want to touch. Around the way she can see where the drum line ends which is also the entrance. Not really interested in the stupid game she walks towards the opening, calling out to Qualeb.

“Know what?” she says, pausing for a response that does not come. “I think I might just go back to the cabin and wait for you.”

‘The entrance is right in front of her and she cranes her neck to see around its curve. Qualeb suddenly pops up right next to her from behind the drums.

“Boo!”

‘Nerves fire all at once and Quathy screams and falls backward and slams into a blue plastic barrel. Rocking back and forth the barrel tilts at and away from her a few times before finally tipping and falling harmlessly to the ground. Except it was not harmless because the barrel’s spout pops off and a thick, steaming liquid pours out over her chest and legs.

‘Vaulting over the drums Qualeb runs over and kicks the barrel out of the way and drags her back. Everything she is wearing begins to disintegrate in his hands and she falls away with her clothes dissolving before his eyes.

‘Nearby there is a giant crash as the barrel knocks into and topples a tall tower of similar containers.

‘Ghastly smoke pours from Quathy’s body, especially, it seems, from her chest and privates. Enveloped in a thick vapor, Quathy is screaming and choking and almost hidden except for some indistinct parts of her which seem to be floating at the edge of the smoke. Qualeb rips his shirt off intending to wipe away whatever has gotten on her but the smoke is too thick and noxious and he has to back away.

‘Behind him, unnoticed, the barrels have rolled to the river and toxic waste is glugging into the water.

‘Feebly wafting at the air, he wraps his shirt around his face. Immense fleshy bulges are swaying on top of Quathy and emerging from the smoke. Recoiling in horror, Qualeb’s foot catches in the sticky ground and he falls on his butt. Swelling mounds have flopped to the ground and seem to be oozing towards him. The smoke stops and as it clears all that can be seen are the still expanding flesh balloons. Once breast and vagina have turned to veiny hairy distended skin sacks. Underneath these masses is presumably Quathy but Qualeb cannot see anything resembling her or a human. Immobile with shock, Qualeb doesn’t seem aware that the Quathy-flesh is nearly touching his feet. Creamy fluid begins to drip from limp nipple tubes and sex lobes.

‘On seeing this Qualeb shakes off his daze and pulls free of the muck and retreats backwards. Not a second too soon for the drips have turned into streams and where he just lay has become a milky puddle. Continuing

to back away, Qualeb sees the individual mounds merge into a giant blob. Effluvium is gushing out. Despite this the Quathy-flesh still seems to be growing. Elastic skin stretched to its breaking point. Qualeb thinks he hears Quathy squeal and then the skin is gone and yellow-white liquid hovers in its shape for a moment before splashing to the ground.

‘While the slimy mess drains towards the river, it pulls at great sheets of deflated skin, revealing Quathy’s head and the blue, lifeless face resting upon it. Gone is any semblance of a body or her womanhood. Though he knows she is dead, Qualeb can’t help but see in her expression a look of resigned peace. He turns in fright and takes off, winding his way through the drum maze. Running with abandon, Qualeb does not notice the burning on his arms where he had touched Quathy when he lifted her. Or the tightening in his bare chest, or the tightening in his jeans. Waving and screaming as the cabin comes into view, the only thing on his mind is to get as far away from there as possible. Subconsciously he is also trying to forget whatever he just saw. Particularly that strangely alluring look which she left him and the world with.

‘In the meantime, the poor pack of escaped dogs huddle together under the bridge. Craving food and frightened of being caught, their eyes are filled with desperation. Night is approaching and they may not make it to morning if they don’t get something to eat. It will be a risk but they feel they have no choice. Chances are nothing bad will happen, but none of them actually believe that. Quliff the dogcatcher has already caught three of them and each one is certain they will be next.

‘As the sun sets, a few of them begin to arise nervously. Stretches and yawns and suddenly an irritated little fight breaks out. Unhappily the loser dashes away and then slinks down to the river. Putting its head down it takes a big drink from the murky water. Perhaps it doesn’t smell it or perhaps it is too sad to care but by now the spill from Barrel Hollow has reached this part of the river. Little-by-little the other dogs get up and get a drink or go pee then get a drink or sniff the stream and decide they aren’t thirsty then go pee then decide they are thirsty after all and come back to lap at the river. In the end, all of the dogs save a stubborn priss get a drink from the contaminated water.

‘Evening comes shortly thereafter.

‘So, with no other reason to wait and filled with equal parts trepidation and hunger, the pack heads off towards town. Before they are halfway there, though, some of the dogs begin to fall behind. Unnoticed at first, these stragglers form a spreading line behind the main group. Gradually the thinning of the ranks is observed by those in the pack. Some of them try to slow things down to give the others a chance to catch up. Perturbed at the thought of having to wait longer to eat and that these slowpokes might increase their

chances of getting caught, half of the main group keeps up their pace and refuses to wait.

‘Remaining behind, the other half whimpers encouragement for the stragglers but as they gather there is a sense of disquiet. You see, it is not just a lack of food and exhaustion that is slowing them down, but also that they are getting larger, gaining weight, in strange places. Quite a few of them, both male and female, have sagging mammaries like they are nursing. All have bulging backsides that are causing some to drop their hips from the weight, making them look as though they are pooping. Also, such engorgement should have been enticing to the males but when they sniffed the odor was putrid and unarousing.

‘Several of the dogs who remained behind are getting nervous and separating from the freaks. None notice, at least at first, that a few of themselves are also starting to swell up. Then, as they realize this, their splinter group begins to itself splinter. Sympathetic dogs remain with those afflicted, offering comfort and trying to ignore the off smells they are emitting.

‘Somewhere up the road there is a rash of barking. Warnings. Ahead of them there is something bad, and it might be coming their way. Roused with concern, the less-afflicted dogs try to help all of them get out of the street to hide. Most are swelling now, though, and as they drag themselves slowly towards the gutters they consider that this might be the end.

‘Quliff the dogcatcher had been driving through the streets of Zvelda with his lights off when he first caught a glimpse of the dogs down a side street. He immediately gave chase. Obsessed with catching the strongest, who he considered the leaders, Quliff the dogcatcher bypassed a number of dogs who fell by the wayside with exhaustion and thickening bodies. Unfortunately he lost the leaders when he tried to follow them down a trash-strewn alley. Irritated, he backtracked in search of any dog and soon came upon a rotund animal lumbering up the street.

‘Rushing out of his van, he slows his approach when he sees the animal because it looks like the bitch is pregnant and might be feisty. Except that even when he puts his noose around her she doesn’t put up a fight and instead just flops to the ground. Maybe she’s just fat, he thinks with disgust, imagining all the food she must have stolen to get this big. One thing that is particularly repulsive are the flabby protuberances hanging off her rear. Vexed by her lack of movement, he nudges one of these protuberances with his boot.

‘Expressed by his pressure, a thin stream of viscous fluid splatters all over his pants. Quliff the dogcatcher recoils and shakes his leg in annoyance. But whatever was sprayed on him won’t come off. Then in anger he kicks at the dog’s fat ass and it explodes. Huge globs of the fluid spray all over Quliff the dogcatcher. Enraged he goes to kick the dog again but stops short.

‘Now, instead of looking swollen it appears to be caved in and is gasping for breath. Revolted by the dog and its insides that he is covered in, Quliff the dogcatcher runs to his van. Eager to get cleaned up, he peels out and heads for his house.

‘Strewn all about this part of Zvelda, the pack dogs lay swelling and almost completely immobile. Those along the path of Quliff the dogcatcher’s drive home see him racing towards them. Fearful that he will get out and grab them, they try to pull themselves further into the shadows but it does not matter because he isn’t stopping. Other dogs have dragged themselves and their packmates into groups on the steetsides or next to fences or behind bushes. Ravenous hunger and thoughts of retreat back to the bridge have been forgotten. Even the leaders, who were able to keep running for quite a while, have succumbed and now rest underneath a box, as if ashamed with themselves. Vile odors fill the air and some are stuck on their sides with legs unable to touch the ground. Every dog is moist with their own and others’ discharge. Regardless of their situation they are not in pain and for those that have not been stranded at least they have each other.

‘Quliff the dogcatcher pulls into his driveway and runs into the house. His wife is watching television and after a moment turns to see him but he is already in the bathroom. Getting into the shower he turns the water on full blast. Even though he is still wearing his uniform it is basically falling off of his body. Though not because it has dissolved but because his expanding body has ripped it at the seams. Reaching for his undercarriage all he can feel is a giant puffy mound. Everything is numb and he can’t see beyond the massive tits he has grown. Drowned out by the pouring water and his own weeping, Quliff the dogcatcher’s wife calls out to him through the door, asking if he is alright, unheard as he slumps to the floor of the tub.

‘You may remember this whole incident started with some kids that wanted to cut class. Qualeb is at home now, in his bed, holding his blanket tightly around his neck. His door is locked and his lights are out so that he can pretend it is not happening. Only he can feel it, beneath the blanket, the damp swelling of his breasts and ballsack to grotesque proportions. Unable to move, he waits painlessly and patiently for his eventual bursting. In the dark, all he can see is an image of himself as he saw Quathy, or rather Quathy-flesh. He knows he is no longer himself and hopes the not-Qualeb he has become will go away before the new day begins.

‘A few streets over Quraig and Quathrine are in her bedroom trying to understand what has happened. Very few words have passed between them. Embracing each other, they press their bodies together to ensure nothing has changed.

“‘Would you stay with me if I started to get big?’” she asks.

“Of course,” he lies, knowing that she would leave him if it was the other way around.

‘Neither of them wants to let go, afraid that when they do they’ll be pushed away forever.

‘92 11 51 27 10 22 24 19 61 62 01 31 42 31 15 31’

There was a pause before the coda began.

‘Near the center of Zvelda, a prissy little dog is still running. Overcome with panic, it is thirsty and hungry, cold and alone. Maybe it will stop soon, maybe there is food and water up ahead, maybe there is a friend just around the corner.

‘92 11 51 27 ...’

Wheez looked over his notes and shook his head. He’d heard language like this before. It was provocative, and perhaps something would come of it, but it wasn’t clear how the conclusion would be managed. He scribbled some ideas in his notebook and chuckled to himself. Yip had really outdid himself this time. He was so damn raunchy. And efficient with the recap — Wheez wasn’t even sure when it had ended.

He switched the radio back to normal and the group channel just in time to hear ‘deaf Yip’ and a frequency. When the frequencies were confirmed he jotted the first one down and got the radio set to descramble and plugged into the tape deck. He started recording and tuned to the frequency and once he got it set turned down the volume. He would listen to it once he was done. Dead-end branches were throwaways compared to the main trunk line that actually passed through the network, but he was genuinely curious to see how he and Yip would compare on this one. He could have listened now, but didn’t want to spoil things.

While he waited for the next hop, Wheez poured another drink and smoked and continued to work things out. At some point the lights flickered and he stopped and watched the hanging lamp, searching the glow for any further hint of wavering. This had happened before and though nothing more serious ever came of it he still considered checking on the generator. The lights remained steady and eventually he turned back to his notebook. He was mostly ready to go when his watch beeped. The recording had stopped so he pulled out the tape and scratched out the existing label and scribbled a new one above. He put things back to the group frequency. In less than a minute:

‘Yarnhead Putto is ready to receive.’

Cherubic Tangle. He was on the next hop. Wheez hadn’t sent yet so gave deference.

‘Pinky Chub is ready to send.’

‘Crucifer Paleson is ready to send,’ Wheez said into the microphone.

Frequencies were sent to 'Fat Comms' and 'Brussel Whitehead' and after confirming Wheez switched the radio and set it to scramble. He quickly checked over his notes before sending out the numbers with a steady cadence, one digit at a time, with a pause between each pair:

'12 52 31 22 01 12 35 16 18 78 61 31 92 21 44 21'

He waited and then repeated the numbers followed by his alias. Then he began, speaking without urgency, pausing between each sentence for a breath, forcing cool poise even as he was scrambling to put the words together.

'Class cutting teenagers have caused a toxic waste spill at Barrel Hollow, killing Quathy and sickening her boyfriend Qualeb. Moreover, a pack of strays was poisoned by the runoff and are now laid up all over north Zvelda. Exposure causes extreme swelling of breasts and gonads to the point that they risk bursting.

'Pressure from horrified leading citizens of Zvelda is put on Quapri the mayor do something to make sure the dogs do not escape the bad side of town. Greatly concerned about losing their support and donations, she has ordered Quool the police captain to quarantine off north Zvelda. Within north Zvelda hundreds of trapped residents are protesting the blockade and finding their anger going nowhere are about to turn on the dogs.

'Led by local animal activists Quloë and Quelsey, a group of sympathetic students from the nearby college have snuck in to offer support and now protection for the animals. All over, inflamed passions are running high. Some of the students have gotten sick and their distended, naked, leaking bodies are being used as human shields to repel the resident mob. Television reporter Quim is demanding information but getting stonewalled. The majority of the townsfolk outside of north Zvelda support letting the illness burn itself out. Unaware that Slick River has already been contaminated, they believe that by keeping the outbreak isolated, it can be ignored and forgotten.

'On another side of town, Qualeb is pinned in his bed, his body heaped on top of him, all alone in the house.

"Girls, this is what happens when you let the evil in you!" his stepmother Qulair told her daughters.

'Aghast and repulsed, she refused to be under the same roof as Qualeb. She wanted him kicked out, however nobody, not even his father, was willing to go near him. The solution was for his dad and Qulair and his stepsisters to move to a hotel.

'Gathered back in her bedroom, Quathrine and Quraig are fighting about Qualeb. Afraid of getting exposed and also because he is completely grossed out, Quraig wants nothing to do with him. Perturbed, Quathrine thinks they should go over to at least see how he is doing. When the argument escalates, Quraig threatens to inform the police that there is someone sick outside of the quarantine. However she reminds him that they'll all get blamed for

the accident and insists on going to visit Qualeb whether Quraig likes it or not. Appalled at the thought of Quathrine turning into a bloated heap and infecting him, Quraig breaks it off with her and storms out. Despite being determined to see Qualeb, Quathrine *is* concerned about exposing herself to whatever it is that killed her sister. Despair begins to set in until she remembers that her father, a technician at Atom-R, has a radiation protection suit in his closet.

‘Believing he would die without ever seeing anyone again, Qualeb is startled when Quathrine enters the room. Upon first glance he might have mistaken her for an angel had it not been for that unholy suit. Peering up, he sees through the cloudy square of plastic the face of a dead person. It is his girlfriend Quathy looking back at him, crying, attempting to smile. Dissipating instantly are any recent memories of Quathrine’s sister, especially the last time he saw her, ripped open from the inside. Instead, everything feels just fine.

‘Presently, his mind reworks what and how and why he remembers, forming an interpretation of his reality which denies desperation, sadness, anxiety. Perception of his hideousness, of the fact that he should feel shame and embarrassment, transforms into acceptance. Qualeb actually accepts the whole situation — at least that is how his mind understands it. Only what is happening right now matters, not what had or would. And yet his contentment is not a resignation. No, it is rather drawn from a familiarity, a comfort in what he’s already known and experienced, whether it had originally been a comfort or not. An escape both from the past and towards it, into a safe space built from the obscure specificities of Qualeb’s memories. Even though his body is monstrous under the covers, it feels just like when he was a child after being sent to bed early. Gripping his blankets tightly to himself, staring at the ceiling, wanting to get up and play but knowing that if he got caught there’d be hell to pay. Darkness falling around him, he would sit in his room and imagine he was flying a jet or fighting robots or that mom was around again to watch him show off his bike tricks. Yet, instead of playing make believe now, he is instead lying there awash in the associations. Sitting next to him is Quathy, rubbing his head with thick gloves, bringing ginger ale — the only thing he could keep down — putting on the music they loved. Talking at times but often not — just listening, alone together. Indeed, everything is just fine.

‘Contrary to this, Quathrine is having a crisis. With Qualeb mistaking her for Quathy, it continues to remind her of her dead sister, of that awful sight of her blue face, frozen in pain, hanging off of an incomprehensible pile of meat. Everyone else (besides Quraig) thinks she’s fine — even her parents, who are out of town on a vacation. Making things more complicated are her growing feelings for Qualeb. After only a short while she has found his

intelligence, humor, and gentle resolve in spite of his circumstances leaving her unexpectedly infatuated. Maybe it is only because her sister is gone, and Quraig too, that she allows herself to succumb to those charms she so often heard Quathy gush about. Underneath the blankets, though, she sees his swollen body and wonders how long before she loses him as well. Listening to his every breath as if it might be the last, she decides she doesn't want to miss the chance for them to touch one another, alive, skin against skin.

"I'm happy just to be together," he tells her. "Having you here, this is enough. Don't forget that this connection, our connection, transcends any boundaries. You letting yourself become like me is unnecessary."

'Her mind is already made up, though. For she has not only fallen for him, but is also enamored with the peace he has found, wants to share in it. Quathrine is no longer thinking about her sister, or parents, or even Quraig. Qualeb's house, really his room, has become her entire world. She's already found in him something she never imagined possible — an escape from the anxieties and insecurities and drama of life. Untroubled by his circumstances, he is completely focused on making their time together as special, deep, fun as it can be. Consumed by a desire to be the same way for him, she believes this is not possible being trapped in the hot, stuffy suit.

'While ready to expose herself, she is worried that the suit will not hold if she swells up. So there is no way she can just leave the mask on, but removing it will show her to be Quathrine not Quathy. Wishing to not break the bond she has made with Qualeb, Quathrine first cuts her hair short just like her sister's. Following this she scrounges through Qualeb's step-sisters' stuff to cobble together a mix-and-match outfit that matches Quathy's style. Preparation finished, she at last returns to Qualeb's room without the protective suit.

'At once she is hit with horrific smells and forces herself not to recoil or vomit. Defecation and urine and toxin juice have seeped everywhere, even though the secretions have reduced greatly since the first day. It is true that she was aware of the odor when walking around the house outside of the suit, however Quathrine is unprepared for its intensity. Perhaps worth noting is that in her eagerness to change herself she has also not considered how she will be taken care of if she truly ends up like Qualeb. Such things are not on her mind as, through burning eyes and clenching stomach, she runs the back of her fingers across his cheek. When he feels the touch of another's skin — something he thought would never happen again — he closes his eyes and lays his head into her hand. Flooding her vision are real tears of emotion as she leans forward and presses her lips to his. Caught off guard, he pulls back but she insists and they lose themselves to one another. Eventually they separate but for the first time he reaches out and she takes a hold of his hand. The one thing she wants him to know is that she is not afraid, no

matter what she is not afraid. Cautiously she takes hold of the blanket and begins to peel it away. Before it reveals anything he has pulled it back.

“Wait, I need to,” she says, sliding her hand under the fabric.

Fingers press into soft, bulbous, billowy flesh. Smooth and damp, the skin is delicate and she finds herself drawn to reach deep to feel its entirety. Quathrine moves her hand over its surface and suddenly she touches something hard and pointed and becomes wetted. Looking into his eyes with a smile, she feels herself become warm and tingly. Lips press together once again while she continues to gently massage the breast.

Cognizant of what she had done, Qualeb is concerned but at the same time not bothered by it. In that moment they are closer than ever. He is experiencing something special, like nothing he has ever felt before. Still, this fulfillment might be as much a product of his past as it is of the moment. While it seems specific to his current situation, it is also a result of a latent need for deep, unmediated, unguarded human connection that extends back throughout his life.

Delicately caressing his body, for a while Quathrine sits beside him in bliss. Finally, though, she feels pressure against the already too-small clothes she is wearing. Afraid that they could cause complications, she decides to take them off. Out of nervousness about how she might look naked, she grabs a large beach towel to wrap in and goes to a corner to undress. Catching a glimpse of herself when disrobed, she unexpectedly feels a touch of vanity and confidence seeing the already ample size of her chest. Overcome with an impulsive boldness, she drops the towel and turns around for Qualeb to see, then walks proudly over to the other side of the bed and lays down next to him. Enormous as he is compared to her, Quathrine already feels humongous, feels herself swelling inside with what they have shared.

“Quathy,” he says, taking her hand, “my love.”

Just then, there is a sound of wet fart sputtering out from beneath the blanket. Ever polite, and also because she doesn't want to lose the moment, Quathrine squeezes Qualeb's hand and continues to stare longingly into his eyes. However there can be no ignoring what happens next.

Everything under the covers drops in an instant as though it is falling into the mattress. Huge amounts of pearly liquid pour out over the end of the bed. In the air above the deluge wafts the blanket's free end, suspended by an equally impressive amount of gas. Preposterously, Qualeb continues to gently hold Quathrine's hands and her eyes like nothing of importance is happening to him. Almost totally in shock, she watches with disbelief as he seems to disappear before her, all except for his everloving face. Lapping at her side is a warm dampness. There is a smell in the air that is earthy, gamey, strangely relaxing. Quathrine's instinct is to scream, to grab for him, to move away from the slippery wetness on her skin. Only she instead finds herself

unable, or uninterested, in reacting. Somehow, though, whatever impetus she has lost Qualeb seems to have gained, and with vigor he throws off his covers and slips and stumbles away from her off the bed and out of the room. Shortly thereafter he returns carrying a bucket in one hand and a pile of linens in the other. In that reeking, dank room, he delicately sponges and dries Quathrine, then covers her in fresh bedding. From her position lying on her back, Qualeb's normal-looking arms and head appear mismatched with a torso formed of thick skin folds which droop shapelessly down towards the ground.

“Don't worry, it is my turn to care for you,” he says, combing his fingers through her hair.

‘As if they have become a curiosity, Quathrine runs her hands over her massive cleavage, then pulls the blanket up to her chin. Her mind recalls a time when she stayed home ill while Quathy went to school, a rare moment when it seemed she had their mother's attention all to herself.

‘To the other side of town, where the blockade is still in place. People are huddled in their homes, afraid to go out. Their anger towards the filthy animals and the disease they've brought, while not lessened, has shifted away from physical confrontation. Curiously, it was the sight of the students who had become afflicted with the bloat that sent them into hiding. It is now a prevalent belief that the scourge identifies those who live an impure life. Nobody wants to risk subjecting themselves to such a test, which may encompass morality, genetics, faith, their past...

‘At the same time, there is the question of Quloë and Quelsey, the leaders of the dog saviors. Inexplicably they have not become afflicted themselves, despite their questionable lifestyle choices, examples of which include dreadlocks, tattoos, piercings, and mannishness. Every day they are in the streets, strutting around with their thick aprons and long rubber gloves and faces wrapped in scarves like practitioners of an aberrant kink.

‘Quarantined inside, the residents wait, confused and frustrated, rationing and hoarding their supplies, their distress turned towards one another and themselves. Upset with the miserable reminders of their situation lying in the streets right outside of their windows, they lock their doors and close their drapes and watch TV and endlessly call each other and into radio shows which have already stopped playing their rants because their listeners are bored hearing the same crap over and over. Such isolating behavior is why they don't notice when things actually start to change.

‘Roughly the same time that Qualeb was evacuating, a similar thing is happening to the dogs from the pack. Cleansing with impossible speed, in a blink of an eye the dogs seem to transform from stretched balloons into limp piles of fur. White and oddly-odored discharge gushes over the streets and sidewalks and down the gutters.

“Don’t touch them,” Quloë and Quelsey warn, unsure what the suddenly unburdened animals might do.

‘Having to watch her step to avoid touching its runoff, Quloë approaches a small dog carefully. Even with her caution she is caught off guard when it suddenly hops up and shakes itself, sending giant rolls of soggy fur into a whirling frenzy of slaps and droplets. Her natural reaction is to flinch away, and Quloë feels immediate guilt that the dog has witnessed her revulsion. Because of this, when it sulks away she rushes to follow after it with soft apologies. Never acknowledging her, it droops and drags across the ground and in its body language Quloë sees sadness, rejection, the realization that she is no different than those people that have brought it misery. Other dogs, all around her, have risen and are moving similarly, in the same direction, but she does not see them. Quloë whimpers, consumed with disgrace, while the anguished dog continues to ignore her. She moves next to it, reaching out, begging for its attention and forgiveness. Urging it to come, she gets no response. Cutting in front of it, it moves past her without notice. Weeping and desperate, she finally just bends down and with her gloved hands picks up the dog, which means gathering its folds and lifting it like an ineptly wrapped delicacy.

‘The look on its face breaks her heart.

‘Jowls sagging and eyes vacant, the dog is lost, gazing off far away towards someplace where Quloë will never be. Especially distressing is the indifference that it exudes.

‘Her shame is overwhelming and, determined to win the poor broken thing over, she puts it down and opens her satchel to look for a treat. Except her search is interrupted by a noise like firecrackers and when she looks up only then does she notice the other dogs listlessly dragging themselves down the street. In an instant her self-pitying sadness turns to anxiety, and she rushes ahead to see what is happening and where they are going. She rounds a corner and nearly runs into Quelsey and they continue wordlessly together, following the trail of plodding pooches with a shared urgency. Before long they are approaching the quarantine boundary, defined by a makeshift chainlink fence through which wretched-looking dogs face a crew of police officers and their flashing cars. Somebody yells, warning Quloë and Quelsey that they are not allowed to pass. Every one of them, it seems, is pointing a gun. Grouped in one corner, two workmen appear to be sealing off a gap in the chainlink. Surrounding the workmen, on both sides of the fence, lie bloody, motionless heaps of fur, reminiscent of the gory pelt piles the women have witnessed in another land. Gobsnacked, Quloë and Quelsey glare at the scene, unaware that just beyond the cops, strategically excluded from the blockade, is the home of Quarol the cat lady. Dogs continue to gather in front of the fence,

sitting, staring patiently past the carcasses of their packmates at the location of their former imprisonment.

‘Another few days pass and Qualeb is still caring for Quathy. Instead of ignoring her discharge and bodily functions, he has been diligently keeping things clean. His devotion has put Quathrine into a state of utter contentment. She also feels great peace in what she is, despite being immobilized and seeping.

‘Yet this situation, though perhaps not the serenity, is only temporary.

‘Happening without warning — albeit, in retrospect, his tender stroking of her cheek seems anticipatory — her body disgorges itself of its bloat. Gas and fluid that has filled her drains out in a giant, gurgling flush. Maybe a moment passes and Quathrine’s view changes from her own massive dome to the far wall splattered with her effluent. Cracking a smile as though he couldn’t be more pleased, Qualeb takes her hand and walks her out of the bedroom. Jammed together under the warm spray of the shower, they meticulously wash out the thick and heavy folds of each other’s body, including the tingling, swollen flaps hanging from their groins.

‘Cleaned up and dressed in stretched-out sweatsuits, they sit in Qualeb’s kitchen eating lightly buttered toast and sipping plain dark coffee. Impassively chewing and intensely watching Qualeb with satisfaction but also apprehension, she asks him what’s next.

‘“There’s only one thing I want to do right now, Quathy, and the urge is so bad I’m not sure I can make it another day,” he says with a tinge that might have been enthusiasm. “Class, I need to go back to class.”

‘With her smile and the way she squeezes his shoulder, he knows she feels exactly the same.

‘91 81 51 92 20 13 14 25 36 21 71 61 42 25 23 12’

A deep breath. Then another.

‘Peeking into a neighborhood not very far away, we see a young and older man in the latter’s garage. Rescuing the girlfriend/daughter is the primary objective, though her captor must also be held accountable for what he’s done to her and her sister. Quraig talks through the plan while Qulive checks the gear, all the while a prissy little dog yips eagerly around their feet.

‘91 81 51 92 20 13 14 25 36 21 71 61 42 25 23 12’

Wheez sat back and sighed. He wiped his brow with his shirt. There was always exhilaration with a good finish. He was stumbling at times but never fell, and he’d managed to include most of what he wanted with minimal contradictions. He imagined Yip listening in, just as Wheez would do to him later, and smiled at the thought. Did Yip enjoy it? Was he impressed? Or maybe irritated at the deflation of his setup? Who else had heard? It was a foolish thing to even think about. The audience was unknowable, as was whether they completely missed the point or not. Whatever validation

Wheez might be seeking was found in himself, not in a connection he would never know.

And soon it would be his turn to have his intentions twisted by another. It did not matter how well things were guided, the next step always moved someplace different, unpredictable. Still, he would direct things as he desired, towards disruption based on invariance, order disordered by an inability to break behaviors that were expected and already—

‘Topheavy Cheeks is ready to receive.’

Wheez had seniority. He responded to Blimp Dimp immediately. Fat Comms followed shortly after: ‘Pinky Chub is ready to send.’ Frequencies were assigned and switched to. Wheez took a quick drink and got his list ready. He tapped his pen anxiously. He reminded himself that accuracy was essential and took a deep breath.

‘12 61 81 92 02 22 23 13 21 15 19 25 11 16 34 51

‘...

‘12 61 81 92 02 22 23 13 21 15 19 25 11 16 34 51

‘Crucifer Paleson.

‘Drums of Atom-R waste have spilled into Slick River above where it flows into Zvelda, the quaint town of dark secrets. A number of dogs and persons have been exposed, which results in a period of inflammation in the chest and privates, after which the afflicted are left drained and changed. Youths caused the spill, and two of them, Qualeb and Quathrine, have survived their illness and paired up and are preparing to return to high school. Only Qualeb thinks that Quathrine is her twin sister Quathy, who was actually killed in the original spill, a horrific death which Qualeb witnessed but now no longer believes happened. Understand? There is also Quathrine’s father Qulive who was called back from vacation by her original boyfriend Quraig so they can save her from Qualeb. It is the morning and they are leaving for Qualeb’s house, however Qualeb and Quathrine have already left for school.

‘Soon enough we’ll return to them, but first let’s check out the dog situation. Near Quarol the cat lady’s house, dogs are lined up along a chainlink fence that has been set up as part of the quarantine boundary. Each of them stares patiently through the fence at the house, looking past the cops now casually standing guard in front of them. Also ignored is the man sitting on the curb, handcuffed to a signpost. Rolls of skin hang from underneath his shirt, splayed off his lap and onto the sidewalk. Quliff the dogcatcher found this spot driving around and was so intent on getting the dogs that he went right up to the fence and started to cut it. The police pulled him off and sent him away but he kept coming back, so they locked him to the post.

“Got to bring them mongrels in,” he says every few minutes to nobody in particular.

‘Giving a hard but unisistent tug at his wrist, he watches the other side of the fence calmly and without contemplation of alternative ways in. Under him, on the concrete, are the brownish streaks of recently dried bloodstains.

‘Around the dogs animal activist college students are slowly moving about, bringing food and water, cleaning waste, occasionally pausing to pet and scratch and talk nonsense to the disinterested animals. Ripped clothes and rags are draped, tied, and tucked around the students’ sagging bodies into makeshift togas and loincloths. Although many of them still have nipples and overgrown sexual organs exposed no attempt is made to cover themselves any better. Nobody seems to feel any shame about their bodies or appearance. There are even one or two who are walking around completely nude. Every once in a while one of them itches their crotch or chest and the scratch turns into rubbing during which the flesh under their hands begins to swell again until a few seconds later when the massage is suddenly abandoned so that they can return to assisting the dogs. Either because they are too grossed out to acknowledge them or feel no obligation to anything “over there” or are secretly enjoying the view of naked skin, the police don’t bother to tell them to put on more clothes. Similarly acting without concern are the dogs, weighed down with bunched ripples of fur that make them appear to be melting into the street. Quloë and Quelsey the lead activists are the only ones seeming to move with any urgency or spontaneity. Gloved and aproned and with scarves trailing from their face wraps, they rush around organizing and ordering the students and making sure no dog is missed and when they get particularly worked up turning to vent at the cops.

“‘Fuck you,” is what they usually say. Or, sometimes, “Can’t you see they just want to leave this stupid town?”

‘Once, in reaction to a diatribe from Quelsey, one of the officers coolly drew his pistol and fired it at the fence right above the dogs. Despite the bang and chainlink sparks and bullet ricocheting off the ground right next to a tail, none of the dogs or students flinched or barely even blinked. Quelsey, on the other hand, went berserk and Quloë had to drag her down from trying to climb over before verbally laying into the cop herself. On the other side of the fence, the shooter’s fellow officers surrounded him and with a barrage of snarls and backslaps sent him off to his car to sulk while they turned around to face the yelling ladies with crossed arms and blank expressions that they probably considered equally apologetic and defiant.

‘However, most of the time any outburst or activity from the within the quarantine zone was met with disregard, at least by the police. Underneath the street sign, on the other hand, Quliff the dogcatcher would often totter up to his feet at the smallest sign of action. Nobody paid him any mind though, even when he spoke, and he would eventually slump back down to the curb.

‘Gradually the day passes, the dogs fed and watered and fed and watered again, the cops relieved by the next shift, the sun rising then dropping, people and animals reluctantly laying to sleep.

‘Residents of north Zvelda had begun to notice that their streets were clear again, a result of the dogs and activists congregating in a single location. Youngsters were the first to leave the houses, some sneaking out behind their parents’ backs and others trying to prove something with grand displays of restless bravado. “Going out” rapidly shifted from cruising the neighborhood and making food ‘n’ booze runs to the corner store (still opened daily by the owner Quris) to searching for ways to slip past the quarantine. Upset with the notion of being told where they can or cannot go, the kids’ interest in breaking through the blockade has more to do with rebelliousness than actually having something to do outside of it. Escape routes were soon discovered all over the place: Slipping through holes in backyard fences. Trees with overhanging branches. Storm drains running out to Slick River. Quickly, games were developed, such as one called Running the Loop that involved leaving the quarantine through one exit and returning to that same spot using a different entrance as quickly as possible.

‘Playing a different one of these games, called Proof of Guilt, two friends named Quate and Quen have just finished TPing the yard of a notable house and are lining up a camera shot when all of a sudden someone comes rushing out of the front door after them. Extremely deep in the fanciest part of Zvelda, Quate and Quen make a beeline for the quarantine area, a path which will bring them very near Quarol the cat lady’s house. Not having time to be subtle, and with their pursuer now in a car, their mad dash turns into a havoc involving a collapsed clothesline, a toppled trellis, a gate busted off its hinge, and their chaser crashing into a soundwall that was part of the quarantine boundary. Destruction like this makes noise which, though a bit of a ways away, awakens many of the dogs. Led by an instinct to investigate melding with that to get back home, a few of the dogs take off to find the source of the sounds. Every other dog follows their pack instinct and joins along. Sitting in their car talking, the late night cops have heard nothing and when they see the dogs leaving choose to ignore them because they are staying on their side of the fence.

‘Slowly the dogs reach the breach and drag their bodies through and then walk around the neighborhood back to the picket fence in front of Quarol the cat lady’s house. Behind the fence many cats notice the pack and most back away though a few make a wild run for it through the pickets and into the street. Lunging after them, a couple dogs make chase but their ungainly bodies cause them to stumble and scrape to a halt after a step or two. An anguished yip sounds out, either for the escaped cat or the cat lady, and is followed by the echo of others. Nearly as quickly as they started the yelps

die out, but not before Quliff the dogcatcher, Quloë and Qulseley the lead activists, and the students are awoken. Keeping their eyes trained on the faint outline of the pack, they all run up against their restraints and point. Eventually the cops notice the commotion but by the time they are out of their car Quarol the cat lady is at her fence, marveling at the sight. The cops are afraid of getting near what they think are infected animals and call out for her to stay back. Quarol the cat lady sees the pathetic beasts and realizes she may not have lost money on them after all. She opens her gate and herds them into the house. All the while making vain and half-hearted thrusts at cats which are more curious than frightened, the dogs lug their way down into the basement without any inducement.

‘Not long after the police show up at Quarol the cat lady’s door but she’s able to shoo them away with a call to Quool the police captain whose boss Quapri the mayor counts Atom-R as a major campaign donor. Daybreak comes and she contacts Quackquack the doctor from Atom-R who checks out the dogs but says he can’t use them because they are too abnormal. Resourceful as ever, Quarol the cat lady calls over Qumel the ex-president of Atom-R and founder of Guld Exotics.

‘Established shortly after Qumel’s retirement from Atom-R, Guld Exotics is manufacturer of natural foods made from specialty regional ingredients that can only be found in the area around the Slick River valley. Very popular among the health and environmentally-conscious locals is Guld Exotics’ only retail store, located in downtown Zvelda. Enthusiasts include Quloë and Qulseley, who start every day with a Guld Exotics *Pur Sun Fed* nature bar. Naturally expecting their animals to eat just as well as they do, the pair have been feeding the afflicted dog pack from Guld Exotics’ pet line, including the after-meal treat *Fur Sup End*. Given how much Guld Exotics products they use, Quloë and Qulseley would be shocked to find out what they are actually made of.

‘Even though it is marketed as a pure and natural alternative to Atom-R’s irradiated food, Guld Exotics is anything but. Qumel actually created the company expressly to utilize Atom-R waste byproducts. Evading regulations, when Guld Exotics reports its ingredient lists it replaces any controversial item with a seemingly harmless one. For example, radioactive petroleum jelly, used to give a luxurious and warm mouth feel, is renamed vapsaolin extract, referring to a nonexistent heirloom pepper supposedly grown in the Guld Exotics hydroponics facility. Included in the unreported ingredients are canine hides harvested from deceased test subjects. Renamed protein-rich bark concentrate, the skin and fur are pulverized to a powder which forms a base for everything Guld Exotics produces. Somewhat mysteriously, in the past month Atom-R’s kill rate has decreased, negatively affecting production.

‘Thus, Qumel is very interested in the afflicted dogs that Quarol the cat lady tells him about. When he arrives at her house, he brings his in-house doctor Qutler and they quickly devise a plan. Each afflicted dog will have its excess skin removed and be sutured up to look normal, with the expectation that the residual hide will be harvested after Atom-R has finished with the animal.

‘Cats are chased out of the kitchen so it can be used as a makeshift operating theater, and while Qutler sets things up Qumel pulls Quarol the cat lady aside.

‘“Our mutual reliance on Atom-R will disappear if we can isolate the infectant and systematically expose and reexpose’

Everything went black. Wheez froze. His mind was still spinning with words, not totally comprehending. The generator had died. What did that mean for his trans—

There was a noise upstairs. Someone was in the house.

Wheez reached for where the flashlight was and first there was only air and then on his second try knocked it to the ground. He felt for the flashlight but couldn’t find it. Footsteps thumped above him. He fumbled and found his lighter and flicked it on. Moved his hand too quickly and it blew out and he couldn’t get it to relight. He heard a knocking at the basement door. Shit — he didn’t have time. The flame caught and he grabbed the whiskey and poured it all over his desk and it lit before he expected and he dropped the bottle and bright hot fire rose up before him. He backed away and ran to his tool bench and grabbed a hammer and a crowbar. He bashed away into the flames, smashing the radio and breadboard and tape and everything else he could. Up at the door there was yelling and banging and something cracked.

Coughing and eyes burning from the acrid smoke, Wheez got a couple of cans of spraypaint from the shelf and focused them on his notebook, dual cones of thick flame swirling from his hands. When he heard somebody coming down the stairs, Wheez tossed the cans into the fire and dove behind the recliner. A moment later there was a flash and his ears were ringing and he could barely breathe. He stumbled out towards the stairs and something grabbed his leg and then another flash threw him out to the ground. Someone got his wrist and pulled him up the stairs and it felt like his arm was coming off. Then they had his other wrist and he was dragged over the carpet and step and porch and out the onto the grass outside. His lungs burned in the cold. He felt like he was suffocating. Everything was blurry. Figures were standing above him. They sounded far away.

‘Ev’s gone.’

‘Fuck.’

Something slammed into Wheez’s side. He coughed and struggled for air.

'He's useless now.'

'And reeks.'

'Yeah.'

'What we gonna do?'

'He's gone. Get rid of him.'

'Wait, sure he's protected?'

'Must be. Look what he did to himself.'

'Yeah.'

Wheez tried to hold his breath, but his body was fighting him. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't not breathe.

'Man he stinks.'

'What if he comes around? Should we take him in?'

'Not in my car. He's already giving me a headache.'

'Yeah. Me neither.'

He resisted. Tried to get away.

'It's really burning now. Throw him back inside.'

'What if they come for him? What if he talks?'

He was in a black tube, falling

'Are you serious?'

'Think anyone's watching?'

'Don't matter.'

falling

'We'll get him tomorrow.'

'Yeah.'

away

'Give him to Ev.'

'Hear that, ten-four?'

the light

'We're coming back.'

shrinking

'Listen.'

falling

'We should get'

away

'out of here.'

speck

'Yeah.'

alm

'Fuck it.'

...a point is all...

‘Who’s’ in charge, then?’

‘Jetse Greg’s next.’

‘Sheesh, could you imagine?’

blip blip blip

‘Then Goober, but he’s been gone for a while. So it would be Elks.’

‘No no, first it’s Dancin Alex then Ghostlider.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Well, maybe they’re flipped, but it doesn’t matter because Alex is removed. Don’t know about Ghostlider.’

‘I’m sure we’d have heard from him if he was around.’

‘So Elks. After that it’s the rest of the secretaries. Welfie, Huh, Wimple. Skrooby.’

chicka beep beep chicka beep

‘Easa Jeer.’

‘That’s right, Nico. And Combover, Fibin, Eldoh. Whoever else I’m not remembering. Who knows the order. It’s so deep I hope it never matters.’

‘Why are we talking about it then? We should be worrying about who’s at the top of the list.’

‘Exactly. I’m trying to understand who has the authority right — oh! Sorry.’

‘Shit!’

‘Whoa, watch out. There’s paper towels back there. Here, let me help you.’

squich squich squich

‘So do we even know who we’re working for?’

‘Mercan’s people—’

‘Mercan’s gone.’

boom boom ssshk

‘Are we sure?’

‘There can be no other explanation. He was the early riser. We would’ve talked to him by now. Let’s go through the list again. You taking notes, Dotee?’

Helena looked down, away from the conversation. She picked up a small bit of crumbs from the edge of her plate and brought them over the center. As she rubbed her fingers the crumbs fell onto the existing pile, rolling and settling and causing minor landslides until the mass stabilized into a conical hill that was indistinguishable from that before her additions. Accession, movement, shifting — clearly something had changed yet if her eyes were closed for the last few seconds she would not have noticed the difference. It used to be a plain cake doughnut, but she had pulled and tore and scraped and played until it lost all cohesion and its original structure, a state which ceded intention to the basest of physical laws: energy, momentum, gravity, friction. Is this what had happened to the president? Had he been turned into cosmic dust that was collected somewhere out of their reach? She could barely believe he was gone. Then again, she must have been with him the last few days and could not remember a moment of that time together. Moments which were surely true yet existed in realms that were beyond her comprehension. Without the possibility of proof she wavered at the demands of faith. How was his removal possible? Had she witnessed it? Helena pressed back a tear with the heel of her palm. She could still feel his presence, his greatness. Was this a result of being unprotected? Was her memory now making connections that the others could not?

She took a drink of tepid coffee and looked around the room. Everyone else had taken a doughnut, some more than one — well, maybe not Nico, she preferred to just suck on another cigarette — and they all were hungrily devouring them. Helena was certain she would never try one of these doughnuts again. They were awful — stale and dry and leaving a film of grease inside her mouth. The same leftovers from a previous day that had been eaten who knew how many times yet nobody seemed bothered, nobody complained. There probably hadn’t been anyone to cook for days and this was the food of convenience that, perhaps, would never be tired of. She wondered where the kitchen was, if there was anything worthwhile stashed away in there. She should probably take the opportunity to find out and take advantage going forward.

‘Helena?’

‘Huh? Sorry, what?’

‘I was asking if you could think of a way to confirm that Mercan’s been removed. We’re all convinced that he is — why else won’t they let us talk

to him? But how do we prove it? Given your experience, I thought that you might have an idea.'

Helena looked at Sdye, collecting her thoughts. His request sounded more like an accusation, as though he knew she didn't have an answer and he wanted to put her on the spot. She explained that without intercepting his zero point it was probably impossible. She started to say that if they had a video feed like for President Aalex but her voice caught.

'I know, hon,' said Darpra Giuda, her lips pursed. 'It's awful.'

'There's plenty of time to cry later,' said Sdye. 'Right now we need to figure out what our plan is.'

Darpra shot him a nasty look, then turned back to Helena. 'You look like you could use something to eat. Let me get you a doughnut and some more coffee.'

She reached across for the mug but Helena quickly blocked her before she could touch it and stood up. She went over to the coffeemaker and dumped whatever was at the bottom of her mug in the trash before pouring a refill. She looked down the length of tables to the other end of the room where Lyophilip and Hubba were hovering around Nicoretta, working at the wet spot on the belly of her shirt with big wads of paper towel, glancing up at her face with eager smiles before letting their gazes fall back to her chest while their mindlessly daubing hands tangled up with one another. They each dwarfed Nicoretta — Hubba's impressive, hulking body bent down to her level, Lyophilip short and soft and wide. Even at this distance, even with those two orbiting masses doing their best to eclipse her, she was still the focus of one's attention — those slender legs and enviable curves and the easy beauty of her face which her bold makeup varnished with superfluity. With a sigh, Helena turned away and peeked in the box of doughnuts. Everything looked like dull, hard plastic. It was too bad they didn't have something that would keep. Like cupcakes, or cookies. She could really go for a cookie. Me—

ullerullaraghaghchachompyompompomp

Skrooby was chawing at her, seeming to have made his neck disappear and looking almost blue. A little disconcerted with his perception, she turned away and pushed off the memories that flooded her mind. She got a napkin and used it to pick whatever was nearest in the box and went back to the table, dropping the doughnut onto her plate with a dull clink. Darpra smiled at her approvingly. Helena grabbed some artificial sweetener and a container of creamer and while she doctored her coffee Skrooby Deuce added audio accompaniment that sounded like ripping fabric and heavy objects being dropped into a deep lake. The conversation had turned to launch strategy and Sdye was knocking the table with his finger, agitating around in all directions, even at the empty chairs.

‘...personally disagreed with President Aalex’s plan, however (*rrrrriiip*) it at least spread things out, left some room for adjustment. Now that (*gub blub*) they’re free from it they’re (*gub blub*) blowing our entire load at the beginning on a few locations, in hopes that the beast won’t function without its head. It’s (*shhrraaakk*) madness. A complete waste of our strikes. They’re not even trying to learn (*lup lup lup*) from the sweeps we’ve been getting hit with. Punching first doesn’t mean anything. Winning a single (*oowiep*) day gets us (*oowiep*) nothing. Go back (*oowiep*) to sleep and we’re (*oowiep*) right back where we started. We should do a small barrage then sit back and wait for them to show their hand and counterpunch. (*grrrzgzgz*)’

Helena wondered what it meant to show your hand with nuclear weapons. ‘Maybe we already tried that,’ she said. ‘You can’t generalize based on what’s happening today.’ She stirred her coffee and Skrooby threw a sound like a toilet flushing. Somewhere in the background she thought she heard a masked fart.

‘That’s another thing,’ said Sdye. ‘I don’t think we actually lost our memorants. I don’t think that’s possible. Somebody’s running us blind here. Dotee — do you have friends in the network you could reach out to? Directly I mean.’

Dotrix looked up from her notes and froze. With her round eyes and slack jaw and big front teeth she looked like a rabbit that had just spied the world’s largest carrot. She made a couple false starts at saying something before just shaking her head. In time to her movements were the sound of wipers squeaking across a wet window.

‘Ah, don’t worry about it. Even if we had them I’m not sure what we could do. Certain people would prefer to just sit back and see if things blow over.’ Helena followed Sdye’s gesture and saw Nicoretta walking towards the exit with Lyophilip and Hubba fawning closely at her sides. ‘They’d rather let others run things to avoid making a target of themselves.’

‘Oh please. How’s the other side going to know who’s running things?’ said Helena. ‘We don’t even know.’

‘They knew about Project Detense.’

Sdye glanced at Darpra, moving only his eyes. His face was unusually stiff. Skrooby started his chair spinning and made a klaxon call.

‘What’s that?’ asked Helena.

‘Nothing,’ said Sdye.

‘It’s not nothing,’ said Darpra, turning to Helena. ‘They claimed that we started all this. Used one of our scenarios *by name*. They knew the codename, they knew the details.’

‘They didn’t know shit,’ said Sdye. ‘Robokov was just bluffing, looking for a way to say we fired first.’

'It was a hypothetical where we launched against ourselves. As if attacking our own soil gives them a reason to retaliate.'

'They said the first strike was ours, and that we blamed them.'

'I've never heard about this,' said Helena.

'Oh, you probably have,' said Sdye. 'Just not at the beginning. You see, it's dangerous and stupid and a lie so we kept it tight. If it got out the public could take it completely wrong and the next thing you know we'd be fighting our own people which is exactly what Robokov and the rest of them want. It or some other propaganda b.s. is probably in the wild by now, though with *go back to sleep* and everybody afraid of being removed I doubt it's getting much traction. We could check the TV to see what our side is spewing out.'

He pointed to the corner where an ignored television was on, facing towards nothing in particular, playing a car chase from some rerun. Darpra got up and went to move it.

'But she said they had the real codename. How did they know that?'

'It couldn't be a bug, such foresight would be impossible. There must be a traitor. Or at least there was. That's probably why some don't want to take charge, they're afraid that someone inside might reveal their position. You know what that's called? Gutless. Not to mention the fact that we haven't had any communication since those first few days. If we can't get through do you think a spy's going to have better luck?'

'Wait, so how would they know, then?'

Darpra was pulling the table the TV was on across the floor. Its legs kept catching and the television rocked precariously towards the edge. At the other end of the room the exit opened and Lyophilip and Nicoretta came in, followed by Hubba carrying a large bowl.

'Popcorn!' yelled the front pair in almost unison, holding their arms up and out like reflected Ls.

Darpra squealed and clapped her hands and ran around the back of the table towards the treat-bearing trio. Her foot caught on the power cord and she spun around and stumbled, simultaneously pulling the plug out of the socket and the television off of the table. As she flailed backwards Skrooby Deuce called out *wooh-woo-woo-woo-woo* and then she slid onto her butt at the same time the TV hit the ground and imploded with a loud sparked pop.

Some people rushed to help Darpra and others got plates and made room for the big bowl and nobody paid any attention to the dead television. Soon they were all back together, munching what turned out to be old popcorn that was cold and stiff and slightly soggy with butter-flavored oil, enjoying it with little thought. Skrooby was making noises like bursting kernels and flicking the popcorn into the air and collecting it in his mouth. When it was beyond filled he lowered his head and looked around portentously then

suddenly chomped and gnashed wildly while growling like a rabid dog, bits and fragments roiling, dribbling, flying out like churned foam.

Sdye, still in a mood, started up again: 'I don't know which of Mercan's cronies are running things—'

'Maybe it *is* Mercan...' said Darpra, leaning forward and rubbing her keister.

'We've already established that it's not.'

'Have we?,' said Helena, unclear when this happened.

'Kind of makes you wish we had the Knots, huh?,' said Darpra.

'Huh?'

'With the energy crisis we made them the bad guys.'

'They *were* bad guys,' said Lyophilip.

'It doesn't matter either way. What does is that the strikers thought that they were. We support the workers in taking out the Knots, they return the favor by entering negotiations. Killed two scourges with one hit. And it's spun as a fight against oppressors, so once the public gets wind of it they're eager to help run the plants.'

'After having their power shut off for days,' said Nicoretta.

'For which they should have held the strikers at fault,' said Darpra. 'Instead they collaborated with them. Because they weren't the enemy, the Knots were.'

'I'm not following your point,' said Sdye. 'Are you suggesting we bring the Knots back?'

'They never completely disappeared,' Nicoretta mumbled.

From Skrooby came the sound of a manhole cover being drug into place.

'All I'm saying is that the way out of this may require an unexpected intervention.'

'What, like a superhero showing up to take our nukes away?'

dah du du da daaah, dun dadaaaaah

'Sounds wonderful.'

'OK,' said Sdye. 'Now, let me welcome you back to reality. I'm not going to sit down here sucking my thumb with my fingers crossed waiting for a miracle to appear from the heavens. This doesn't end on its own, we're going to make it happen. However, with all apologies to Secretary Deuce, we're so low on the totem pole that nobody's bothering to listen to us.'

The sound of a video game death: *doodeh dehdunduhduh doodoo doo doo*

'Though I wonder if we really are that far down the succession chain.'

Power up: *grroinkgrroinkgrroink*

'Our influence should be greater than any group who's had their link removed. We should be working to establish who's still around, demand confirmation, take our rightful seat at the table.'

Victory: *dudelaydudelay na nananaaaaah*

‘Hold it,’ said Lyophilip, ‘even if we could verify who’s still around, what is that really going to gain us? You yourself admitted we are super low, so even if more than half of those ahead of us are removed we’ll be lucky to have a smidgen of importance.’

‘Well,’ said Nicoretta, ‘if this goes long enough, Skrooby’s turn is bound to eventually come.’

Lyophilip turned to her, looking not quite at her face. He waited a beat, then spoke: ‘She’s right.’ Another beat, during which she gave him an appreciative look, then he held up a finger and looked around at the others. ‘Though, forever is a long time. I expect a new order to have taken over before then.’ He stopped at Sdye, who was glaring at him. ‘What?’

‘What? What?! Do you hear yourself? You’re saying that this country, this great experiment, is not up to the task of surviving this challenge. Our forefathers—’

‘Our forefathers could never have anticipated this. This doesn’t lessen them. I’m certainly not disparaging them. I’ll bet even they would say the system they set up is inappropriate for these times.’

‘That’s seditious talk.’

‘The opposite, actually.’

‘Could’ve fooled me. I hear stuff like that and I wonder... What *were* you doing with The Dipper?’ Sdye turned to Helena. ‘You in on this too?’

Helena’s chest tightened at the implication. The mention of the president reminded her what she was doing and she blinked back the tears that were drawing into her eyes.

‘Come on, Novette, lay off,’ said Lyophilip. ‘Think we’re not broken up over whatever happened?’

‘I’m sure you are. Tell me Phil, if this is how you feel, why are you even here?’

‘I’ll tell you why. Because I believe in this nation. Because I believe in its people. This government, this experiment, has brought them together to make something that has proven to be truly great. But in case you didn’t notice, things are not going so well right now. The world has gone to hell. We’re floundering trying to keep it together. However, this,’ he gestured around vaguely, ‘this is what we’ve got. For now, at least. Someday someone smarter than me will figure out something better. In the meantime, I’m damn proud to be here. I’m certainly glad I’m not on the other side. I want to do the best for those who put us in charge. Which I think means we do what we can to keep ourselves alive so that when we’re really needed, *really* needed, we’re there. For the country. For the people.’

Lyophilip took a grease-splotted napkin and wiped his forehead. Helena, her emotions already delicate, hearing more than a hint of President Aalex in Frostbit’s words, ran a finger under her eye.

'What if we're needed right now?,' asked Sdye.

'Well I guess call 'em up and find out!' said Lyophilip.

Just then the clang of a telephone ringer sounded.

'Very funny, Skrooby,' said Sdye.

Skrooby held his hands up and made a busy signal. The phone rang again, overlapping him. Everyone turned and Sdye jumped out of his seat and ran to the bank of phones, leaving the others to scramble after him. From her position in the middle of the pack, Helena heard a crash behind her which she could not be bothered to stop for or even check back on.

'This is great...'

They were back at the big table, discussing the phone call. Helena wasn't able to grab a handset before they were all taken and though she was able to squeeze in to share an earpiece with Nicoretta, she had to give it up for Skrooby and was left listening to only one side of the conversation. From what she could tell it was a conference call with other groups whose successor was unremoved (Skrooby proved himself with a signature bleep). Discussion topics appeared to include: whether and how to include groups which were no longer in the presidential line, the need to reestablish consensus, how to wrest control from the Mercan faction, and the possibility of breaking the protection cycle. Around the table, jaws were moving in talk or chew. It seemed that at any given time at least one person was reaching into the bowl to grab some popcorn. Hubba went over to get some more coffee and had to start a new pot. Darpra was picking at her teeth with a pen, creating an incessant clicking. Lyophilip was talking excitedly, sending out infectious energy that everyone seemed to be catching except for Sdye who was sitting with his arms crossed, unusually taciturn.

'...allows us to share power, to come to agreement before acting.'

'It's pluralistic,' said Nicoretta.

'Exactly. We avoid letting a single group run amok. That's especially important now. It moves us closer to the people of this nation.'

'With their multitudinous points-of-view.'

'Exactly. We escape relinquishing control to an isolated sect.'

'Which is tyranny.'

'Exactly.'

'You seem to forget that if you really wanted to represent the people, there's already a branch for that.' When Sdye spoke only his mouth moved. Everything else, including his eyes, remained frozen.

'Weren't you listening? Removals have been unevenly distributed. The executive is the only way to fairly govern the entire country.'

'By ignoring the line of succession? Somebody has to be in charge. What's being proposed has no lawful basis.'

‘And what’s going on with the Mercan’s gang does? Besides, the letter of the law—’

Sdye pounded the table. ‘You don’t fight a coup with a coup. Anyway, you sure seem to be singing a different song than just a bit ago. What happened to keeping our heads low?’

‘We still are. Skrooby’s not at the top of the list. (robot voice: *phvvveeuww*) But we’re being asked to take our seat at the table. They need us at the table, just like we need them. We derive power from each other. And since Wimple has unprotecteds now, we have a memory, we can take back control.’

Helena didn’t remember any discussion about the unprotected. She started to ask how they would be used when Sdye cut her off.

‘And we’re supposed to blindly trust that horndog? This is probably some secret plot for blowjobs.’

‘That’s uncalled for,’ said Lyophilip. ‘You’re just upset because nobody wanted to discuss your launch plan, that you won’t end up with control over your precious nukes.’

Darpra’s clicking turned to a crack and the pen flicked in her hand. Dotrix flinched and touched her cheek and a few new freckles stretched into dark smudges. She looked at her hand and in an impulsive reaction rubbed at her face again which only spread the problem. Helena wasn’t sure that anyone else noticed — not Darpra, certainly not Sdye who was nearly yelling at Lyophilip.

‘But right now, none of us do. Those launch codes are the currency of power and we don’t have them. I don’t know what possessed The Dipper to sleep with them in his shirt pocket, but thanks to him and his fucking quaint ideas they’re a charred mess and the whole nation’s falling apart.’

‘How dare you,’ said Helena, ‘he was a brilliant man.’

‘Oh please. That great mind managed to give away the most powerful weapons in the world *and* trap us all in hell.’

Helena lunged across the table at Sdye. He flinched and twisted and she grabbed at his ear. She’d make him listen, make him learn, old lobe limply flopping she’d rip it right—

Something caught her and lifted her up and she found herself flailing in Hubba’s arms. She kicked and yelled and cried and finally relaxed and Hubba put her down, away from the table. Through eyes blurred with tears that kept falling even after she wiped them she saw everyone with their dry faces and looks of sympathy for her and not the president and turned and walked away.

It was a plain jar. A smooth, straight cylinder of thick glass with a small flare at the top. Helena had removed the domed lid topped with a ball handle

and without it the jar was almost invisible, an unremarkable vessel for the multicolored jumble of jellybeans that it held. She ran her hand through the candy, swirling, digging, breaking up the places where groups of beans had stuck together with the static bonds of time. She wondered how long they had been untouched — not how many loops but how many weeks or months before any of this started, before time ceased to accumulate. The jar had been filled and then forgotten, probably with the hope that it would never be touched. If you were down here it meant things had gone bad.

She scooped a fistful and raised them high and let them patter back down. Through the side of the jar she watched the slow rain of jellybeans return to join the others. Red. Green. White. Blue. Yellow. A brief moment of recognition before disappearing into the noise. There was no individuality. She could focus on a single bean, at the top or the bottom or anywhere in between, but if she moved her eyes or even just blinked, she could never be sure to find it again. Had they moved in the interim? Could she trust her memory? And what was visible was just a surface, a shell. Beyond all the ones she could see but couldn't keep track of were many, many more buried away from her sight, their presence implied by the outermost layer which must be supported and what else could that support be but more beans? She looked at them pressed against an invisible boundary. There was no dust on the glass. Had a maid been keeping it clean? Was it that the air was kept filtered? Had she mindlessly wiped it when she first came in? She looked at the jellybeans which meant she looked at the glass but she didn't see the glass at all. Another hidden support, only this one unseen due to the particulars of light transmittance and the workings of a mind trained to ignore the mundane, to assign irrelevance.

The jar had been sitting at the center of a desk which was otherwise bare. It was a small room that besides the desk only had a lamp and a bed and an adjoining bathroom. There wasn't even a phone. But it had the jar. So this would certainly have been the president's room. She picked up a single jellybean, rolled it in her palm, wondered how it tasted, wondered if the color mattered. Yet she couldn't bring it to her mouth. It seemed wrong, like taking flowers from a grave. She dropped it back into the jar. It was important to leave it, at least for today.

Helena looked across the desk and could almost see him in front of her — smiling, serious, thoughtful, attentive. Physically, at least from the room's perspective, she had never been in here, and probably neither had he, but she knew exactly how he would sit. He would lean forward and ask how she was and offer her the jar. She smelled her hand. Hints of fruit and spice and licorice. She left her hand over her nose and closed her eyes and breathed. It very much reminded her of him. The association was unexpected but strong. He felt so close. She thought of the last times she had seen President Aalex.

Making the plans for the protection. A tough but correct decision. Knowing just what to say — he always had the right words. This was how long ago? Somebody said it had been two weeks. It seemed so much longer. What about the true yesterday, the day before the loops began? Technically that was even closer, only hours before. Or was it a lifetime? She had lived so much since then. And there was two days ago. She was with him, or must have been. It was a blank, a miserable blank. Why did she return and not him? What happened? Did she see his end?

She quit fighting and let herself fall into sobs.

When they finally subsided Helena took a deep breath and opened her eyes and wrapped her hands around the jar. Moisture from her tears smeared across the glass and she rubbed at the streaks with her thumbs, not trying to wipe them away but rather to press them into the surface. This was an urn, a monument. It was why she was here. Yesterday, when she had crossed her zero hour, she knew something had happened. It was not just the different location, or the different protector, there was something else, a heaviness. Like a somber fog had filled the air. She was told nothing but felt she knew. And surely she found out. Today it was the same feeling, an oppressive weight. Questions. A looming sadness. She couldn't go on like this forever, she had to know. She had to remember. So she slipped her napill. Faked protection. Discovered that it was true. He was gone. Removed. And now she was trying to say goodbye, to pay tribute to President Aalex so that at every day's start she could remember him properly and not be weighted under the burden of an unknown grief.

There was a part of her that worried whether she was doing the right thing. Forgetting seemed an offense but there was so much drek it took with it, that it must have taken with it. Realizing everything from today would follow her forever was making her anxious, apprehensive about holding on to something she would regret. She wanted to know what happened to the president but what if she had seen something awful? Protection was seductive, she was sure it must be a relief. Even having something wonderful happen and knowing it would be lost would be, in the moment, a mild disappointment at worst, even stuck erasing each day's memories before the next wouldn't seem so bad when afterwards you never actually knew. What did she really know? Helena turned to the bed, wondered if her spinning mind would even let her fall asleep right now.

The door clicked behind her and she quickly wiped at her eyes.

'Helena?' It was Nicoretta's voice. 'You OK? We got some food, cold cuts and — oh hon-ey.'

Nicoretta dug into her purse and pulled out a packet of tissues. She grabbed a couple and moved to wipe at Helena's face but Helena stopped her and took the tissues and did it herself. When she looked up again Nicoretta

was in the chair across from her, lighting a cigarette. To her side, Dotrix was sitting on the edge of bed, holding a notepad. Three-quarters of her face was completely black with only a quadrant around one eye being clear. She smiled shyly and gave a small wave which transitioned into a self-conscious and inadequate attempt to block her stained skin.

‘We wanted to come by and make sure you were doing alright,’ said Nicoretta. ‘Sdye was pretty rude back there.’

Helena nodded. Nicoretta asked her if she wanted to talk about anything and she shook her head but started talking anyway. She told them about what a great man President Aalex was, how kind and smart and patriotic he was, all the wonderful things he had done for the country and how she knew they already knew but it seemed like back there everybody was already forgetting and it seemed as if they were already acting like he never existed.

‘You’re right,’ said Nicoretta, ‘he is— was a great man. You see, I haven’t even fully grasped the fact that he’s gone. I’m not sure that anyone has. This is a confusing time. Like, how can we not know who’s in charge? It’s a nuclear war. A fucking nuclear war. We’re not forgetting him, we’re just— there’s just so many things we have to deal with already.’

Helena looked at Nicoretta and remembered her showcasing a big bowl of popcorn with a sparkling smile. She didn’t say anything. Nicoretta took a big drag and glanced around and then knocked her ashes onto the floor.

‘You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.’ Nicoretta’s head was cocked, her voice sweet. ‘Everyone knows if there was something you could have done you would have. And you weren’t the only one with him. Phil was too, and Hubba.’

Helena looked up. ‘Hubba?’

‘Sure, he was the president’s protector after Reesees and then Goyt were lost.’

‘He knows this?’

‘Oh, of course not. He’d only get the assignment after getting protected himself.’

‘How’d you...’

‘Darpra knows the list. She’s got all kinds of weird information in that head of hers. Maybe that’s why she’s so unstable, ’cause she’s top-heavy.’ Nicoretta giggled at her joke and looked around for a response. Dotrix lowered her head politely. Helena just waited. ‘Anyway, she was talking today about all these things she knows that have become completely irrelevant, and that was one of them, since we no longer need to cut off the— I mean, we don’t need—’ She cleared her throat. ‘My point is that it wasn’t just you there. You can’t blame yourself. Especially with two big guys...’

Nicoretta trailed off. Helena was looking at her but her mind was someplace else, working things out.

‘So are these for the president?’ said Nicrotta, sticking her hand in the jellybeans. Helena took a second to react before pulling the jar back. ‘Woah, hon, didn’t realize we weren’t sharing. Don’t worry, I wasn’t going to eat them anyway.’ She stubbed her cigarette out on the table, leaving a smudge of char. She picked up a golden bean from her hand, holding it up in front of her face. ‘These go straight to your hips. It’s a shame. I love sweet stuff.’

‘Yeah, it’s horrible how all that extra weight follows you back through time.’ Helena said this as rudely as possible and without thinking, not realizing until afterwards that it might have opposite the intended effect.

‘It’s the principle, hon. And you know the day I decide to stuff my face all this will suddenly stop and I will have to deal with it.’

‘Please,’ said Helena, pushing the jar back towards Nicoretta, ‘take one for the team. Save us all.’

‘Ha ha, very funny.’ Nicoretta stood up. ‘I don’t know why your being so mean. I came here trying to be nice, to make you feel better. I can tell when I’m not appreciated.’ She looked at the jellybeans in her hand and then dropped them in her purse. ‘In case I decide I want a little treat later. Come on Dotee.’

There was a high-pitched noise and then Helena realized it was Dotrix and she asked her to repeat herself. A feeble, squeak of a voice at the upper end of human audible spectrum twittered out:

‘If there’s anything else you want to add — about President Aalex, I mean — you can tell me now. I’ll be sending another report back soon and even though I don’t think they’re getting saved it might be a nice way to remember him.’

Helena smiled and told her what she said already was fine. The two women left and Helena returned her gaze to the jellybeans, stewing over what had been removed. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind something fit together and rose into her consciousness and a new fire lit inside of her, an anger that sent her suddenly standing up, almost knocking the jar off the desk which she caught and righted before rushing to the door.

Helena’s footsteps echoed around her as she shuffled down the hall, clicks and scrapes and occasional cheeps sounding urgency and ire. She hovered at the cusp of a run, going as quickly as she could without looking panicked or causing unnecessary alarm. Her muscles twitched to move faster and it felt as though most of her energy was being spent on restraint rather than propulsion. She turned the corner and up ahead saw the other two approaching the guards to be let in. When they glanced back at her Helena forced herself to slow slightly, to appear relaxed. A guard signaled and Nicoretta stepped forward and gave her name.

‘Nicoretta Calorfree.’

The guards took their time checking her credential and comparing it to her. One of them, both hands firmly on his rifle, took a slow walk around her, pausing to ponder her backside and legs. By the time they were satisfied, Helena had reached them and, suppressing her impatience, took a place along the wall. Nicoretta stood to the side and lit a cigarette while the guards motioned for Dotrix. A large, hostile jet of smoke was blown in Helena's direction but dissipated into a haze and then nothing before making it even halfway towards her. She ignored Nicoretta's stare and focused on getting her breathing under control.

'Dotrix Rasermat.'

The voice was at the threshold of imperceptibility. The guards looked down on her and one of them leaned over to whisper to the other whose face stiffened unnaturally. He said something about her looking different than the picture and his partner coughed and handed her badge back and waved her on. She dropped her head and followed Nicoretta inside. A rumble of voices poured out into the hall when the door opened and then faded away when it closed.

The guards fell into a fit of giggles and one of them gestured at Helena without looking. She stepped up and gave her badge.

'Helena Prolclast.'

Before she had even finished saying her name the badge was back in her hand and the other two had turned their backs to her, laughing hysterically. It was impossible not to feel the target even if she knew she wasn't. Rankled up another notch, Helena gave them a look of disgust as she stormed past.

As previewed before, the room was loud with conversation and the sounds of eating. Small groups had formed with people chattering away, bandying and nodding and holding heaping plates of food. Helena searched for her target and was immediately struck by two tables upon which were huge platters that at one time probably held attractively arranged spreads of lunch meats and cheeses ringed with crepe-like vegetable greenery. Now, though, whatever organization had originally existed had dissolved into a mess: nicely arrayed and folded slices flattened and mixed-up and picked-over and flopping off the platters onto the tables and all over the floor, greens discarded haphazardly after the realization that their decorative qualities limited their edibility, a scattering of bread and condiment squirts and toothpicks tipped with colored ruffles and napkins and plastic cutlery. There was a rectangular table with clear plastic cups spilled across it and at one end an enormous, intricately patterned crystal bowl filled with bright red punch. Nearby was a depressingly empty tray speckled with crumbs and a couple odd chocolate chips.

Helena kept looking. Sdye was sitting alone with one of the phones cradled to his ear, attempting to take a huge bite and talk at the same time.

Nicoretta put a napkin up to her mouth and then began to violently rub at Dotrix's cheek. Skrooby was making like he was furiously chewing though his mouth appeared to be empty. Lyophilip was chuckling at Hubba, catching the food that was falling out of his mouth with his plate. *Hubba*. His back was towards her and he was huge and she didn't know how she didn't see him right away and she could tell he was having a good time by the way that Lyophilip was looking at him and his posture and her anger boiled.

Deliberately, she began to move towards him. He was the protector, he was responsible. He had lost the president. He was fundamentally to blame, no matter the circumstances, be they negligent or accidental or intentional. He had screwed everything up, had *killed*. And he had no clue. She watched his shoulders heave as he laughed, his head tilt back to catch strands of food, his nonchalance, his ignorance. She had to confront him, to let him know what he had done. See his face when he comprehended his guilt. He would not remember but she would — not just his failure, the unknowable act, but also, most especially, his realization. It would be a reckoning. President Aalex deserved this, deserved to have it retained, to not be forgotten in the convenient ruins of memory.

He was close now, she could almost reach him. She raised her hand to poke his back, break his revelry, push—

There was a blur at the edge of her vision and Helena turned to see Darpra sliding across the floor like an out-of-control ice skater on a wad of mortadella and roast beef, hurtling in the direction of her and Hubba and when Darpra got close and Hubba caught sight in his periphery of a figure with flailing limbs bearing down on him with threatening velocity his training took over and he swung around with his arm, sending Darpra flying back and Helena too from the follow-through he didn't realize he needed to control.

As Helena fell backwards she saw Darpra slam onto a table and the punch bowl launch into the air accompanied by the sound of a mortar shell falling — *eeeeeeooooowwwwww* — and the bowl's trajectory intersected with Helena's backward slide and when she covered her face with her arms there was a racket of breaking glass which was no sound effect. Instantly Helena was all wet and as she wiped at herself it felt thicker and looked redder than she expected. She tried to cry out but it was all blood and instead what she heard came from across the room where Skrooby was standing in shock with his hands to his face and mouth agape letting loose with a perfect Wilhelm scream.

...take it...

Two sports cars, picked up hours before from different cities and joined up more recently, sped down the smooth black asphalt of a highway. Mark Pulgrim and West Rustrack were side by side, moving faster as their tandem formation turned into an informal race. They were in the middle of the country and everything seemed empty and dull, from the turned earth of the surrounding fields up to the gray sky. The road was wide open in front of them, lifting only in the distance. Mark had his accelerator floored, but the car was shaking, resisting. West was pulling away, the fucker. Mark slid in behind him and the car seemed to exhale, holding speed in the draft. Red lights blinked and Mark overreacted and his car weaved and fought and when he regained control West had opened a considerable gap. Mark eased off and let him go.

There was a honk and Colg 'Surfn' Turfnbern came up on the left in his convertible. The top was down. Mark wondered when — *how* — he had done that and still kept up with them. Carjacks one hell of a ride and then manages to make it even cooler without missing a step. It was probably close to freezing outside and Surfn was shirtless. The hair on his chest quivered in the cold wind. He held up a beer and paused, flexing his bicep and flashing a grit smile, then took a big swig. He motioned the can in circles at Mark.

As the window lowered air rushed in like deafening ice. It whipped across Mark's face and inside his ear and behind his sunglasses into his eyes, as if challenging his senses to notice anything else. He squinted over at Surfn who was turned towards him, yelling something. Above the tumult of the wind Mark could just barely hear the roar of the engines and beyond that a hint of Surfn's voice, deep grunts that bore little resemblance to words or connection to the movement of his mouth. Surfn glanced up the road and then back at Mark, smiling expectantly. Mark gave a dismissive nod. Surfn waved his

hand and Mark nearly didn't see the beer can until it was almost too late and he batted at it and it spun off in a foamy spray.

Laughing, Mark yelled out his window, knowing that he would remain misunderstood. They were cresting the top of a hill. With one hand he grabbed a beer and opened it and was about to toss it when a dark blue projectile appeared coming straight at him. He slammed the brakes and pulled behind Surfn and a clunky hatchback flew past. It was pointed in their direction but was going so slow it seemed to be moving in reverse. Where the fuck did that come from? He hadn't seen it when they were going up the hill. He looked at the beer in his hand and took a big drink. Down past Surfn a cloud of dust kicked up and from it emerged West who cut across the road and eased in next to the convertible. The road flattened out and they passed a gas station with a huge banner stretched across its canopy, crudely ringed with flashing, multi-colored lights.

KNOTS THANK YOU!!

All three began honking their horns and whooping. Surfn held up a beer in salute and without looking hurled it sideways at West. It thunked off the door and West swerved away and his window dropped and a middle finger extended as he accelerated ahead. Surfn looked back, his teeth gleaming over his bare shoulder. Mark pulled over to the other lane to stay out of his immediate path. Up ahead he could see another slower vehicle was approaching. It turned its blinker on to change lanes but West followed it and proceeded to weave back and forth, slowing down, echoing its movements. Surfn and Mark shifted to the middle of the road, apprehensive. Suddenly West jerked to the right and the two behind barely had enough time to do the same to avoid the car before it veered off onto the shoulder.

Asshole, thought Mark. Surfn had his arms held out in a what-the-fuck gesture. Then, while his hands were still raised and knees running the steering wheel, an ungainly, flopping mass that looked like an amputated octopus or spazzing cat rose out of West's window, trailing ink or piss, moving too fast for Surfn to have time to do anything but grab the wheel before it burst onto his hood in a wet explosion that threw off shrapnel of aluminum can and six-pack ring. Surfn barely slowed as beer trailed off the top of the windshield and across his head. A bat-thing flew out from West's car and split and stalled and fell to the asphalt where its user-manual pages were thrown up by Surfn's then Mark's tires. A huge wing sailed away and up and then right over the top of the convertible and thwapped onto Mark's windshield, the branded floormat momentarily blocking his view before it peeled away. As it did he caught a glimpse of a tumbling spike ball just before it bounced on Surfn's hood and immediately turned the passenger side of the windshield into a cloudy web of cracked glass. Brake lights lit up

and Mark did a hard lane change and, giggling all the while, sped past first Surfn then West, following the road around a curve.

The road straightened into a row of businesses — tractors and trailers, cylindrical fuel tanks, piles of gravel and dirt looming in the rear. A bar was up ahead, arrowed sign blinking welcome in the midday sun. A crowd of people were in the parking lot, bundled up, cheering and waving. Three chicks in jeans and bikini tops were near the road, swaying signs and hips wildly. Mark quickly cranked down the window and waved back, craned his head to get a nice look at the goods. They must be freezing, he thought. He had no idea how they knew to be out there, but he wasn't complaining.

He popped off another beer and looked in his mirror and saw Surfn and West pulling off of the highway. One of the girls was bouncing over to the convertible. Mark hit the brakes and hung a U and ran the wrong way on the road back to the bar, swearing at himself for letting those fuckers get a head start.

They drove along a narrow lane that weaved through hills dense with leafless trees, bare sticks proudly withholding their signs of life for a spring which never neared. Along each side of the road was a respectable white fence. Mark was behind West, who had been joined by Surfn after the latter had abandoned his headrest-impaled and climatically challenged vehicle (turns out the ragtop's roof had been jettisoned at full speed). He had been following them for hours. On the seat next to him, underneath the remaining beers, a map sat folded and untouched.

The forest broke and they descended into a small valley dominated by a palatial estate. White-trimmed mountains rose in the distance. Before today, Mark had assumed that he would never see snow again. They approached a tall metal fence stationed with armed soldiers. A man wrapped in a giant parka stepped out of a booth and talked with West before walking back and checking Mark's identification against a clipboard. Then he stiffly pointed them past an oval drive to the far side of the building where a large parking lot was hidden behind a row of hedges. It was already quite full and they had to drive back a ways before they found open spots. Mark stepped out and stretched in the nippy air, looking up towards the sun's faint blur within the hazy sky. He turned and examined himself in the door window, pulled at his collar, adjusted his tie, fingercombed his part.

'Afraid something might have changed since yesterday?'

'Fuck off.'

In the reflection Mark saw West reach for his hair. He ducked away from the headhunter and squared up a few steps back. Surfn patted him on the shoulder and pushed him to get moving. They were all dressed in

black-tie tuxedos. West had a tailcoat and over that, in his preferred style, a bullet-lined gumbelt with holsters and revolvers on each side.

‘I wonder how Shynyside got stuck with guard duty.’

‘Who’s that?’

‘The Knot down at the gate, checking credentials. Said they had him protect himself before they brought him out. Wanted us to let him know what happened.’

‘Never met him before,’ said Mark.

‘Consider yourself lucky,’ said West, ‘he’s a chump. Guys like him didn’t do shit. *Don’t* do shit. There’s a reason he’s spending the party back there.’

Along the edge of the lot, between it and the mansion, was a wide planting bed, dotted with some nicely manicured shrubs but otherwise barren for the season. Up at the corner nearest to the building, a doorless jeep had been carelessly parked in the bed, deep tire fissures and the remnants of an uprooted bush in its wake. The body was dented and chipped and on its back was a spare tire and a jerrycan spraypainted in dripping red with a symbol that looked halfway between a peace sign and an X-ed out circle.

Mark grinned. ‘That’s gotta be Jek.’

‘There’s no doubt,’ said Surfn.

‘Bastard always has to be up at the front,’ said West. He walked around to the driver’s side. ‘You know, he must freeze his precious little ass off in here. It would be nice if someone kept the seat warm for him.’ West hopped in and put his hands on the steering wheel and pushed himself back, straining. A long, dry rumble sounded deep into the cushion. He exhaled satisfaction and slid out and hovered his hand over the vinyl. ‘Still seems a bit cold,’ he said, pulling at his gumbelt. Mark and Surfn were falling over each other. An arc of liquid shot up in front of West and pattered sloppily onto the seat. West blew into his hands and rubbed them together, all the while the fountain continued its steaming trajectory without deviation.

The museum room was filled with an eclectic hodgepodge of antique furniture, historical artifacts, newspaper clippings, pictures, trophies and crystal cups and other sentimental one-offs, memorabilia, faded outfits, framed correspondence, and anything else that had some remote connection to the estate or its past denizens or surrounding region. One corner was devoted to the construction of the building: plans, contracts, and blurry enlargements of black-and-white sketches, ordered chronologically to show a rapid time-lapse of a forest cleared to dirt from which the structure rose, foundation to walls to roof to roughly its present state. Across another wall was a line of portraits — dignified men with similar somber expressions that began as sedately colored paintings then made a harsh transition to silvery, shadowed photographs which progressed through stepwise lighting improvements then

introduced color and finally retouching to the point that they looked more like paintings than those back at the start.

Mark was looking at a display case of old weaponry with Ollie Satian, trying to read the fanciful inscription on a greater-than-century-old saber. Royal Vroom was standing on a chair, inspecting a old airplane propeller that was suspended from the ceiling. The three of them and West had wandered in here after being given free reign to look around the place. West quickly got bored and left, ostensibly to take another leak. Ollie moved around to the side of the case trying to see underneath a six-shooter. Mark gave up on the inscription and turned his attention to an old spermacetti candle. At the wick end all of the threads splayed into a tangled mess.. Above them, Royal ran his finger along the wood grain.

‘This place is fucking ridiculous, huh?’

Mark turned around. Hughie Grataboy was strolling into the museum room with a drink in one hand and a skewer of meat in the other. Royal hopped down and they tapped their bottles to his glass. Hughie slid off a hunk and chewed eagerly. Ollie asked where he got the food.

‘I just came through the kitchen. We’re not supposed to be in there but I got one of the servers to let me have a peek at what’s for dinner. It’s great.’ He held his hand out and picked at his teeth with the end of the skewer. ‘Hey, have you guys seen this over here?’

Hughie walked across the room and opened a pair of folding doors. Behind them was a cutaway into the wall cavity which was filled with a line of thick metal pipes running vertically.

‘These are pneumatic tubes. When this place was built it was before telephones so they put in this system so that every room could have direct, private communication with any other.’ He reached down and picked up a cylinder and handed it to Royal. ‘The transport containers, have a three-dial addressing system which you used to set the destination room — hundreds, tens, ones. When it is locked in and sent off those keys on the dials fit into grooves within the tubes and automatically route them.’ Ollie handed the container to Mark. There was a thick ridge down its side and at one end were stacked discs with square projections jutting off. Numbers were engraved around the lip of the cylinder. ‘Or, at least that’s what they told everyone. In truth, below us is a room where all the tubes run to. They had people working down there twenty-four-seven who would receive the containers, read the dials, and put them in the correct tubes so they would go to the intended room. In addition to that, their duties included running the air pumps and passing intel.’

‘Oh, I like that,’ said Ollie, reaching for a piece of meat.

‘I knew you would.’ Hughie parried away the greedy fingers.

‘How do you know all this?’ said Royal. ‘You from around here or are you just a fuckin’ nerd?’

‘Naw, I got here early and an old docent gave me a tour before they sent her home.’ He pulled off another bite from the skewer.

West suddenly appeared between Mark and Ollie, his arms wrapped across their shoulders.

‘You know, I wonder how is it that such a beautiful old place as this, so invested in maintaining a tradition of classic grandeur and excellence, can have such a shitty bathroom.’

‘Did you make a mess in there?’ Mark asked, only half joking.

‘Do I look like an animal?’ West said, not waiting for an answer. ‘No, I’m talking about the look of the place. You walk through the door and it’s like you stepped from this elegant palace into a generic gas station john in whereversville. Everything looks plastic. The paper towels don’t absorb. The toilet water’s blue. There’s a souvenir coin smasher. Is that historically accurate? Hey, where’d you get that?’

The skewer was offered, which West or Ollie snagged, pulling away an empty, grease-slicked spike while Hughie tossed the last morsel into his mouth.

Just then a voice arose, filling the room, calling all the Knots to the main hall for the evening’s formalities. Mark looked around for the source but could find none, person or speaker or otherwise. His eyes rested on the tubes, wondering if they didn’t just listen, but spoke too.

They filed out, Mark and Hughie trailing the others. Up near the room’s entrance Ollie went flying off to the side into a pedestal, knocking an ornate goblet onto the ground where it crumbled into shards with a weak murmur, like a sound of surrender. Ollie first tried to lift the pedestal then got a better idea and grabbed a shiny metal trophy cup by the handle and launched it at West. It clanged off the doorframe as West came scurrying around Mark and Hughie, using them for protection. Ollie had gone back to the pedestal and was attempting to hoist it up like a caber. Hughie stepped over and pushed it back to the ground.

‘What are you doing? This isn’t a playground. These are precious valuables. Priceless even. We’re *guests* here. Why’re you all laughing?’

‘C’mon dude, what’s the big deal? Close your eyes and it will all go back as it was.’

‘It doesn’t matter. Shit like this has consequences, Rustrock. We know that better than anyone. *This* happened. Somebody’s gonna notice. Your lack of respect doesn’t go away because you took a nap.’

‘OK, I apologize. We apologize.’ West looked at Ollie who nodded and looked away, chewing back his smile. West went over and picked up the

trophy and laid it on the floor near Ollie. He tossed the big chunks of the goblet into it and then used his foot to sweep more of it in. When he was satisfied he uprighted the trophy and kicked way any residual. Mark noticed his pocket square was frayed and limp and looked like a dingy piece of crude patchwork, yellowed white and dulled red. Ollie put the pedestal back up and West placed the trophy on it. There was a giant dent in its side. He turned it so the damage was hidden. West took a step back and rested his hands on his guns.

‘All better.’

Hughie did not look satisfied so Mark and Royal pulled him away, pushing him out the door and reminding him they were supposed to be having a good time. They followed the hallway until it opened into the front atrium. The space was lit up by a low sun still embedded in haze. As they walked towards the doorway beneath the double stairway, Mark noticed that on opposite walls were hung large antique flags, well-worn and of designs from a long-ago past. One of them had a corner torn off. Mark glanced over his shoulder at West and then at Hughie and started laughing. Royal joined in, as if Mark had pricked something that had been lurking just beneath the surface, ready to burst. Hughie looked back between them, confused, searching for the joke, then for no apparent reason catching the bug and erupting into his own stream of pointless giggling. He shook his head and turned behind and then forward again, smile wide, guffawing all the while, leading the way for his fellow Knots.

The theater was buzzing with conversation, clinking glass, scraping furniture, yells of recognition, laughter, clapping, whistles, coughs. Circular tables had been set out for everyone, each centerpieced with a vase holding a fancy floral arrangement and a thick string precisely tied around its neck, no knot duplicated across them. Mark looked around. He was sitting between West and Royal. Around the table were Ollie, Hughie, and Surfn, as well as Peebee Gurp and Buzzi Swoltz. Up on the stage, a line of seats had been set up and were occupied by a group of plain-looking people, not dressed for the occasion, nervously watching the crowd. A pretty waitress was carrying a tray and passing out drinks, deftly maneuvering away from Surfn’s grabby hands. Buzzi was bent over, talking into Royal’s ear. Peebee had pulled the centerpiece over and was fiddling with the thief knot. Ollie was telling a story about his flight out, about how he had convinced the pilot that he was a pilot himself and was allowed to fly the plane for a few minutes.

‘I thought for sure he was just humoring me, that he’d be watching me like a hawk in case I did something reckless. But he took off into the back to talk with the others and left me up there with the co-pilot who I swear to god was sleeping the whole time. Good thing those birds basically fly themselves,

because I honestly had no clue. It would have been a bad time if things had gone south. We finally get to go unprotected so that we can remember this and I come that close to missing it all anyway.'

Without looking up, Peebee asked if he really 'flew' the plane if he didn't actually touch any of the controls. 'The result would have been the same whether you'd been in the seat or not.' He pushed the vase back to the center, the rope now formed into a noose.

'But I *was*. And I could've touched them.'

'So your restraint saved all those lives. You're a fucking hero, Satian.'

'Whatever,' said Ollie, raising his middle finger. 'If you're so unimpressed why don't you tell us about what great adventure you took to get out here.'

'Oh, it was nothing special. I just took a cab.'

'How did you get a cab to come all the way out here? How did you get a cab at all?'

'Because I'm just a goddamned, motherfucking, real hero. A good many of you all know what I'm talking about.'

Mark laughed along with everyone else, even though he didn't think he knew.

Buzzi waved her hand over the table to get their attention and pointed. A man in a bland suit was standing onstage at the podium, speaking into the microphone but not getting amplified. As the hum of the crowd diminished his voice moved in and out of audibility.

'... on behalf ... full job ... Knots have made ... elective ...'

'What?'

'We can't hear you!'

'Ahhhhhhh, I'm going deaf!'

The man looked off stage and pointed to the mike. Mark leaned forward to Royal.

'Who is this guy? I though Mercan was supposed to be coming.'

Royal shrugged. 'I could barely make it out. Something about something came up and he's the deputy something or rather in his place or something.'

Mark sat back, unexpectedly feeling disappointment at not getting to meet the vice president. There was a squeal and a staticky pop and the man's exhaled breath whooshed around the room.

'Better? OK, good. I'm glad you all could come out. And, um—' He glanced around, off into the distance. Nodded.

Everything went pitch black. An afterimage of the man hung briefly in the void before fading away. There was an uneasy commotion about. Mark's immediate thought was that they had shut down the power plants again and a rancor begin to burn inside him.

'In the beginning — all was dark.'

The audio system was still powered. The voice was attempting to be dramatic, ominous, but given the situation it was more like comic relief. Mark's fire faded away. A few people clapped. Something plowed into Mark's belly and he doubled over onto a knee, gasping for breath. Suddenly the lights came on and he looked up and saw West intentionally ignoring him, rubbing his fist, doing a poor job of suppressing a smirk.

'Then there was light!'

Mark dragged himself back into his chair and lifted it slightly to move to a better position, one facing the speaker more directly and which placed the chair leg directly on West's foot. He dropped down hard and there was a squawk and a groan behind him. He tried to look focused on the speaker but there was something wet writhing in his ear. He batted it away and spun around and saw Buzzi and Hughie staring contempt at him and West. Mark wiped his ear with a napkin and turned back to the stage.

Despite the fanciful moment the man had quickly settled into a terribly dry delivery, droning on about the great importance of electricity and social harmony, making a claim that they were one and the same, that in the world they had come to live in brotherhood, order, and peace are only possible if unfettered power is constantly being fed into their civilization, sustaining it, forcing balance.

'We have settled into unstable times, and, as the contrast of the past two weeks has shown us, the only hope for equilibrium and our continued security is to maintain the structures and systems that will now exist in perpetuity.'

Mark looked around the table to see if anyone else understood what the hell he was talking about. Surfn was staring at his empty glass, picking at his eyelashes. Peebee was nodding his head, perhaps in comprehension, perhaps in boredom. Ollie gave him a confused shrug.

The man onstage gestured to the line of people behind him. They apparently were plant workers, part of the strike. Mark's fire rekindled. They were there not just to affirm the truce but in a display of solidarity and respect. The word 'repentance' was used. They each stood up as their name was read, facing a silent audience.

'Mithsp Blissen. Dzherm Curlimaxx. Thlon Pompee. Jovanagon Mustardi. Ahol Mighty...'

What the hell were those, noms de guerre? And they sure didn't seem contrite. In fact, they looked proud. It was like they didn't even realize what had happened. They had lost. They had gained nothing except everyone's disgust. There was blood on their hands — innocent blood, pointless blood, blood of their own. They took out their own leaders to incite a revolution, tried to blame it on the Knots, thought they would have the people on their side. But it wasn't about fighting power, it was about wielding it. They didn't want everyone to work together, they wanted to show they could make

everyone suffer, that their own supposed hardship mattered the most. They didn't understand how good they had it. They still had their same purpose in life when so many had lost theirs. Rather than recognize their fortune, they got crabby about perceived inequalities and threw a fit. And what good did it do? Caused a bunch of unnecessary misery, fighting, removals — only to have everything go back to the way it was before. What a waste. Look at them, acting so virtuous. They probably secretly wished they had been removed and left the country in chaos — smug martyrs willing to throw everything apart just to prove a point. Fucking strikers.

Mark looked down at his hands. He was squeezing a spoon that he had bent in half. He flattened it back and put it on the table. The speaker was wrapping up.

'...evening of fun. Food, refreshments, dancing, games. I hope you stay awake as long as you can to enjoy it. Unfortunately I must leave for another engagement, and these hardworking men and women have their own obligations. Which of you are going from here to your shift at the plant?' A number raised their hands.

'That's right, get back to work!' someone called out. The theater exploded into cheers. Many stood up.

Everyone on stage seemed uncomfortable. Pleased with the sight, Mark clapped his hands above his head. The man at the podium looked like he had more he wanted to say, but after the commotion died down he just leaned forward and said, 'The night is yours,' before motioning the workers to follow him out.

Dinner was delivered by a procession of servers that snaked around the table, depositing plates in order. Three men, stonefaced and disengaged, and a shapely doll with a tight skirt and glittering makeup. Ollie reached up and touched the small of her back.

'So, what do you say we ditch this place and go find ourselves a good time? I promise you a night to remember.'

Surfn leaned over and pulled the waitress towards him. 'You'll have to excuse my friend here, he talks big but doesn't have the goods to back it up. If you're really looking for a night to remember, and I do mean *all* night, an I-don't-care-if-you've-already-taken-a-nap-you-ain't-ever-gonna-forget-this kind of night, I'm the man you're looking for.'

Buzzi piped in: 'Watch yourself. You may not forget it, but you'll wish you could.'

There were *ooohs* all around. Royal reached over the table and slapped Buzzi a high-five. Ollie gave her a victory sign under his chin. She held her finger and thumb infinitesimally apart and squinted haaard. West had his chair tilted back and was rubbing his gun grips. Surfn shook it off and made

another appeal to the waitress. She smiled and leaned onto the table, lifting one foot back off the ground.

‘Listen boys, there’s plenty of other hungry fellas in here and I need to make sure they all get fed. You make sure you stick around, though, and when I’m done we can continue this conversation and, uh, see where it leads.’ She took a step away then ran a finger over her lips to her chin. ‘I’ll bring some friends too.’

Mark opened the glass door and stepped out onto the veranda. Hughie didn’t turn around, just took another drag from his cigarette and stared off into the night sky.

‘You OK? They got a big ol’ cake in there.’

‘Sure. Just thinking.’

Mark leaned on the railing, facing the same way as his fellow Knot. It was freezing out. He breathed into his hands and stuffed them into his pockets.

‘You want a smoke?’

‘No, I don’t. Smoke, I mean.’

‘Too bad. It’s particularly nice on a night like this. It can’t hurt you, you know.’

‘Hmm.’

‘No, I understand. We’ve spent our whole lives learning the world works a certain way and now everything’s twisted. Different things matter, different things don’t anymore. It’s hard to adapt. I mean, look around. Everyone’s still rushing as if they’re going to miss out, trying to make every second count, disappointed when they can’t. We’ve got plenty of time, but it’s like we’re hard-wired to forget that. I have to remind myself all the time.

‘I live in the city. Lately, by the time evening comes my street is covered in trash. People just dump whatever out there, they don’t care anymore. I spent a lot of time getting angry about that, still do. I mean, it looks horrible. I can’t let that go, that it looks like, well, trash. Have a little respect. What’s wrong with not wanting to live in a dump? But you’re seeing it all wrong, they say. Don’t fight what it is, look forward to what it will be. And you know what? There may be something to that. We get hung up on the moment and lose track of the new rhythms of the world. I can make the trash disappear. All I have to do is turn my back, close my blinds, go to sleep earlier. When I wake up it’s gone. Or, maybe now it was never there. Because of me. I did that.’

‘Speaking of trash, what about those fuckers they had on stage? At least they threw themselves out.’

Hughie looked at Mark and lit another cigarette. He took a deep drag and held it. Everything was quiet, other than the dullish sound of music behind them. Finally, he exhaled up into the sky.

‘Look out there, what can you see?’

Mark looked. The parking lot was in front of them. He searched for their cars, couldn’t remember the row. Up behind Hughie he noticed that Jek’s jeep was gone.

‘There’s mountains, right in front of us. We can’t see them, but they’re there. Same as this morning, same as tomorrow. I’m sure of it. Mountains are not fixed, though. The ground is shifting and buckling infinitesimal amounts every day. A gust of wind blows a grain of sand into the mountain-side, knocking out a new grain of sand. Over millions of years those little changes add up. Mountains rise up and erode away. But the span of a life, at least as it used to be, was too short to witness this. These mountains that we can’t see, that we’re certain are there, they’ve probably looked the same for the whole history of mankind. Tell me, is that any different than now? Starting over every day is indistinguishable from moving a distance that we can’t measure. Does that mean we’re stuck? Have we always been?’

‘I think I can see the ridge. Up there. It’s like a different dark.’ Mark hooded his eyes with his hands. The line shifted, faded, dissolved. He tried to remember the shape of the mountains from earlier but wasn’t sure he had actually looked. Maybe that was trees, the black woods blending together, pointed apices defining a false boundary. Should he be searching higher? What color was snow at night?

‘When people toss trash in the street, bust an antique, break their leg, smoke another cigarette, they’re not worried because they know the damage won’t last. But neither does the progress. We act like we’re gaming the system, but we’re actually falling prey to it. We forget that something does last, up here, in our heads. We want to treat every day like it’s a fresh start, take too much in, try to do everything, ignore the residue. We’re dooming ourselves to going nowhere. We’re going to end up insane. Maybe we already are.

‘We can do better. If we don’t want to waste all this we need to build mountains, one grain at a time. It can’t be rushed. It requires patience, and intention, and faith in consequence. That’s what I’m going to do. I’m still learning, still trying to adapt. It’s barely started. There’s a long ways to go.’

There was thump and Mark glanced over his shoulder. Surfn was yanking at the glass door and finally pushed it open and stumbled out to the railing and shot a golden jet of vomit into the gloom. He turned to Mark and Hughie and let out a maniacal laugh and lunged back inside, leaving behind a hanging fog that smelled of fermentation and marine spoilage. Through the windows Mark could see tables and chairs being moved to the perimeter, a few of the waitresses mingling about. He looked at Hughie and sniffed.

‘Come on, I think they’re going to start dancing. It’s too fucking cold to think, anyway.’

‘Yeah. You go on ahead. I’m just gonna finish this.’

Everyone was gathered in a disorganized crescent in front of the stage, surrounding a large, garishly colored ball. Its surface had a crumpled texture and was patterned in shapes that were fuzzy and distorted and indiscernible to Mark, like a rainbow shattered and blurrily reassembled into the wrong form. Two men in coveralls were next to it, wrangling with a pair of ropes that dangled down from a hole in the ceiling. The standing one was barely taller than the ball.

Mark saw Buzzi watching with some of the others and walked over.

‘What’s this?’

‘It’s a piñata.’

‘It’s ugly as hell, is what it is.’

‘I thought we were going to be dancing.’

‘Afterwards, I guess.’

‘What are we, ten years old?’

‘Has it been that long?’

‘Is there a bat?’

‘Where’d the chicks go?’

‘They said they’d be back.’

‘They’re changing.’

The kneeling man stood up and he and his partner rolled the ball so that the knotted ropes were at the top. One of them yelled something and the ropes pulled taut. He called out again and they stopped with the globe hovering a just off of the ground. They centered and stilled it and then climbed on stage and disappeared into the wings.

‘What do you think’s inside?’

‘Bigger mystery’s what’s on the outside.’

‘I think it’s a...’

‘Haha. It’s so bad Colg’s at a loss for words. Don’t stare at it too hard, man, it’ll make you crazyyyyyyy!’

‘I’m seeing an eye.’

‘Are you blind? That’s an O.’

‘Could be a head. That bottom part looks like a smile. It’s so hideous I think it’s supposed to be you.’

‘Fuck off. Where’s the bat? I’m going to smash it. Sometimes— Hey! Why?’

The lights were out. Then they came back on.

‘Maybe they don’t trust us to be blindfolded.’

‘Where’s the bat?’

‘Screw it, let’s see how it takes a punch.’

Peebee walked out to the sphere and reached out, laying his palm flat against it, crinkling into the crepe paper, swaying it slightly. He dropped his hand and looked back with a smirk and raised his fist. There was a whirring sound and when he swung the haymaker the ball was already above his head and he connected with nothing and reeled around flat onto his back. He pounded the ground, lifting himself up to his knees, whipping his head wildly.

‘Hilarious. Who the fuck’s controlling this thing?’

He was already on his feet and scanning the room, along the walls and back at the empty stage and into the Knots, in search of complicity. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a pistol. Mark and Buzzi and most everyone else backed away. Among the few who rushed in was Royal who got to him first. Peebee had his head back and arm straight up, rocking slightly to keep aim with the piñata. Royal wrapped him in a hug and spoke into his ear and slowly lowered the gun. The others that had charged forward huddled around and talked calmly and patted the two men’s backs. Guns were reholstered, including many in the crowd around Mark. He was surprised that they were so jumpy, especially considering it was Peebee. Nonetheless, he found himself feeling through his jacket at his own weapon. He leaned over to Buzzi.

‘So, seriously, what is this? They got a stripper in there or something?’

She shrugged.

‘Didn’t you help organize this?’

‘Not me. My job, just like every day, was to make sure you guys knew where to go, when to be there, and how to prepare. And that you had a way to get here. Everything else is out of my hands.’ She nudged Mark. ‘I’m honestly surprised that some of you actually made it.’

‘Oh ye of little faith.’

‘Easy for you to say. *I* don’t forget how often you all screw up.’

There was a clacking noise and when Mark looked onstage he saw one of the covered men leaning down to hand out a couple of thin sticks that looked like broom handles. He dropped something else and turned to leave but Royal called him back. They had a brief discussion during which the man mostly shook his head and pointed vaguely at the piñata and the sticks, which Peebee and another Knot were now swordfighting with. Royal still appeared to be trying talking to him when the man gave a final, awkward wave and left more quickly than seemed necessary.

Royal called Peebee over and took the sticks, then lifted a black piece of fabric from the stage and slipped it over his head. The hood had no eye holes and Peebee swung his hands around aimlessly. There was a cry from the crowd and West shuffled out, arms extended, nose aloft as if tracking a scent, saying he was ready. The ragged strip of faded flagcloth had been

wrapped around his head as a blindfold. Laughing, Royal took Peebee's hand and walked towards West, calling out to help guide him. When he had them both he handed a stick to each and explained something to them. West and Peebee both faced off away from Royal, each leaning an ear towards him, holding their sticks at angles they didn't realize were odd. Royal guided them out below the ball and had Peebee wait while he and West backed away. They stopped and Royal began to spin West in place, guiding him through a constant direction change, fleet feet moving nowhere. After a number of revolutions Royal grabbed West and aligned him and then stepped away. The blindfolded Knot leaned and wavered, stumbled and caught himself, was facing the wrong direction. The crowd clamored then quieted. Royal was walking towards Peebee but thought better of it when the hooded man's stick started to swing in wild, wide arcs. West lurched diagonally, tapping like a blind man. Peebee was reaching out to touch the piñata, trying to follow the directions being called out to him. He never made contact.

Royal put his hands up in surrender. 'All right!' he called towards the stage, 'we're ready!'

The lights went out again. Boos and hoots competed with one another. Mark heard footsteps on the stage. Then a yell and almost simultaneously a row of flashing fire and the room was aroar. Mark instinctively dropped to the ground and someone fell on him heavily and when he tried to drag them off they started shaking and his arm and side exploded in pain. There was flickering all around him but he couldn't see anything and his ears felt like they'd burst. The air was heavy and thick with gunpowder and something else, something familiar. He couldn't get at the pills in his pocket or his gun because his arm was shot and the other was trapped behind from the weight on top of him. Mark tried to roll but the body convulsed again and he felt shots punch into his belly. He fought to breathe and at the same time felt a surge of awareness, a buzzing in his nerves absent any strength. The shooting seemed to be subsiding.

Then there was light.

Mark's head was laying on the ground, looking at bodies surrounded by puddles of blood streaked with green, an emerald smoke hanging over everything. Who had junk? he thought. Were we hitting ourselves? Far off, deep within the buzzing in his head, he heard somebody yell 'Thlon!' and a Knot rose up in front of him and squeezed off a couple of shots. The Knot stumbled forward and Mark moved his head to follow and Buzzi's face came into view, half of it missing, hanging right in front of his own. He winced away and saw the ball still above them, well-defined and indistinct, appearing to be floating through the haze, suddenly seeming like a manycolored explosion that blew out towards everything.

...rumour in the ranking...

Phil discarded the jack of spades. Jack of spades. Jack of spades. Ranchin looked at his hand. Two tens, two nines, two of them spades. He should take the jack. Get rid of a ten. But hadn't a nine already been laid down? He hadn't seen a ten yet, he didn't think. Maybe Phil had two tens too. But why drop a jack then? He couldn't think straight. What were they doing? Why was he playing this game?

'What are we doing?'

He picked up the jack and put down the ten of hearts. Phil looked at his cards.

'Don't start that again. We're just passing time.'

Phil picked up the ten as if an afterthought, and discarded another jack. Ranchin considered what he should do. Thoughts rattled around in his head, useless. His heart was fluttering. He reached into the candy jar and pulled out an orange jellybean and popped it into his mouth. The jar was half empty. They knew he liked to keep it full. Had Phil been swiping them when he wasn't looking? It didn't matter what was going on, he should show a little restraint, given how fat he was. Ranchin glanced at Phil's mouth, his fingers, searching for residue. He pulled the jar closer, pulled out something light. Perhaps he could take the jack. Get rid of his ten. Just blow the game. Bit into the candy. Coconut. Or was it piña colada? He drew a card from the stock pile. Ace of spades.

'Can't you let me in on what's happening?' he asked Phil.

'It's too early. You'll only forget.'

'Then you can tell me again. I have the right to know. Are they launching against us? Do you need my codes? How many people have died? I'm not—'

'We can't risk you making decisions which you won't remember. You understood that. You set it up this way.'

‘Well, I should have known better. I’m rescinding my order.’

Ranchin discarded his nine and closed his cards and put them down. He began to stand up and felt something on his shoulder push him back down. He looked up and saw Hubba looming over him, wearing the same plain, broad suit he always did. An enormous hand was holding Ranchin in his seat. The big man checked his watch.

‘I order you to let me up, Hubba.’

‘I’m sorry sir, you know that won’t work.’ Hubba’s voice was deep, unyielding. ‘You have to wait until your head clears.’

‘Well, can we check then?’

‘Not quite yet, sir.’

Ranchin slumped forward. He grabbed a few more jellybeans and began to eat them in rapid succession, stuffing the next one in before he had time to taste its predecessor.

‘Pick up your cards, Ranchy,’ said Phil.

‘Can’t you brief me about something that doesn’t matter? Agriculture projections? Next week’s weather? How we’re polling with the gays? I wasn’t elected to play games.’ Ranchin’s mouth was salivating heavily at the cloying confusion of flavors. Spittle sprayed when he spoke. He wiped at his mouth. A rainbow smeared across the back of his hand, over another.

‘Pick up your cards.’

‘Come on, Frostbit, at least give me a hint.’ Ranchin struck his most authoritative stare. He chewed with extreme gravitas. ‘What’s happening?’

‘I’m about to take my turn.’

‘No, now. I mean, not here. Out there, in the real world. What’s happening now!?!’

‘I don’t know any more than you. None of us do.’ He took a big, exasperated breath. ‘You think I like this? I’m dying to hear some news. I hope the country’s doing alright. I hope we’re kicking butt. Don’t forget, my head’s clear. So’s his. We’re here out of duty. So are you. Not to be rude, sir, but I’ve told you this exact thing, less than an hour ago. I wish you wouldn’t be so difficult. It’d all go a lot quicker if you’d just get with your own program.’

Ranchin gnawed at the candy and sucked at it through his teeth. Something was happening outside, but they were stuck pretending it didn’t matter yet, as if forgetting was no different from never knowing in the first place. He laid his palm flat on the table. The cards were gone. He only saw his hand.

‘It’s time, Mr. President.’

Ranchin felt a weight lift from his shoulder. He swiveled to see Hubba standing back, pulling out an index card from his jacket.

‘The code, sir?’

Ranchin probed his memories, trying to remember what they had decided on. As he reached back, previous codes began to swirl around and jumble together. Some were fainter, others more clear. There was Hubba but also Goyt and Reesees before him. Ranchin let the clearest images come to the fore, looked for Hubba, searched back from this moment for an intersection, a memory from minutes ago. One seemed to stand out, but he wasn't sure.

'227?'

Hubba shook his head. 'It's not clear yet, sir.' He flipped over the card to show the numbers **710** written in thick black marker. With a sigh, Ranchin turned away and scooped another fistful of beans into his mouth. He imagined a man locked behind bars, helplessly watching an approaching mob. Hubba folded up the card and slipped it into his pocket, then pulled out a new one and moved forward. He double-clicked his watch, showed it to Ranchin, wrote down the trailing digit. Repeated the cycle two more times. He glanced across the table before holding up the code. There was a brief discussion to which Ranchin contributed only smacking sounds, then Hubba put the card into his jacket, checked his watch, walked back to his seat in the corner.

Phil raised his eyebrows at Ranchin. 'Pick up your cards.'

Ranchin dragged his hand off the table and fanned it out. Phil took the nine and tossed away a card and laid down three separate groups.

'Gin.'

The table shook almost imperceptibly, movement transferred from Ranchin's bouncing foot up through his body and out his leaning arms. The coffee in front of Phil quivered, as if beneath its pale tan murkiness lurked a writhing beast. Ranchin stared above his cards at the mug, modifying his frequency and amplitude, trying to induce waves, to raise liquid over the walls as a signal of the unseen's rage. A hand appeared and lifted the vessel and the surface quickly dampened to flatness.

'I'm waiting, Ranchy, it's your turn.'

Ranchin looked over at Hubba. He was holding his cuff, staring at his watch. Ranchin turned back to his cards, then glanced at what Phil had discarded. Two of hearts. Exactly what he needed. He grabbed the card and almost without a thought put down one from his hand. A couple more cards and he would win, multiple ways to get there. As long as Phil didn't knock. A minute ago he thought his hand was a mess, and now he could almost see exactly how it would play out. He was a cowboy in a saloon, watching his opponent unknowingly stumble towards his inevitable defeat. His foot bounced harder, lifting into an occasional tap. He reached into the candy jar without looking and rattled around until he got a hold of one of the

remaining beans. It was sour, an indistinct citrus. Phil discarded the queen of hearts and Ranchin immediately picked it up and put down an eight.

‘Excuse me, sir.’

‘Not now, Hubba.’

‘But it’s time to—’

Ranchin let out a breathy groan accompanied by a flat hand. Phil put his cards face down and started to say something but Ranchin turned his hand into a pointing finger and directed him to keep playing. Phil sighed and with a glance over Ranchin’s shoulder, drew and discarded simultaneously without looking at either card. Another eight. Ranchin drew a card. Another eight. Dagnabbit. He dropped his other eight. Phil did another indifferent draw and discard.

‘You’re not even trying,’ said Ranchin.

‘Not until you check.’

Ranchin looked at his nearly completed hand and reluctantly put it onto the table. He motioned for Hubba to come over and picked up the candy jar and emptied the remaining jellybeans into his palm then funneled them into his mouth. Hubba pulled an index card from his jacket.

‘The code, sir?’

Ranchin probed his memories, reaching back through the swirl and jumble of previous codes. He pushed away the fainter ones as well as those with Goyt and Reesees. He intersected images with his sense of time, seeing not just index cards but playing cards as well. His current hand, the ones he needed. He couldn’t concentrate, nothing stood out. A code crossed his mind. It seemed stupid, impossible. But it was all he could think of. He spoke haltingly.

‘3-2-1’

‘Contact Helena,’ said Hubba, flipping the card over. ‘Let her know we’ll be coming in less than five. Mr. President, why don’t you lie down while I get your napill.’

Ranchin quickly rose and went over to the couch. There was still a small wad of jellybean floating around in his mouth and he chewed at it purposefully before stretching out. Already the image of Hubba writing **321** on the index card was settling into his memory, truth congealing from the mists he had been searching through. Across the room Phil was talking into a phone, intense and agitated. He briefly glanced at Ranchin then turned back, all the while nodding his head and shaking his free hand at nothing. Hubba came towards the couch with one hand cupped and the other holding a glass of water. He offered the napill and Ranchin picked it up and before putting it in his mouth took a wistful look past Hubba to the table where his abandoned hand lay, its completion and victory unrealized.

* * *

The hallway was dull and narrow. Walls and ceiling and floor were all hard concrete or metal painted in the same colorless drab, echoing their footsteps out and back and creating the impression that a number of invisible feet were shuffling through the space with them. Fluorescent lights spaced too far apart in the low ceiling created a pattern of bright and shadow that made the tiny corridor seem to undulate as they moved through it. Phil was in the lead and Hubba behind, encouraging Ranchin to keep up his pace. Ranchin felt like he remembered being here before but had no clue where they were. He watched approaching doors expectantly and followed them when they passed, quickly reading the tiny placards next to them. MERM — EP — ET In one arm was cradled a candy jar into which his other was thrust, grasping futilely at its emptiness. His heart rattled and stomach churned. He wondered if one of the doors opened to a bathroom.

‘I need to use the toilet,’ he said to Phil.

‘Its just a little bit ahead.’ Phil was holding up a piece of paper with scribbled directions.

‘But I really need to go.’

Phil leaned his head over a shoulder without slowing down and sighed. ‘You should have gone before we left. We’re almost there. You’re just going to have to hold it.’

Phil looked forward and left Ranchin appealing to the back of his head. They approached a corner, the patter of unseen steps converging to just their own, and when they turned the bend they were looking down a hallway that appeared identical to where they had just come from. Ranchin had the sense that the hall was actually some architectural trick that had turned onto itself, or that they had spun all the way around without realizing it and were going back the way they came. A pilot who’d lost his instruments, adrift in the fog. Phil charged ahead despite how out of shape he looked and Ranchin had little time to consider his disorientation as he struggled to keep up. His hand scraped at the smooth glass of the jar, his mouth was dry, he felt hot and clammy, he wanted something sweet. He really needed to go. The movement had helped at first but now he was having to walk and pucker at the same time, actions which seemed antagonistic, which caused him to squirm and made his legs work like they’d forgotten how to be natural.

They turned another corner and it was the same view again except halfway down the hall were a couple of uniformed guards at a door. As they got close the guards stiffened and stared straight ahead at the opposite wall and saluted. Phil continued right past but Ranchin stopped and returned the salute, the jar banging against his forehead.

‘Is there a bathroom in there?’

‘No.’ Phil didn’t slow down.

There was a nudge at Ranchin’s back. ‘Come on sir, let’s keep up.’

Ranchin did another salute, this time sans container, felt Hubba push him along after Phil. 'Are you sure?,' he said, 'I'll be quick.'

'We don't have time.'

'Well, what *is* in there?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Why are there guards?'

'To keep people out.'

'Out of what?'

'That room.'

'Why?'

Phil didn't answer and Ranchin didn't press him because his body found a new edge to teeter against and he had to focus on holding back the pressure. He clenched and pushed at himself, trying to be subtle, a fist in the front and candy jar at the back. They zigged one corner then a few steps later zagged another. The direction changes seemed to help settle things but a moment later Ranchin felt a tremulous, painful cramp which brought him nearly to a halt. Hubba coaxed him forward. Another set of guards were up ahead. They were indistinguishable from the ones they had just left behind.

'Here we are,' said Phil.

He signaled and one of the guards opened the door then stood back to the side. Ranchin rushed past Phil and into the room, hunched forward, barely lifting his hand to give a salute which pointed mostly at the ground. He quickly scanned the room and spotted the bathrooms at the back. He shuffled across the floor and tried the men's room but it was locked. Without a thought he moved to the ladies' except it was locked too.

'Oh, gimme a break!' Ranchin said in a full panic. He began to bang on the door with the jar. 'Excuse me! Open up! National emergency!'

A young man with a big wave of blonde hair and eyes wide behind his glasses came running up shaking something in his hand. 'Sir,' he said with a sheepish nod, then turned to the men's room door handle and unlocked it. He had barely opened it when Ranchin pushed him aside and lurched in. He hadn't thought to turn on the light and was halfway to the toilet when the door closed behind him and it went completely dark. Ranchin floundered in the direction he had been heading, hit something and fell forward, water up to his elbow. Pulling his hand out of the bowl he reached down and fumbled blindly at his belt. Everything was teetering at the precipice and he feared he wasn't going to make it even though he was so close. *So close*. Finally he got it open and tore down his pants and felt for the seat and before his butt even touched let himself go, blasting liquid from both holes in a flood which sent a tremendous roar out into the blackness. He added a third discharge to the din, crying out with relief and shame, all the while gripping the candy jar and directing his voice at the transparent emptiness he could not see.

Ranchin looked out into the room with bewilderment, trying to make sense of things. His head was still swimming with adrenaline and embarrassment and the inhuman chemical stench that he'd befouled the air with. The space was smaller than he'd expected, barely bigger than his bedroom back home, and seemed disorganized, low-tech. One wall was lined with folding tables containing: a couple phones colored dingy green and yellow, a fax machine, a computer whose monitor was nearly covered — screen, sides, and top — in yellow sticky notes, themselves covered in scribbled writing and arrows, a brown file box, a number of tall, unkempt piles of papers, and, at the far end, another telephone, this one bright red. On the opposite side of the room were two big blackboards. One of them had a list of times written out at regular intervals, half of them crossed out. The other had some city names and, in the far corner, a drawing that looked like horse mounting a mushroom cloud. The third wall had three big pull-down maps, one of them half retracted. Next to the door were two televisions. One was tuned to a soap opera, the other black and white and showing a grainy view of the hallway and the two guards. In the center of the room was a couple of card tables and a handful of folding chairs. Phil and Helena were sitting there together, in deep conversation. The young blonde-haired man was talking into the yellow phone while Hubba held up a piece of paper in front of him and pointed. There was nobody else in the room. He blinked a couple times, as if that would clear things up. Then he coughed.

'Um, where is everybody?'

Helena and Phil looked up, then rushed over to him.

'You feeling alright, Mr. President?' asked Helena. Her expression was stiff, as if she was suppressing something. Her nose twitched involuntarily.

'Where is everybody?' Ranchin repeated.

'This is it.'

Ranchin took this in. The thought of everyone else being removed seemed impossible. The weight of an unfathomable loss pressed down on him, through his shoulders and chest and into his gut which rumbled miserably. 'They're all gone?' he said, staring dumbly at the televisions.

'No, no. They're— Well, I mean, some of them— We've lost a number of people, but we're still in good shape.'

Ranchin looked around. He thought of a straggle of helpless pioneers, surrounded by natives they could not see. He turned to Helena, half expecting to see insanity in her eyes, or for her face to crack, to let him in on the joke.

'You don't remember, do you, sir?' It was Phil. He was pulling at his nose and wiping his hand across it. He took Ranchin's arm and led him out into the room. 'Your plan was to decentralize, to break us into small groups. Complicate the attack surface. Ensure continuity on any given day.'

Ranchin looked at him blankly. This didn't sound familiar. Phil cocked his head at Helena.

'It's OK,' she said. 'Mr. President, you should understand that we are well-positioned across a number of sites. They have sustained fewer losses than us, and we are—'

'Wait, how many have we lost here?'

'An exact accounting isn't possible. It might be a hundred, maybe two.'

'How can we not know?' He looked around again. 'And how the heck did we all fit in here?' Something on the television flashed and he jerked his head back and stared at a commercial zooming in on a head falling into a pillow in slow-motion.

'We didn't. Apparently we're in this room now as a type of strategic countermeasure.' She had a look that Ranchin couldn't exactly read. Worry? Fear? 'The other sites are continuing to collect data and assess the situation, outside and internally. We're in communication with all of them. They recommended we move in here.' She pointed at the wall with the tables. 'They've been sending over reports which I've been going through and I'd like to brief you on.'

Ranchin turned away from the television, his gaze held by the screen until the last moment when it swept over to the mass of paper on the tables. He imagined a blitz of linemen, nowhere to go. Helena was sharp, but how could one woman go through all that? The red phone caught his eye.

'We should call someone, let them know I'm here, find out what's going on right now.'

'I already have. They're ready to talk to you, but first I need to give you this briefing.'

'But since I'm in charge now, don't they need my orders?'

'They already have them, sir,' said Phil, patting him on the shoulder. 'You gave them back when you set all this up. It's working just as planned.'

Ranchin nodded, pleased with himself and at the same time digging around to remember exactly what he had set up. He remembered the vice president.

'So Mercan is running things?'

'That's right. Following your instructions, of course. It's like you've been running things all day.'

Ranchin felt a touch of relief. Mercan would hold the line. Then he suddenly felt weak and reached into the jar he was holding but it was empty. He looked at his hand, slightly distorted by the clear glass, and remembered the bathroom. He fell back into a chair. He almost couldn't speak.

'Did we strike?'

'Why don't you let me brief you.'

Ranchin looked up at Helena. 'Did we strike?'

‘We did, sir.’

Shock and nausea rushed over him. Tears welled in his eyes. He thought of his wife.

‘Where’s Craynia?’

‘She’s still asleep, close by. Now if you’ll just let me—’

Ranchin waved her off and stood up. His legs quivered, threatening collapse. He turned towards the door and nearly ran into Hubba. The big man held up a bag of jellybeans.

‘President Aalex,’ said Hubba, guiding Ranchin to sit back down, this time facing the door. The rattle of the beans went from sharp to dull as Hubba filled the jar.

‘Thank you, Mr. Rrhoid,’ said Helena. Then to Ranchin: ‘You’ll have plenty of time to see her later. You know how she’ll be if you get her up early.’

‘She’s right, Ranchy,’ said Phil. ‘Remember what happened that time the sweepers accidentally set the fire alarm off. The whole day she was interrupting us. “Just say no to bugs! Just say no to bugs!” We could barely get anything done.’

Ranchin sighed. Yes, it was better to leave her be. He took a scoop of jellybeans and dropped a few into his mouth. ‘What about the kids?’

‘They’re safe too. We can arrange calls later.’

As Ranchin chewed the candy he began to relax, felt his strength returning. His eyes settled back onto the television across the room, fabulous people he could barely resolve, acting out petty dramas, speaking passions he couldn’t hear. He asked the next question almost without thinking.

‘Did they hit us?’

‘They struck the mountains, first thing every time.’

To block entrance with debris and radiation. Yes, he remembered that. But... ‘Anything else?’

There was a pause. ‘Not today.’

Phil clapped his hands together. ‘Hot dog! That’s what I like to hear!’ He held up his hands for Hubba who looked confused for a second before returning the double high five. Phil slapped Ranchin on the back which sent his stomach scurrying. ‘That’s how you do it, Mr. President. Play the strong hand, hit ’em with the sledgehammer! Now we got all the chips. They’ve fallen and can’t get up.’ He reached over and grabbed some beans, threw them in his mouth and leaned back, looking satisfied. Ranchin pulled the jar closer to himself.

‘We knocked out their response capability? I thought that wasn’t possible.’

‘It’s probably not,’ said Helena.

‘Then they backed down?’

‘Not exactly. Perhaps, Mr. President, if I could just brief you...’

The briefing was in typical Helena Prolcast style: curt and efficient, dispassionate, offering just enough information to provide the necessary context without getting mired in details. Some of it Ranchin knew, some of it sounded new, though the distinguishing line between the two quickly became indistinct as the various strands of intelligence and data self-reinforced and became dependent on one another. *When* he learned something no longer mattered, only that it all made more sense now than before. After the first attacks a plan had been initiated to disperse the government and its control structures across various physical locations and institutional hierarchies. Because Ranchin’s zero hour did not coincide with absolute zero, there was a period of time where his actions would not be retained in his memory and could create an accountability gap. There was discussion of using memorants — possibly with video recordings played back at high speed — to bridge this gap, however experiments conducted before the crisis by Spohnik and Burloyn had shown such a program to be unworkable since real-time would quickly be overwhelmed by the time it took to replay history.

Instead an authorized procedure was prepared with the following key elements:

- attempt to reestablish communication to end the conflict
- preemptive retaliation
- leverage the existing network of memorants to provide day-to-day continuity, operational adjustments, and history preservation
- all key members of government (excepting those selected to oversee the memorant network) would engage in zero hour testing and upon confirmation undergo a protective sleep cycle
- a nationwide campaign to encourage everyone to preserve themselves, the centerpiece of which was the slogan: *Go Back to Sleep!*

Unfortunately the memorant network was quickly decimated, though it was unclear if (or how) they succumbed to nuclear strikes since they were supposed to be housed in hardened facilities. The reporting systems were still being utilized but nothing was being retained — that was what the blonde kid was there for: he was a protected (and thus secure) secretary who was expected to regularly call in updates to the network. Thus far he had only been able to connect with a machine.

There still appeared to be a smattering of surviving memorants who provided small pieces of information, most of which were useless. One of them, however, said that the attacks were predictable, hitting roughly the same targets every day, with the only difference being that they occurred fifteen minutes later than the previous day. It seemed to be a casualty-

maximizing strategy, a systematic attempt to, over time, hit as many people right after their zero hour as possible.

Phil grumbled that this was sick and cowardly and that they should modify their retaliation to match it. Helena said that wasn't viable, since without the memorant network government was stuck in a perpetual protection loop which offered no responsive capability.

'It looks like we're just repeating ourselves while they methodically work their master plan.'

Phil slammed the table and swore. Ranchin gave him a disapproving look for using salty language. He had a pile of now-wobbling jellybeans on the table in front of him that he was steadily bringing to his mouth one-by-one using alternating hands. His belly ached and body agitated and the mash of sugary flavor had ceased to taste like anything good yet he couldn't stop eating them. He turned to Helena.

'You said they haven't hit us today yet. Do we know when they will?'

Helena looked at her watch and walked over to the chalkboard and crossed off two more times. 'According to the source, a little more than an hour.'

Ranchin felt his stomach knot. He put his head in his hands. The plane was headed down and he hadn't even started the mission. 'How many of our people have died?'

'They say we have no way of accounting. Death isn't the same as removal, but we don't have an estimate for either.'

'Why? Why?' said Ranchin, looking around at each person: Helena, Phil, Hubba, that young guy refilling the fax machine's paper. 'How could they have started this?'

'I'll tell you how,' spat Phil. 'Those godless sickos over there realized they were stallin' out in misery-grad and decided to end it all and take us down with them.'

Ignoring him, Ranchin asked Helena: 'But why? What do they have to gain from continuing a nuclear war?'

'I don't know', she said, shrugging helplessly. 'And now that we're the ones launching first, maybe we're perpetuating it.'

'That's incredible!' exclaimed Phil. 'You aren't seriously saying we're to blame, are you? They fired first, we're just balancing things out. Look, they're the ones changing their launch times. They obviously have the ability to stop. Until they back down we sure as hel—, sure as heck shouldn't.'

'Why can't I just talk to them?' Ranchin turned to the blonde kid. 'Hey, what's your name?'

'Uh, Mar-Marchall, Mr. President. Antaenys Marchall.'

'Can you put me through? Tell them that President Aalex would like to speak to Robokov.'

‘Well, to tell the truth, sir, I’m just a secretary. Actually, I don’t really like that name, being a, uh, male and all because, well, maybe you can’t tell, but a lot of ladies say I’m pretty, well, you know. And you say secretary and unless you have something attached to it like state or general it sounds, like, well. Like a girl.’ He spoke thick and wet, as if he was wearing a retainer. If Ranchin were closer he’d be getting pummeled with spit. ‘What I’m trying to say, sir, is I only report. I don’t know how to— To answer your question: No.’

Ranchin stared at Antaenys. The young man looked around awkwardly like someone at a talent show who was waiting for the audience to realize he’d finished his act. Ranchin thought of a monkey, mocking itself. He smelled a waft of sour bowels and wondered if the kid needed to use the toilet. There was a long gurgle and only when it was almost through did Ranchin realize it was coming from *his* insides.

‘We don’t have any communication with them at all, Mr. President,’ said Helena. ‘For all we know, they might all be gone.’ (‘I hope so,’ Phil interjected.) ‘In which case these are just automated attacks.’

‘A doomsday?’

‘That’s right. At least that’s what we’ve been told. Something’s been bothering me, though, the more I think about it. All of this seems too convenient. Just a handful of us, isolated in this room. Getting information that we can’t verify. Removals we can’t confirm. Strikes you supposedly ordered. Launch codes out of your control. A war that won’t stop.’

‘What are you saying?’ asked Ranchin. His stomach cramped hard and body took a shiver.

‘Yeah,’ said Phil, ‘what are you saying?’

‘I’m not sure that we’re actually in charge. I fear—’

But Ranchin didn’t hear the rest, for his mind had dropped into his gut and he was already stumbling off to the restroom.

‘Mr. President, you have to talk to the people. You are their leader. They need to hear from you, to know that you’re still in charge, to know what is happening. They will rise up against this coup.’

Phil was pounding a finger on the table, causing it to shake. The candy jar shifted closer to the edge. Ranchin reached out for it, moved it towards himself. A ripple went through his stomach, an aching reminder. He pushed the jar away, into the center of the table.

‘We don’t actually know that there’s a coup,’ said Helena, ‘It’s just a theory that—’

‘Theory my ass,’ snapped Phil. Ranchin glared at him but let him go on, not wanting to think any further about nether regions. ‘You just laid out a heckuva convincing case. How can you do that and not believe it? It’s real,

the facts don't lie, there can be no other explanation. Ranchy, don't let her equivocate. That's fear talking. This is no time to hesitate, you have to take action.'

'How dare you, Lyophilip. I'm more ready to fight than you'll ever be. We can't rush this, though, the stakes are too high. We need to collect more intelligence, consider our options, find our allies, make a plan.'

'And how do you propose we do that down here in this cell? Using reports that they fed us and phones that they're listening to? Even if we could trust any of it by the time we might find some sliver of actionable information we'll probably be falling asleep and when we wake up — guess what? We won't remember any of this. They're probably watching us, scheming, adapting. Tomorrow what they send over and say will be different, changed around so that Helena's alarm bells will never go off. Maybe we figured this out before, maybe we just got lucky this time. No matter what, we have to assume that this might be our last chance. That means we have to act. Now. The people are our only conduit. They'll remember for us. Perhaps they already have. What if they're already out in the streets fighting to preserve this great nation? They need their leader. They need *you*, Mr. President.' Phil pointed upwards, shaking his finger gloriously towards the ceiling, towards the outside, towards the heavens. 'Take the reins! Lead them into battle! Reclaim our freedom!'

Phil was sweating, out of breath. Ranchin watched him, stirred, his heart fluttering. He saw a low shot of himself, waist up, straight-backed, framed by big sky and bigger flag. He stood up quickly, was hit by a twinge and bent forward, leaning on the table.

'Alright,' he grunted, 'let's go.'

'Whoa whoa whoa,' said Helena, 'take it easy, we don't really know what's actually going on. You shouldn't be making decisions based on gut instinct.'

Ranchin's belly contracted then released. He lowered himself back into his chair. 'What about my people? They need me. Phil is right, I need to talk to them.'

'I'm sure there's a media room down here. You could just use that.'

Phil threw his arms up. 'What makes you think they'll let a signal out?'

'Now you're just being paranoid.'

'Of course I'm being paranoid! And rational. Plus, we don't have the luxury to muddy our message. They need to know he's strong, brave, in charge. What's inspiring about seeing their president hiding out in a cellar while his country is taken over? This nation deserves better.'

'How is anyone even going to see him? It's not like there's a news crew up top waiting for us. And if there was, we might as well draw a big target that says "aim missile here."'

‘We’ll have Hubba drive us out just like he drove us in. He’s not Reesees, but I’ll bet he can still get to a station in less than half an hour.’

‘Hey,’ said Ranchin, getting inspired, ‘what if I used my showbiz contacts? They’re experts at getting people to watch stuff, even when it’s awful — and, don’t worry, not all pinkos. You got an outside line over there?’

‘Don’t touch that phone, kid,’ said Phil. ‘We have to assume they’re listening. We can’t trust anything down here, it’s not safe. We’ll deal with the preparations once we get out on the surface.’

‘They’ll whip up a whole production in no time. I know, we can call it *The Day Af*—’

‘Hold on, Ranchy. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We need to focus on getting out of here first.’

‘I still say it’s a bad idea,’ Helena said, talking directly to Ranchin. She gestured at the blackboard. ‘The strike is coming. What happens if you get killed live on air, or, even worse, injured?’

‘You’re protected, sir,’ said Phil. ‘You’ll come back. They’ll see you come back. You’ll become bigger than yourself. Invincible. A symbol for our nation, our spirit, the endurance of freedom. Anyway, how do we know this strike stuff isn’t just a ruse at this point? To keep us cowering. Either way, the best course of action is to go up.’

‘No, the best course of action is—’

Ranchin held up a hand and put on a who’s the boss? look to shut Helena up. He turned to Hubba. ‘What do you think?’

‘Sir, I support whatever you decide,’ the big man said, puffing his chest out, ‘but I’d be honored to drive you on this mission.’

‘How about you?’ Ranchin asked across the room to Antaenys.

‘Well, uh, Mr. President Aalex sir, I’m not — I don’t know. What I mean is that I’m, like, not, not supposed to leave my station here. S-s-so, what you decide doesn’t—’ He looked down at his feet and then back at Ranchin. ‘I think you gotta go with your heart.’ He continued to gesture imploringly but said nothing more.

Ranchin nodded, looking into the young man’s earnest eyes, feeling his pride swell. Helena began to speak but he stopped her again.

‘Sorry, like you said, we don’t have a lot of time. I already understand how you feel.’ He looked at Phil. ‘You have anything else?’

‘Mr. President, you don’t win by hiding. You take charge! Show strength! Bravery! You are a symbol of our national spirit, our freedom. You are our president, and you are about to lead us into what may be the greatest day in our great nation’s history!’

Ranchin was already up, standing tall and straight above everybody else. His insides tightened, not with sickness but resolution. He reached into the jar and grabbed some beans. When he looked at his palm he saw there were

three: cinnamon and creme soda and ice mint. He looked at Phil gravely. Soldiers in a foxhole, ready to charge.

‘Let’s move out!’

They traveled through the passageway, quickly but quietly, trying to act normal, resisting the urge to hunch over and tiptoe as if they were trespassers. Phil was in the lead, followed in a line by Antaenys, Helena, Ranchin, and then Hubba. Antaenys had insisted his orders were to stay in the room which caused Phil to openly question whether he might be a spy and then Helena too when she offered to stay behind. Ranchin ended the ensuing argument by pulling rank and ordering everyone to stick together. Antaenys agreed to follow along, with reservations.

‘I’ll do it, Mr. sir, I mean, your word is, of course, the rule, only, like, I want you to know that it’s confusing for me when you contradict yourself.’

‘I’m not contradicting anything, I’m telling you to come with us.’

‘You also told me to stay here for the whole day.’

‘Aren’t I allowed to change my mind?’

‘It’s just that I can’t, you know, forget what you said. You seemed so sure then, and you seem so sure now. Would the old you perhaps, maybe not, have agreed to this change? If you were wrong then, could you be wrong now?’

‘Well, I actually don’t remember talking to you before so it’s possible that I was wrong then though I think I was probably not wrong then just as I’m not wrong now, it’s only two different situations which means there’s probably no contradiction as long as I acted like I always act, which I’m sure I did. What’s important is that the old me is the same me as now, who since you trusted before you can trust now, because I’m the same person you talked to before, if you say I am.’

‘Um, yes, so, like, if, as... what?’

‘You see, son? You don’t have a choice.’

On the way out, Phil had explained to the guards outside the room that they were moving due to a security situation and that the guards were to act as if they were still inside. This ensured they wouldn’t communicate the change over their radios. Hubba assured the group that there were only cameras outside of a few select rooms, and that there were no other sensing devices since they raised the risk of exposing sensitive information. Ranchin’s insides twisted with anxiety and excitement. He thought of a man in a strange house, fearing the return of his illness, wishing for an escape.

They continued through the corridors like a group of teens playing hooky in the school hallways, Phil occasionally stopping to confer with Hubba, taking a circuitous path to avoid any unnecessary contact with guards or cameras. Ranchin rubbed his pants pockets, lumpily stuffed with jellybeans.

He plucked one out and looked at the passing doors, thinking about Craynia, wondering where she might be. BF — DICEPH — ASTLY That last one gave him pause. He desperately wanted to see his wife before going up, even if it meant waking her. Phil and Helena refused, though, saying that her room wasn't nearby, that it was in the wrong direction, that there wasn't enough time and it would only increase the chances of them getting caught.

'The country is bigger than one person, she would understand that.'

'What if she wants to tag along, are we going to wait for her to get ready?'

'You'll see her tomorrow.'

Ranchin looked back at Hubba, who himself was looking back to check their rear. He was so big that Ranchin couldn't see around him, as if the corridor stopped there, a forward rushing dead end made up of giant dark suit. The big man turned forward and nodded with great solemnity, his handgun pointed at the ground. Ranchin patted his chest, touching the pill that he had been given. Hubba was pledged to protect him but this was the last resort in case of capture or worse. Actually that gun was the last resort, though to resort to that was unthinkable. Still turned, Ranchin stuck his hand in his pants pocket and pulled out a couple jellybeans and Hubba signaled for him to watch out but before he could react he collided with something, with Helena, starting a chain reaction that continued through Antaenys and then Phil who was flung out past the corner at which he'd stopped, across to the other side of the T-intersection. Phil's discharge meant Antaenys was left without someone to lean on and he over-corrected backwards, knocking into Helena who knocked into Ranchin who bounced off of the immovable man behind him and reflected the energy back through so that Antaenys was suddenly flying out towards the sprawled-out Phil. While the young man was still in mid-stumble the wave continued through another cycle, sending Helena careening out herself. The final round was halted by Hubba's quick reaction to grab his ward so that he wouldn't follow the conga line pratfall.

Hubba stepped in front of Ranchin and peered around the corner then stepped across to help disentangle the dogpile. From it emanated an overlap of moans and struggle, pushing and sharp words, Helena panting and Antaenys slurping and Phil grumbling for everyone to get off of him. Ranchin moved towards them while Hubba began to lift people up onto their feet.

'Freeze!'

Ranchin tried to stop in the middle of a step but tipped slowly forward, just clearing the edge of the far wall before coming to rest in a half-stride, his arms held out, head pointed downwards.

'What's going on?'

Moving only his neck, Ranchin looked over to the source of the voice. A guard was down at the end of the hall, pointing a military rifle.

‘Oh, sorry sir,’ said the guard, dropping his weapon and stiffening into a salute.

Ranchin moved his hand up to his head, the rest of his body still holding the static pose. Hubba crept towards him and reached out and poked at the outstretched hand, touching index fingers. Then a clap in Ranchin’s face and the president relaxed and flopped into ambulation. The big fella caught him and straightened him up onto his feet and spun him around. Then he stepped out into the corridor. Ranchin followed him and the others straggled behind, rubbing their necks and backs. The guard was still saluting and as they approached Hubba asked where he came from and he looked at the president and began to talk proudly about his home town but Hubba interjected that he meant just now. The guard stuttered that he and his partner were stationed at the elevator. They followed him down the corridor to where the other was keeping watch. Phil said they were going to need to take their radios.

‘I don’t think we can do that.’

‘How else are we going to communicate?’ said Phil.

The two guards looked at one another. ‘This is highly unusual,’ said one.

‘Maybe we could just give them mine,’ said the other, ‘that way we all—’

‘Uh uh,’ said Phil, ‘we need to talk to each other. Who can we talk to with one radio?’

‘With us,’ said the first guard.

‘Yeah,’ said the second, ‘what about us? We need to talk too.’

‘You have each other. We’re the ones who have to split up.’

Ranchin ordered them to hand them over and the guards shrugged and reached for their belts.

‘Don’t touch those!’ said Hubba, blocking their arms and removing the radios himself, handing them to Phil. He quickly told the guards a dramatic story about a secret mission and that they weren’t to let anybody else into the elevator. The guards looked at each other warily.

With a supportive smile, Ranchin patted the nearest guard on the back and reached into his pocket and offered some jellybeans. The closest politely took one while the other grabbed the rest, stuffing them into his mouth.

‘You like those?’ asked Ranchin.

‘Ooooh, yes sir!’ simultaneously.

‘You keep everybody else out of this elevator,’ said Phil, ‘and we’ll bring you all the candy you can eat.’

The greedy guard nodded and chewed fervidly. The other licked his lips with envy. Ranchin handed him another bean which he eagerly snatched. The elevator doors opened and Ranchin saluted one more time before they headed in. As the doors closed he saw the guard with the single bean holding it away from the other while blocking him with a stiffarm.

A single shaft running from the surface all the way through to the deepest levels would provide a direct path for a weapon's energy or contaminates to penetrate the entire complex. Thus, this elevator only went partway up to the ground floor. Phil reached out and hit the highest button — B4 — and stepped to the side. When the car pulled upwards Ranchin felt a pull at his insides, roiling up something uncomfortable. He forced it back, more a mental process than physical, adamant to reject any sign of weakness. He watched the levels illuminate in sequence while he listened to the music that had begun to be piped into the space. A soft, wordless tune played with innocuous artificiality, melodically familiar yet ungraspable. It reminded Ranchin of a previous time, a nebulous memory nestled into an acoustical comfort. His body relaxed as his anxiety drifted away. He glanced around at the others. Hubba was up at the front, staring at the closed doors, waiting for them to part. Phil was on one knee, packing the radios into a corner. Antaenys had his fingers in his ears, eyes glazed, shaking his head slightly back and forth as if in distress. Helena was looking straight at Ranchin. Their gazes locked and she smiled, a nervous grin but also the face of a proud mother, a peculiar warmth given she was childless.

A bell rang and the car jerked to a halt. The music shut off and nothing happened for a moment. Ranchin thought of the pregnant instant where a beautiful girl in a massive gown hesitated before descending the stairs to her suitor. The doors slid open, exposing two more guards holding automatic rifles, standing close to the opening. One of them saw Ranchin and quickly saluted. His partner turned to him with a baffled look but before he could understand what was happening Hubba walked forward and both guards moved to block him.

'Stand back, nobody is allowed to leave.'

'Do you know who we are? That's the president right there.'

The guard who hadn't saluted craned around to see and upon catching a glimpse of Ranchin began to shift into abashed attention but caught himself and ended up doing a half-salute that didn't cede any of the space he was controlling. He pushed back against Hubba then glanced at Ranchin again with a nod of familiarity. Hubba started to explain the secret mission thing but Ranchin interrupted.

'Listen fellas, I know you're trying to do your jobs, but we are in an immanent crisis here. I don't know who told you not to let anyone out but I'm ordering you to let us through.'

The guards looked at him strangely, heads cocked like confused dogs. 'You did sir,' said one.

'I did what?'

'You ordered us to not let anyone out, just a few hours ago.'

‘Well, now I’m ordering you *to* let us out. You see, it’s not a contradiction if I change my mind.’

More perplexed looks. ‘Your orders said they couldn’t be changed, even by you. Not today.’

The other one added: ‘You said that if your orders really needed to be changed, you would arrange for them to be different tomorrow.’

‘That doesn’t make any sense you insubordinate pricks!’ said Phil, pushing forward. ‘He’s your commander in chief. How can there be an order that he can’t overrule?’

Just then there was a series of rapid beeps and doors began to slide closed and everyone on each side instinctively backed away. Phil stuck his hand in between them with annoyance and continued to berate the guards. Hubba tried to pull him back but was shook off. The doors closed then closed tighter and Phil moved his head to aim his voice through the narrowing crack. The gap sealed shut and Phil’s yelling turned into a high pitched scream as he yanked his arm back and cradled his hand.

‘What the fuck!’ he shrieked.

Ranchin was about to reprimand him and insist he apologize when he saw the hand. It was bright red and appeared to be throbbing like a heart. Phil backed away into a corner, blinking back tears.

‘I tried to warn you,’ said Hubba. ‘The doors can’t be open for more than a couple minutes at a time. It’s a security measure. For our protection.’

‘That chews up the people it’s supposed to protect? It should have a safety release!’

‘It wouldn’t be very secure then, would it?’

‘Are we stuck here now?’ asked Helena.

‘It’ll open again after a delay. A minute or so. Since we’ve got a little time, we should make a plan. Now—’

Ranchin cut him off. ‘How long has this been going on?’

‘Huh?’ Hubba looked like he’d been asked to explain cold fusion.

‘Since we were first hit, how many days?’ He looked at Helena.

‘If we can trust what we were told, maybe two weeks.’

‘What about you,’ Ranchin asked Antaenys, ‘can you confirm that?’

‘Um, the, well, the network is, uh, I don’t actually read...’ He looked over at Helena then around as if expecting to find someone else behind him. He turned back to Ranchin and shrugged hesitantly. ‘Sure, a couple weeks sounds about right, I guess.’

‘I’m not sure why that matters, sir,’ said Hubba. ‘Whether it’s ten or a hundred days won’t change what we have to do right now.’

‘It *does* matter. It may be the only thing that matters.’ Ranchin was trying to reconcile his memory with the timeline. All the codes. Goyt and Reesees and now Hubba. Did some memories belong to the same day? Were

there days he didn't remember at all? Could it only have been a couple weeks? Could it have been less? 'What if we've been here before? In this elevator, I mean. In this exact position. If we make a plan, we might have already made it before. And obviously it didn't work. How can we be sure we aren't just repeating our failures? Maybe the correct path is...'

Ranchin trailed off, unsure where he was headed. Everyone was silent, expectant. Phil was still huddled in the corner. The music had started again, an upbeat song that Ranchin didn't recognize, rhythm and melody he couldn't follow, a tune of disquiet. Antaenys was bobbing his head, as if he unconsciously grasped that which was unfathomable. Ranchin was about to ask him when the doors opened again.

The same two guards were waiting, except their attitudes seemed completely different. Their weapons pointed into the elevator, their faces blank, unreadable. It was like looking at two perfect strangers for the first time.

'You need to go back down, now,' one said. The sternness sounded strained.

Pushing aside Hubba's protests, Ranchin stepped forward into the doorway until a rifle barrel pushed into his chest. He wondered if his bulletproof vest would matter at this range.

'What are you going to do? Shoot me? Shoot your president?'

The guard was shaking. 'Please, sir,' he quavered, almost a whisper.

With a flat hand, Ranchin moved the gun down and away. There was no resistance. Looking only at the faces of the two guards, he took another step, then another. When he was between them he turned back and signaled for everyone to follow. Only Hubba moved and one of the guards immediately pointed his rifle at the huge man. Hubba pulled out his gun and pointed it at the guard. Ranchin moved back into the elevator and inserted himself between Hubba and the guards, then proceeded to slip past them both out into the hallway. Hubba's arm was extended over Ranchin's shoulder, aiming his pistol at one of the guards who tracked them with his rifle directed at their feet. The other guard had his weapon trained into the elevator. Ranchin told them to stand down, soldiers, waved at the others to come out. Nobody moved.

He and Hubba continued to back away down the corridor, Ranchin holding his arms out, blocking the bodyguard.

Then it felt like his head exploded and everything was shaking and the ground seemed to shift in all directions at once and Ranchin was hovering and spinning his arms and legs as much as his old body would allow but going nowhere. All of a sudden a massive gravity gripped him and splatted him to the floor and knocked his breath away. While he struggled to inhale he looked out in front of him and saw a chaotic rainbow of jellybeans scattering out across the floor above which dust was billowing about and a guard dove

into the elevator just before it closed under the crumbling roof and lights flickering and walls cracking and his chest freed and he finally could breathe but it was choking and everything was silent and excruciatingly loud all at the same time.

Ranchin looked over and his eyes began to wince and shut at the dust but through flickering blinks he saw Hubba, blood dripping from his ears, waving and yelling even though he wasn't making any sound. He pointed at his chest and waved his gun and Ranchin suddenly understood and felt at his shirt pocket and inside it but it was empty. He rubbed his eyes and got to his knees and felt something stick and reached back to pull at his pants and they were wet which he thought was blood but when he looked at his hand he smelled the stench and knew.

He scanned the floor which was speckled with jellybeans, some rolling, some whirling, some quivering in place. He spotted a white shape then a second then saw them everywhere, too many of them, none of them right. He looked back at Hubba who was sitting up, distraught, aiming his gun with uncertainty. Ranchin held up his hand. He couldn't ask him to do it. He shook his head. His brain was throbbing, it felt like it would crack his skull. His eyes scratched as if coated in sand. He turned back to the floor, scrambling across it, searching desperately on all fours through a grayish fog, stumbling and recoiling when his knees and palms hit the candy which skidded or jabbed into sensitive crevices.

Then he was slipping, all limbs cycling in the same direction as they rolled away beans and more flowed in to replace them, a wild dance which quickly escalated until he flew up and did a complete revolution around his longitudinal axis and landed flat on his belly with a discharge that, though he could not hear, was undoubtedly thunderous. Stunned, he raised his head and looked without intention over where he thought he already had and then he saw it. Perfectly white, a runt capsule lacking the kidney dent. He lunged and fumbled and picked it up and held it out for Hubba to see. Then put it between his teeth and prepared to bite down.

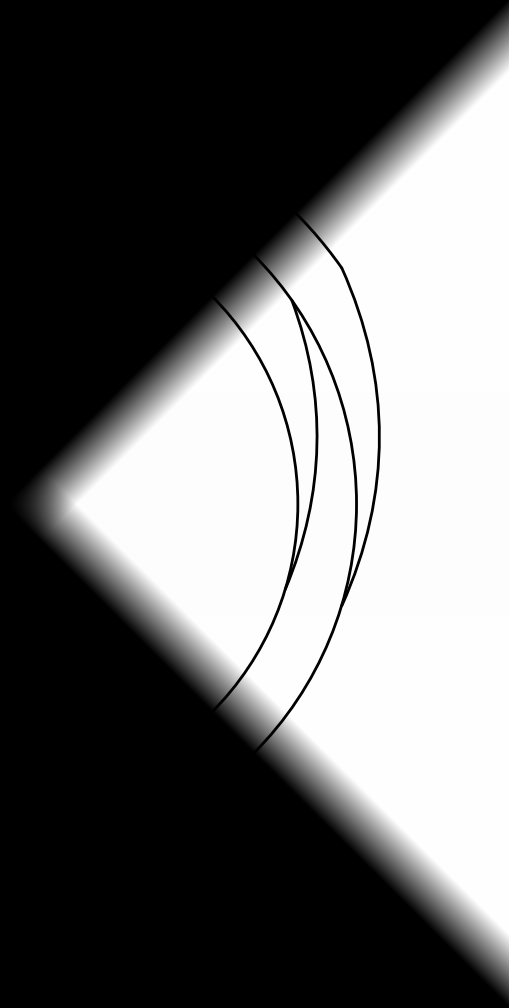
His jaw locked. He thought of his wife and his kids and grandkids and whether they were safe and he wished he had talked to them but most of all he thought of Craynia. He looked down at the floor, past the dust and spread of jellybeans and floor tiles and through the earth and concrete she was down there somewhere, awake now, frightened, alone, abandoned. Ranchin turned to the elevator and wondered since now he had the pill if he should try to get down to see her. Was it even right to use the pill? Was it an unforgivable sin? Had he already committed it? Was his sin leaving her behind? There was an angel him on one shoulder and a devil him on the other. Or devil on the first and angel opposite. He started to crawl towards the elevator but got an eyeeful of dust and cringed to a stop. He rubbed at the dirt and tears

and grabbed at his aching head with loathing and thought of a world where there were superweapons, ray guns and space lasers and inertia projectors that they could use to stop all this and blast those motherfuckers to oblivion.

Ranchin flopped back onto the ground. His backside was wet and cold and squished foully. The pill was still wedged between his teeth, holding them apart easily against the strength his fearful lifeforce had sapped. He looked at Hubba — head down, gun in both hands between his legs, bawling. He was strong enough for this. He would get another chance. Tomorrow he would do better. What was he waiting for?

The question didn't need an answer because just then there was another massive shock which lifted him straight up into the ceiling and when his head hit it his mouth snapped shut, shattering all of his teeth and breaking the capsule right open.

last



...ever set foot on earth...

—ohmmnngd—

The voice was like somewhere else, taking up space where it didn't belong. His eyes opened to a dark and jostling tube. Where was he? It was right there, just out of his sight, perfect sense fading as his wake took over. He searched for it, trying futilely to recapture that feeling of comprehension that he could not retain. The dream held essential secrets, if only they could be grasped, but it wasn't going to happen today, especially in this din. Being in the rear wasn't his first preference, though better than a middle, surrounded, limbo. Couldn't swing a bulkhead or exit. Could remember back to that, yet not seconds ago. Here the sound was dense and ubiquitous. Denied the sleep which could drive it off. A shaking ripple flowed through, a swaying, a memory of rest, enticing him that oblivion was shut eyes away. There was something else, embedded in the noise. Speech — concerned, urgent, scared. Arman listened in the darkness, straining to catch hushed words amidst the rumble.

mmmatarmmmmmflammmmmairmmmmgammgone!mmmfly the plane?

The fog of sleep burned away as he remembered. Was this it? Was he still dreaming? Face rub, head shake, arm pinch. The voices sounded more desperate, nearing some edge.

‘—no pilots!’

This was it. There was no time to waste. He looked down his row — empty (a benefit of the back of the plane) except for some tossed away clothes at the far window. Arman slid across the seats and stopped at the aisle. He took a deep breath and imagined gliding safely to ground, the plane erupting in cheers, being carried aloft by an adulatory crowd, hands held high in exaltation and support and desire to touch the hero. He stood up, swinging

around to face the three flight attendants who were huddled together. One of them was grasping at her chest, as if holding in her heart.

‘Excuse me sir,’ said the male attendant. He was thin and almost dainty, speaking with a curt authority. ‘The restrooms are out of order. I’m going to need you to take your seat.’

‘Good thing I drained the horn before we took off, heh?’ Arman chuckled, a pulsing, strangely-pitched cross between a squeak and a bray. The three faces dully staring at him indicated his attempt to break the ice had failed.

‘Sir—’

Arman cut in: ‘So, it actually happened? I couldn’t help but hear — bet you’re wondering what’s going on?’

‘You need to return to—’

‘Just hold your horses, Jerry.’ The attendants looked at one another warily. ‘I know what’s happened, I want you to all to relax. I’ve been trained for this exact moment.’ He put on a grin and said, matter-of-factly, ‘I’m your pilot.’

The reaction was worse than for his opening line. Paused looks, like they were waiting to see who would flinch first.

‘Who are you?’ asked the woman who’d been holding her chest. She was dark and pretty, her eyebrows arched impossibly high into her forehead.

‘I’m sorry, I should have introduced myself. Arman Certica.’ Attempting to bolster his authenticity, he pointed to each one in turn, naming them. ‘You’re Jerry, you must be Mary, so that makes you Jesse.’

‘*I’m* Jerri,’ said Mary, the heart clutcher, ‘he’s Kenth.’

Arman could have sworn that his name was Jerry. ‘I could’ve sworn—’

‘It’s Kenth. Kenth Jersey.’

‘Ahhh, Jersey. I was close. You make it confusing. Jersey-Jerry. Jerry-Jerri. Jerry-Jerri-Jesse.’

‘It’s Esty,’ said the third, ‘and we don’t have time for this. You say you’re a pilot?’

‘Well, not exactly a pilot. But I can fly this plane.’

Jerri looked at Kenth. ‘What the hell is this?’

‘Maybe we can talk on the way up?’ said Arman, turning to go. Kenth grabbed his arm, his grip unexpectedly firm.

‘Hold on, you’re going to need to do better than that. We’re not just letting you take over.’

Arman sighed. ‘If I tried to explain it, you wouldn’t believe me and it doesn’t matter ‘cause you’ll forget anyway. Just understand this: I know that there’s no pilots in the cockpit. I know that you need someone to fly the plane. I know how to do that.’ He let out another laugh. ‘Pretend it’s luck, pretend it’s fate. Who cares? We can worry about that when we get back on the ground. Right now, I need to get up there and save this bird.’

Arman was disappointed by the lack of enthusiasm displayed by the others at his rousing speech. Oh well, they'd change their attitude once he'd safely landed them. Perhaps one of the ladies might even feel like showing him a little extra appreciation...

'Wait, is this one of them hidden camera shows?' asked Jerri. 'Are you putting us on? How did you make everybody disappear?'

'Everyone's gone?' Arman looked over his shoulder and saw at least a few people illuminated by reading spotlights or dim outlines in the shadows. A few rows up a young boy in a ballcap was standing on his seat, facing backwards, watching Arman with blank curiosity.

'I think you've got the wrong show,' said Kenth. '*You just crossed over...*'

'Isn't that a movie?' said Sefyr.

Jerri grabbed Arman's free wrist. 'Do you really know what happened? I thought we got hit by lightning — zap and then poof! People gone. The pilots gone. That smell.'

Arman had not heard about any of this before. Disappearances, sure. But lightning? Smells? Better to play this off. He chuckled some more and pulled his arm over to the hand below Kenth's grasp, gently unpeeled her hand. 'It is far too complex to get into right now.' He turned to Kenth, picking at his fingers which were as immovable as a gargoyle's talons. 'If you don't believe me, let's go up and get on the radio. Ask for Colonel Fairlovin. He'll vouch for me.'

'There is no radio.'

'No radio?'

'I think the lightning knocked it out.'

As Kenth said this the plane lurched and Arman slipped from his hold and fell back into a seat. The overhead lights came on. A murmur of concern spread throughout the cabin. Gasps. A muffled cry. Arman was leaning backwards with his feet splayed out above him and had a vague sense that the plane was sloping downwards. In a panic he worked to right himself.

'Jeez, who do you have flying this thing right now?' he said as he twisted around. 'They shouldn't be touching things they don't know about.'

'There's nobody up there. Just the autopilot...'

Arman couldn't believe they didn't leave somebody watching the cockpit. What were they thinking? Grumbling to himself, he turned up the aisle, rushing towards the front. He'd barely taken two steps when his forward progress halted and he felt himself being pulled in the opposite direction. Grabbing the seatbacks in front of him, he looked back to see Kenth tugging on his shirt, leaning desperately like a first-time water skier.

'Sir, you can't just go up there. I don't believe you actually know how to fly this plane.'

Using his weight advantage, Arman leaned forward and dragged the attendant up the plane. He passed the ballcapped boy, wrapped in striped arms, his attentive gaze next to one perplexed. Pressing on, looking back and forth, Arman searched for a familiar face from the training. He thought he saw one, asleep, wasn't certain, didn't think so, didn't want to risk his forward momentum trying to wake them up to be sure. The people who were awake were staring mouth-agape and hazy-eyed, probably thinking this was part of some wild dream. Midway through the plane his shirt pulled tight against his throat and began to make tearing noises. He struggled and glanced down a row and saw the conceited girl from the sessions. His immediate thought was to turn away and pretend not to notice, but she was looking right at him. Shit! Well, she might be helpful. Grabbing the seat, he leaned towards her. Kenth was still pulling backwards, giving him useless orders.

'Hey Whinny!' Arman choked out. 'The plan's started! Cabin boy here doesn't trust me about our training. Can you back me up?'

He hoped she wouldn't ask to join him. She was a real pain in the ass know-it-all who would probably try to take over and end up crashing them. But she didn't say anything, just stared at him as if he made no sense, like a talking pillow. The attendant had stopped pulling and instead came up to stand right behind Arman with a hand on his shoulder.

'Whinny?' Arman asked.

'Do I know you?' she replied, looking completely dumbfounded.

Arman laughed nervously and turned towards the steward, shrugging, backing up.

'Eh, sometimes they don't remember. It's a thing that can happen. Maybe it happens to me too. But not today.' He kept moving backwards, towards the front of the plane, his palms held out defensively. 'I do know what I'm talking about. They taught us. Just let me—'

He bumped into something and spun around in surprise, holding his arm out to block the attendant. It was a tall man in a colorful shirt, looking down at Arman with cool acknowledgment.

'Hey! Remember me?'

'Sure, Arman, right?'

'Mike?'

'Mac.'

'Right.' Arman gestured for Mac to come closer and spoke quietly. 'Pilots are gone.'

'Oh shit!' Arman shushed him and he covered his mouth, looking around sheepishly, keeping his voice lower. 'Oh shit! Is it just us?'

Arman nodded. 'Can you explain to Jerry here the situation? He seems to think it's best if the plane just flies itself.'

With an easy authority, Mac stepped forward and began to talk to the attendant in a whisper. Arman caught just the beginning as he continued down the aisle towards the cockpit.

‘This is not the first...’

The few people in first-class were either dead asleep or pretending to be so Arman was able to pass up to the front of the plane without attracting any more notice. Looking over his shoulder before he opened the cockpit door, he saw Mac backing up the aisle, hunched over talking to Jerry. He pulled the lever and went inside. It was more cramped than he’d expected, a lot more dials and switches and lights. Through the windows it was black, off in the distance hints of clouds illuminated by the moon. He moved to sit down and saw there was pile of something in the way. He reached down and picked it up — a dark suit, tie, stripes of gold, pilot’s hat. A white shirt with a large, creeping stain. He grabbed the mass and dumped it on the ground, then thought for a second and plopped the hat on his head. He picked up the jacket and tried slipping it on but it was too small and got himself jammed up with his arms stuck pointing above his head. He was flailing around helplessly when Mac appeared and helped tug him free.

‘Careful, let’s try to fly the plane before we play dress up,’ said Mac. ‘Say, nice hat. Got one for me?’

Arman pointed to the other seat. Mac reached over and pulled up the clothes, tapping the hat down on his head while he looked at the suit. He ran his hand inside the jacket and the pants, inquisitively pulling out a dingy-white piece of fabric before realizing it was underwear and tossing it all onto the floor with a look of disgust. Arman shrugged and doffed his cap.

‘Shall we?’

‘Indeed,’ said Mac, returning the gesture.

Arman maneuvered himself into the seat, having to ungainly dig around between his legs to grab the shoes and socks that were in the way. He threw them back without looking.

‘Hey, watch it!’

‘Oh, sorry Jerry. I didn’t realize you were there.’

‘It’s *Kent*.’

‘Yeah, that’s Kent,’ said Mac, ‘Jerry’s one of the girls. Here—’ He was sitting in the other seat, scribbling on something. He placed it on the console between them. It was a barf bag with a neatly written list:

Flight attendants

Kent, M

Jerry, F (cute)

ST, F

Mac →

← R-man

Arman nodded with approval, though he could have sworn that the guy's name was Jerry. Not-Jerry leaned in and took the pen from Mac and added an h and i-ed over the y and then seemed to be perplexed how to continue and, sighing loudly, handed the pen back. He stood back and began to nervously kick the clothes off to the side. Arman reached out and picked up the radio microphone, pressing the button to talk.

'Hello? Anyone there?'

Mac lifted his mic.

'I told you, the radio is broken,' said Kenth.

Arman began fiddling with the radio controls, trying to get a response. Mac looked over and back, echoing his actions.

'Hello?'

'Hello?'

'Roger?'

'Roger?'

'Come in.'

'Come in.'

'Hello?'

'Hello?'

'Guys, forget the radio! You said you could fly this.'

'You might want to write that down,' Arman said to Mac.

'What, that we can fly?'

'No, about the radio.'

Mac nodded and wrote below the names: *Radio broken*. Arman looked over the console — many of the gauges and lights were unfamiliar. He searched for the ones they'd been taught. The altimeter was stuck on zero.

'Some of these don't seem to be working,' he said, flicking the dial.

The plane shook and veered to the side, tilted slightly downward. Arman flinched back, palms up high.

'Wasn't me.' He turned to Mac. 'Did you touch something?'

The tall man shook his head, his hands similarly raised. The plane was still canted and quavering. Behind them, Kenth sounded like he was ill.

'Oh fuck, we're going to die.'

'Relax,' said Arman, 'I know what I'm doing.' He scanned the controls again and saw Mac move forward, about to do something. Arman put his hand out. 'Don't! Don't touch anything. I'm the captain. I'll do this.' Mac retreated and Arman continued searching until he found the switch he was looking for and flicked it. Then he gently eased the controls and the plane leveled out, its reverberations dissipating.

'See? Piece of cake.'

Mac snapped his fingers and winked. ‘Nice one — Captain. You just let me know when you need me to take over.’

Arman laughed and gave an approving nod. There was no way he was going to let this guy have control. If need be he would remind him who was the top student in their class. Mac pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, flicking his wrist once to knock one out of the pack, and again to light the flame. He reached the pack across but Arman waved him off, pulling out his own.

Kenth was hyperventilating loudly behind them. He spoke up breathlessly. ‘I can’t believe this, you weren’t lying. You two know how to land too?’

Arman and Mac looked at each other. That was supposed to be something they would be talked through over the radio. Mac seemed to sense the volatility of the situation, kept his mouth shut.

‘Sure,’ said Arman, ‘but we need to concentrate. Can’t do that with you panting down our necks. Why don’t you go do your job, keep everyone calm. Let us do ours.’

Kenth slipped out the door and pulled it closed behind him. Arman returned to looking over the controls, surprised by how few of them he recognized.

‘So,’ said Mac, ‘do you really know how to land this thing?’

‘Jeez, I don’t even remember coming in here,’ said Mike, shaking his head. ‘I guess the pilot’s gone. Is there anyone else from the training back there?’

Arman shook his head. ‘Who knows?’ He looked over the console, it seemed that some of them weren’t working. He tapped on an unmoving gauge.

‘I wonder if Wedny’s back there. She’s a real fox.’

‘You mean Whinny? Did you ever, you know, get with her?’

‘It’s Wedny. And not that I can remember. Maybe, right? Might have been one of those things I forgot, though with someone like her I can’t see how that could happen. I’m thinking maybe I’ll go back there and see if she’s around. She was pretty smart, maybe could help up here.’

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea. Not enough room. You don’t need any distractions.’

Arman picked up the radio handset and began to fiddle with the dials. It didn’t seem to be working. Mike watched him and then turned to his own.

‘Hello?’

‘Hello?’

‘Hello?’

‘Hello?’

‘Come in.’

'Come in.'

'Roger?'

'Roger?'

'Radio is broken, probably should write that down.' Arman looked around for a notepad or something before looking between them. 'Oh—'

Mac was looking where he pointed. 'Do you know how to land without the radio?'

'I don't know how to land *with* the radio,' laughed Arman. His giggles died down in the face of Mac's serious look. 'How hard can it be?'

'My kid has a video game where you have to land a fighter jet on an aircraft carrier. It's almost impossible.'

'Lucky for us, we're landing on the SS Earth.'

'I've gotten pretty good at it.'

'What's that?'

'The game. I stick it almost half the time.'

'OK.' What, did he expect Arman to let him do the landing? Did he forget who was tops in their training?

'I was just thinking maybe I should do the landing?'

'This isn't a game.' Arman flicked at the altimeter.

'I know how this works.' He grabbed the controls in front of him and the plane pitched forward. Lights thought to be broken lit up, an alarm came to life. Arman fought to correct the plane, swinging his arm at Mac. They stabilized at some lower level, though when Arman tried to return them towards what he thought was their previous altitude the plane began to shake and resist. He thought of something to add to their list. He searched around for a pen.

'Do you have anything to write with?'

Mac looked around and tapped himself, coming up empty.

'Shit. Well, try to remember this: Don't touch anything. And don't let us drop.'

Just then the door opened and Jerry stuck his head in.

'What the hell was that? Is everything alright?'

'Fine, fine,' said Arman, 'just checking our controls.'

'That's what you said *last* time.'

'Did you ever do anything with that Whinny girl from our flight school?'

'Who? The horse-faced one?'

'Uh? No, the pretty girl. The know-it-all you were all cuddly with.'

'Oh, Wedny? I wasn't cuddly with her. We were just training partners. I'm married, you know.'

Arman gave Mike a dubious face and looked down at his ringless hand.

‘What, this? Good to keep your options open, especially when traveling alone.’

Mike started chuckling, a smooth, intoxicating laugh. Arman joined in.

‘Maybe she’s back there,’ said Mike. ‘I tell you, she seemed pretty easy. She’d probably put out for you.’

‘Yeah right. Women like that aren’t interested in guys like me.’

‘You’d be surprised. Most girls just want somebody who’ll listen and act like they care. Give them a little attention and they won’t leave you alone.’

Arman turned to his copilot. Easy for someone who looks like that to say. Tall, tan, confident. If Arman put on a shirt like that he’d look like a dumpy tourist. Mike wore it like a dream — handsome, successful, a bit mysterious. He was a rich stockbroker and dashing private investigator and sexy good time all rolled into one.

‘Why don’t you go back and give it a shot? The worst that can happen is she says no. Nobody will remember any of this anyway.’ Mike paused for a second, staring at his cigarette thoughtfully. ‘What if we both already boned her? If nobody remembers, does it even count?’

Arman stared at the instrument panel, taking a long drag, trying to act cool. Why was this guy up here with him? To prove his inferiority? It would be different once they landed. It wouldn’t matter what he looked like, or how he laughed, or how small his apartment was. They wouldn’t be able to keep off of him. He’d be a hero, *their* hero. He reached forward and knocked on the altimeter with his fingernail.

‘Come on, you only live once. I can handle things while you’re gone.’

Everything tilted at a sharp, downward angle as Mike took a hold of the yoke. Swearing, trying to ignore the sudden onslaught of blinks and beeps, Arman reached over and slapped his arms away, working to right the craft. The plane shook with resistance at any deviation from a straight, level path. He smiled nervously at Mike and told him it would be better if he didn’t touch anything. It would be better if he wasn’t in here at all, Arman thought. If he could find a way to get him to leave, he wouldn’t have to share the glory.

The door opened and a flight attendant stuck his head in.

‘Seriously, you guys need to take it easy. Jerri’s back there freaking out.’

Arman looked back, wondering why he was referring to himself in the third person.

‘Just tell the passengers to calm down,’ said Mike, ‘we’ve got everything under control.’

‘They’re not the problem — they don’t seem to care that we keep dropping every few minutes. The three of us are wondering if we need to get our swimsuits ready.’

Mike scoffed. Arman turned back towards the front, speaking derisively.

‘You may not know this, Jerry, but we’ve been trained on how to fly this plane. Why don’t you just go back and do your job and let us do ours?’

As he looked over the controls, he could feel the eyes behind him glaring, hesitating. Then with a huff the door closed. Arman looked at Mike and they both began to snicker. Arman stuck the stub of his cigarette into the astray between the seats. It was stuffed full of butts. Was that all from them? How long had they been in here? It didn’t seem that long. Maybe these were from the real pilots. He felt a sensation of being adrift, floating in indeterminate coordinates, controlled by forces unseen and unknown.

There was a bag next to the ashtray with some written notes. Kenth? Was that right? Who wrote this? *Mac*. Damn! Had he said his name out loud? He looked up coyly. A large smoke ring was floating away from Mac, and he nonchalantly puffed a smaller one through it.

‘It says here the radio’s broken,’ said Arman. He wondered what that meant, feeling a hint of anxiety at being cut off from the world. He picked up the handset and tried talking. Mac stuck his cigarette into his mouth and did the same. They adjusted the controls, almost-reflections of one another.

‘Roger?’

‘Roger?’

He saw the lights before the land, spots and glows off at the horizon. They began to fade well before they reached the coast, though, their intensity drowned out by the haze of dawn. Nonetheless, the halo of the city’s vast expanse was still visible, a vague beacon signaling the direction of their terminus.

Mac was craning his neck, looking off to the side. ‘I think we need to turn down there,’ he said.

Arman already knew that, had known that for a while. He was worried about overshooting and wanted to make as few turns as possible, to preserve their altitude. They just needed to get a little closer so that he could recognize where they were.

‘Did you hear me? We’re not headed towards the airport.’

‘I know. If we turn too soon it may be too far out to see when to turn back.’

‘Huh?’

A real genius. Arman needed to find a way to get him out of here. He offered nothing and there was the constant worry he’d start messing with things. He was perilously close to the controls right now as he leaned over to look out of the window.

‘Just trust me. We have plenty of time. I want to get it right.’

Mac sat back and lit another cigarette. ‘Do you think it matters? I mean, do you think the plane crashed before? Maybe it killed the pilots but we came back. Maybe we’ll always come back. All this worry about landing safely doesn’t matter. We’ll always have one more chance.’

‘You think we’ve died before?’

‘We’re still here. What if it’s just a matter of perspective? Back in college my brothers and I—’

‘Yeah, yeah. The lab rats. So are we hidden in an almighty’s frathouse basement?’

‘It’s just a metaphor. You have to— Wait, I’ve told you this already?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Hmmm.’

‘Look, see that jut of land? I know exactly where we’re at.’ Arman pointed straight ahead. They were farther up than he’d thought. ‘I’m going to run us along the coast and then cut in at the airport. We should be able to line up with the runway pretty easy.’

‘You know the direction of the runway?’

‘Didn’t you pay attention all those times we landed?’ Amran didn’t bother trying to hide the snideness.

‘I was asleep,’ Mac sniped back.

‘That’s helpful. Hold on.’

Arman turned the wheel and they banked and angled forward. Everything vibrated horrendously, filling the cabin with a rattling roar that seemed to originate from deep within the plane. It felt like the craft was tearing itself apart. And falling from the sky. The noise was deafening. Arman eased off the turn and their descent leveled out and the shaking ceased but the roar continued. He looked over to see Mac wide-eyed and wide-mouthed, grasping perilously onto his setback, screaming at the open sky in front of them. Arman joined in, a whiny bleat not of fear but of annoyance. Mac’s mouth shut suddenly and faced Arman, the shock expressed in his rapidly blinking eyes tinged with embarrassment.

‘Still think you’re immortal?’ said Arman. Mac turned away, looked at the crew’s clothes as if noticing them for the first time and then out the window over the endless ocean. ‘Why us and not the people who are gone?’

‘Maybe we still have some purpose.’

‘To fly a plane until the end of days? Maybe we’re just lucky. Or unlucky. What if it has to do with where you’re sitting? The pilots are gone. Maybe if we don’t make it today we’ll be gone too. You could play it safe and go back to your seat. I think I can handle things fine—’

The door burst open and Kenth barked at them. ‘Hey, next time you decide to ride into the danger zone would you mind giving us a fucking warning?’

Arman was about to tell him to worry about his own job when the door slammed shut.

‘What was that? Are— How many—’ Mac seemed genuinely concerned. ‘Is he going to be all right?’

Arman shrugged. He glanced at the notes on the barf bag, thought about the names and whether they had been missexed. Began to giggle to himself. ‘Maybe you should go back to see if he’s OK.’

‘I wouldn’t want to leave you all alone. I think we should try and call in, so they can help us with the landing.’ Mac picked up the radio handset, speaking into it while turning knobs. ‘Hello? Hello? Roger. Roger.’

‘It doesn’t work.’ Arman explained the situation, that they were on their own.

‘Maybe that’s our purpose: we have to learn how to land the plane.’

‘That’s stupid,’ said Arman, ‘if you don’t remember anything how can you learn?’

‘Who says we won’t remember?’

‘I don’t know about you, but I have no memory of landing this plane before.’

‘Maybe it’s our first time.’ Mac brushed ashes off of the window and pointed. ‘You know, you’re way too high. You need to get lower to land.’

‘Oh, you’re an expert now?’

‘This may sound crazy, but my kid has this video game where you have to land a fighter jet. Tough as shit. It took me a lot of practice, but most of the time now I can nail that landing. One of the secrets is you can’t come in steep, you have to get close to the water.’

‘This isn’t some game. Unlike you I’m not even sure we get another life to retry if we fail. I don’t think I’m going to trust some toy for tips on how to fly.’

‘It’s more realistic than you think. Maybe you should let me have a shot at this, seeing how I’ve got more experience than you.’

Arman laughed, hard and loud, shaking his head.

‘Let me show you—’ said Mac, grabbing the controls and easing them forward, tipping the plane slightly. Arman’s reaction was instinctual, pulling back on the yoke, trying to nullify the other’s actions. In response, Mac pushed harder and Arman pulled harder and the yokes wobbled under their strains. Arman braced his feet against the floor for leverage, hitting the pedals indiscriminately. The plane began to sway and twist, making it harder to keep steady in the struggle.

‘What are you doing? Stop it!’

‘Just let me show you!’

‘You’re going to crash us!’

‘Hey!’

'This isn't a toy!'

'You don't know what you're doing!'

'Do too!'

'Do not!'

'HEY!'

Arman and Mac shut up, froze up, looked back to see Kenth standing in the cabin, the door closed behind him, staring vaguely between them as if contemplating some horror from beyond the future. The with neither of them touching the controls, the plane quickly settled down, gently rocking itself into stability.

'What is going on?'

Arman pointed at Mac and began to loudly decry his behavior. Mac did the same in return. They seemed to be speaking in unison, cancelling and resonating into a pointless babble. Kenth stopped them with another rebuke, this time glaring them down in disbelief.

'People are starting to panic. *I'm* starting to panic. There's another person back there who says she can pilot the plane. Should I bring her up?'

Arman had faced forward, making sure things were under control, looking out for the airport. He spoke as he intermittently scanned the horizon and the console.

'I don't need more help. I need less. This fool is just getting in the way, distracting me, won't keep his hands off of things.' He pointed to the cap on his head. 'I'm the captain. He needs to get out of here, let me focus on landing this bird.'

Kenth didn't say anything. Mac scowled at Arman, then blew a blast of smoke in his direction and jammed his cigarette into the ashtray. As he contorted himself out of the seat, Arman grabbed the hat from his hat and tossed it away. Mac stood up, stooped, staring down at Arman.

'What are you waiting for?' Arman said. 'Why don't you go calm everyone down with your fucking charm.'

Mac looked at Kenth, looked hurt, turned to leave. The steward opened the door and offered to stay and help.

'I'm fine,' Arman said curtly.

Kenth put a hand on Arman's shoulder.

'Please, god...'

'Just go.'

Kenth was squeezing, hard. 'Good luck,' he quavered.

Arman nodded without looking back, shifted his shoulder. The hand released and he thought he heard a snuffle. When the door closed he sighed with relief. Finally alone. He set the autopilot and the plane began to keel so he cut it off. He gingerly pulled his hands away from the controls and everything seemed stable, so he squeezed out of the seat and began to dig

through the pile of clothes. Settling on a pair of pants and a jacket, he tied a leg onto the door handle, the other leg to an arm, the other arm to a hook, keeping everything taut. Sitting back down in the seat, he followed the coastline with his eyes to a point where it angled away into a large bay. It wouldn't be long now. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it, taking a deep drag, trying to stay relaxed, visualizing the approach — slow and steady, gliding into the runway. He'd never done this before, but the image was vivid, as if it was something he knew, something real. Perhaps this wasn't his first time. Perhaps something returns with you, even if your memories don't. How much had he learned that he didn't even know? Does a forgotten thought have a purpose?

It was time. Arman gently banked the plane, turning it towards land. It shook and dropped with the effort, yet he was unconcerned. In the cockpit, alone, he felt confident. He could see the path. The craft relaxed as he straightened it out, returning to its steady hum. Though he knew it would do nothing, he tapped the altimeter, getting no response. It was hard to tell how high they were. He eased the nose forward, taking aim at the coastline. In front of him he could see another jet approaching the airport, blinking. It seemed much lower, but along their line-of-sight. As he tilted towards it the plane shuddered. Tiny specks filled his view, moving, still, colored, lifeless. The lights of the city. He found the landing gear control and lowered them. The coast was approaching, the dark, flat runway extending beyond it. It was coming fast, too fast. They were too high. He tried to adjust, point downward, but the plane resisted. They were almost at land. They were too high.

Something banged on the door, tried to open it. He couldn't look. The voices sounded like they were in the cockpit.

'You're too high! Too fast! You're going to miss it!'

He fought the plane, tried to get it down. It would not deviate. The runway was there, below them, flying by. It seemed so close. And it was gone. Now houses. A park. Arman tried to pull up but the plane would not rise, it was too steady. The yelling behind him continued. Something slammed against the door. 'What have you done? Pull up! Pull up!' He ignored the noise, whatever was behind him. Focused only on the angle of the plane, how fast it was moving, its rate of descent. Buildings were getting closer. Streets. Cars. He couldn't worry about where they were headed, it didn't matter now. Nothing mattered except paying attention and hoping to remember all of the details so that he would get it right the next time around.

...lay for bait...

It was a strange room. No windows, boxy, stark, gray, inadequately lit. The double doors spanned nearly the entire far wall. There was a slight hum all around. To Astra, it felt like an oversized elevator and she kept sensing phantom movements while she sat there and waited, vertiginous sensations that the room was rising or falling. While this may have been a trick of her anxious mind, it was just as likely the result of microhallucinations brought on by offgassing from the clear vinyl that wrapped the couch she was sitting on. Her clothes adhered to its tacky surface and made an awful unpeeling sound whenever she moved, however it was the only place to sit besides the cold, bare floor. She would have pulled off the cover except that the dingy green upholstery beneath looked, even through the camouflaging plastic gloss, to smell and feel even worse. Besides, the volatile odor had likely permeated the air so thoroughly that even tossing the cover through the doors wouldn't offer respite (never mind that they were certainly locked). The atmosphere was heavy, like it was weighing on her, its pressure lulling her towards sleep. There was a dull pain deep in her forehead. She shifted and her sleeve clung and when she lifted it there was a soreness in her shoulder, its source unknown. She rubbed her eyes and buried her nose into the hat, wondering when Oga would return. She'd said she would only be gone a few minutes, but with no clock or watch, and with nothing to do but sit on this unpleasant furniture in this toxic vapor and watch the doors, Astra was feeling restless. There was no way she could sleep, even with this exhaustion dragging at her. The room bounced or leaned and she jerked still. The movement was gone. Or was that acclimation? She wanted to leave, to even just stick her head out the doors and get a fresh breath. To look. She knew better than to try, though, for they must be locked and anyway Oga had told her explicitly to

wait, to not go anywhere. That when she returned, she'd have information about Teddy.

Teddy. Where was he? Why wasn't he here with her? And what was she even doing in this room? She had never been here before, didn't remember being brought here. If Teddy wasn't with her then something must be wrong. Her mind was flooded with horrible thoughts, that her son was dead or in the hospital, that he'd been kidnapped. And why did she have his hat? Astra began to cry. Her throat and eyes ached as if she'd been crying before — did she already get bad news about him? Had something awful happened that she'd forgotten?

She grabbed at her face, tried to calm down. She was probably just overreacting. Maybe it was just the plastic smell. Maybe something had happened to her and they'd sent Teddy to stay with her mother. Or maybe it had something to do with his father — he was clear across the country but she wouldn't put it past that bastard to stir some shit up. She didn't know what time it was, but usually when she started remembering it was still morning. It seemed too early for Bentse to get out here, though she couldn't be sure. She really didn't know what time it was, or even if it was the same day as always. What if all that had all ended, what if today was finally the next day? Was that why she was in here? But where was Teddy?

Astra brushed the hat with her hands, pressed it up to her face and breathed in. It smelled strange, woolen, parched. She wasn't sure Teddy had a scent, or if she could even recognize it, but this wasn't it. She breathed again. No hint of her son. It was just a hat — bright red, a little too big. Lately he'd been wearing it wherever he went. She ran her finger along the fabric, over the button, across the bill's arch, around a thread-ringed hole. She could sense his presence in it, but it was empty.

These last few days had been so nice. She remembered being at the airport the same, but now they'd learned to make each day as something special. One day at the zoo. One day to the beach (too cold to swim, but who cared?). Went to see grandma. Something different for every meal. When so many places were closed, the very search for things to do was an adventure. Just yesterday they'd had a hankering for ice cream and spent so long driving around looking for a shop. Teddy screaming and pointing when he saw the crowd around The Endless Scoop. Then waiting for what seemed like an hour in line, joking and playing around with everybody else, all those kids and adults, everyone happy despite the chilly weather. He'd gotten a double scoop of cookies 'n' cream and bubblegum. Astra thought it was gross but he loved it, spitting out all the gumballs onto a napkin and then, when he was finished, shoveling them all into his mouth. She had laughed and laughed watching him struggle until he finally relented and spit

the impervious mass out, his mouth stained red and blue and green, rubbing his sore jaw with a look of satisfied regret.

Astra felt herself drifting. She stood up and started to pace the short distance in front of the couch, fighting her drowsiness and also attempting to relax herself. She picked at her fingernails, tried to keep her breaths deep. The inside of her body, all of her nerves, everything was tight. The smell, the cold lights, the incessant hum. There wasn't enough space. What were they doing? Where was Oga? She couldn't breathe. She needed to see Teddy. She tried to sit down again but was too restive and stood right back up. It was too much, she couldn't wait anymore. She'd go to the doors and step out or if they were locked bang on them until someone came and let her get some air. It had been too long, they'd probably forgotten about her anyway.

Decisively, she did a quarter turn and walked briskly towards the other end of the room. She had barely taken two steps when there was a clunk and the doors opened and Oga stepped inside, her face intense but cryptic, framed by the dark, short, tight curls of her hair. A slight chill came from her direction.

'Oga, finally. I thought you'd forgotten about me. I gotta get out of here. I gotta see Teddy.'

'Oh, you're remembering. Great.' Speaking with a curt kindness, Oga stepped forward and reached out to Astra. 'Now we can talk. Why don't you have a seat and I'll call the others.'

Astra found herself sitting down, even though that wasn't what she wanted. 'What about Teddy? I need to — wait, don't leave again...' His hat was gripped in her fist.

Oga held up a hand. 'I'm not going anywhere. We just need to get the equipment set up.' She moved to the other end of the room and cracked the door, talking to somebody on the other side. The doors opened up and two average-looking men in military fatigues came in with a video camera and a tripod, trailing a slew of wires. Oga stepped around them, carrying a folding chair which she set up right next to the couch. She sat down and put her hand on Astra's knee. 'We need to record this, to document it. Once the boys get things set up I can tell you about your son.'

'Is he alright? Can I see him?'

'Just try to stay calm. This'll only take a minute.'

Oga rubbed Astra gently. She was wearing a dark blue suit with broad shoulders and a tight skirt. Her tender smile was reassuring, complemented by a plain face done up with rosy cheeks and bright lipstick. Astra touched her own face self-consciously. She picked up her purse and dug through it, pulling out a small packet of tissues and a compact. In the mirror she saw swollen eyes with dark smudges in the corners. She dabbed at them, trying to clean herself up.

‘Take your time,’ said Oga. ‘Just keep in mind that this camera is a piece of junk. In this light and at that distance you could have a black eye and nobody would tell.’

Astra hadn’t even thought about being recorded. She looked at the camera nervously. It was sitting on the tripod, low to the ground, aimed directly at her. One of the men was kneeling behind it, looking through the viewfinder, one eye squinted and the other unseen. His partner pulled a plastic container from a duffel bag and popped it open like a book. He lifted a dark cassette from it, inserted the tape into the side of the camera, slid the tray shut. The camera jarred and the kneeling man jerked his head away. He glared at the other man, then readjusted the camera and resumed his invisible stare. Feeling awkward and vulnerable at being watched, Astra turned away and began digging through her purse for nothing in particular.

‘It’s all set up, Miss Thimpf. The recording’s started.’

‘Thanks, boys.’

One of the men began to pick up, while the other continued to fiddle with the camera. Astra watched them disinterestedly, not realizing she was staring directly at the lens or noticing the blinking above it until the man behind it scooted aside to straighten the cables. Inside her purse, she fondled a small tube, unable to place it. There was a touch at her back.

‘Hey, don’t worry about it. Nobody’s going to watch this. It’s just something we have to do.’ Oga was leaning over, trying to catch Astra’s eye. Her voice quieted. ‘You sure you don’t remember anything about the flight, what you saw?’

Astra shook her head. ‘What about Teddy?’

Oga reached down and picked up a manila folder and unclasped it. ‘I want to show you something.’ She pulled out some photographs and handed them to Astra. A large jet airplane was sitting in the middle of a park, leaning onto one wing. What looked like a puffy slide was hanging off the side. It was surrounded by police and firetrucks. One of the pictures showed the plane in the foreground with a huge brown gash trailing behind it through the grass. The last photo was a blurry image of a woman coming down the slide. Her head was turned and smudged but her hair was visible enough as was the red blur in her hand and the lines on her jacket and pants. She was alone.

Astra’s stomach clenched. She turned to Oga, overwhelmed. It was true, something horrible had happened. The other woman took her hand and leaned forward, nodding gravely.

‘He’s gone,’ Astra said, not fully comprehending the words.

‘You remember.’

Astra wasn’t listening. Her mind was flooded with Teddy. His big-toothed smile, reaching out for her to come along...

'The flash, you told others.'

Just yesterday, sitting on her lap...

'What did you see? Inside the plane.'

Nothing. She didn't remember anything. Where was he? What had happened?

'That's it then, you don't have anything for me.'

What would she have? She could describe him...

Oga sighed and looked down. There was a pause and then she spoke, flatly, as if afraid to let the words out. 'Your son didn't make it. He wasn't on the plane. He's been...vanished.'

Astra shrunk away from Oga. What did that mean? Vanished? She'd just seen him. How could he not have been on the plane? It was supposed to always start the same. It was impossible. Her face prickled and her eyes blurred. She felt apart from her body, as if it was dragging her along through an unreality. She felt herself collapse to the floor. She felt herself scream. She felt herself grab at her hair and kick and sob. She sensed nausea and then pain, only the pain wasn't in her body, it was in *her*, inside somewhere where she'd been rent and something had been torn away, leaving a gaping, hopeless lack. She heard things, snippets that escaped through her attempts to drown everything out. — 'not coming back' — 'than half gone' — 'after he slept' — 'don't know when' — She needed to get out of here, they couldn't be trusted, she had to find Teddy. She tried to get up and run for the doors but was restrained, unable to move despite thrashing to get free. — 'another sedative' — 'no, she can't sleep' — Sleep. She must try to sleep. Teddy would be back. He was gone today but not tomorrow, not the next time. — 'calm her down' — She tried to calm herself. Tried to close her eyes and escape. There was a pinch. She was on the couch, wringing the hat in her hands. She couldn't keep her eyes closed. Couldn't fight. The men were over her, two looming shadows.

The woman pushed between them, framed by a murky halo. 'She's better now. You two can go.' She lit a cigarette and offered it to Astra. Astra waved it off, looked at the woman. Her mind was swirling, she couldn't remember her name. The doors closed, leaving a small dark crack between them from the wires.

'Oh, Astra. I'm sorry.' There was compassion within her impassive expression. What was her name?

'Who— What is your name?'

'Oga.'

She said it quickly and immediately Astra remembered, nodded. Oga's face wrinkled slightly, like she remembered something herself. An unnoticed rush of limpidity began to trail away, turning to a dull, bearable weight. Again, Teddy filled Astra's thoughts, his absence unfathomable. Her gaze

settled on the floor, on the pictures of a crash landing. She had no memories of it, yet there it was. And of him, only memories. She wished they could switch, trade the forgotten for the real. She wasn't thinking straight. Teddy was everything, if she could just bring him back. She was crying now. The hat against her heart. The bad smell had returned, assertively chemical. Bewildered and scared, she turned to Oga. The other woman was looking at her with deep understanding. Astra grabbed at and embraced her, pressing hat and nails into her back. Harder, tighter. She wanted to squeeze out her breath, squeeze out both of their breaths, to crush them all until it would no longer matter.

Astra sipped her coffee. The pungent steam settled deep in her sinuses, did not leave. Oga had offered to get her something stronger to drink. Or cigarettes. Or food. She only wanted coffee. Black. Bitter. She was trying to clear through her muddled mind, to grasp what didn't — couldn't — make sense. She was sad, devastated, but for some reason didn't feel it. It was like feelings were concepts that she understood, that existed within her, but were separated from her experience. She was alone without loneliness. Ill without being sick. She should be crying, she wanted to be crying, but there were no tears. She had not cried herself out, but it was as if she had. Nothing seemed real. Nothing seemed to hold.

Oga was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, a cigarette in her hand. Her foot swiveled restlessly. She smiled somberly at Astra, then took a drag and tossed the cigarette away. Astra watch it skitter over the floor, hitting the wall in a tumble of ash, smoke continuing to rise from where it rested. Oga sat down on the couch and the cover croaked tackily. Astra took a sip, breathing deeply while the mug was at her mouth, trying to cover up the smell of smoke and plastic, even though it didn't really bother her anymore. Oga reached down and picked up the pictures of the landing, putting them face down on the arm of the couch.

'Feeling better?' she asked.

Astra shook and nodded her head. Opened her mouth to say something but couldn't find words. Oga put a hand on her leg.

'It's OK, this'll be over soon.'

Astra wanted to put her own hand over Oga's, but was afraid to find it wasn't there. She took another drink, both hands clasped around the mug, absorbing its warmth.

'Before we go on, there's something we should have done at the beginning.' Oga pointed. 'I need you to look into the camera and say your name, for the record.'

Astra turned, looked into the black, blank circle staring back at her, the red light flashing a lifelessly steady rhythm. It felt strange to speak at

it, as if doing so would admit its consciousness, or perhaps diminish her own. 'I'm— My name—' Did it care how she said it? Everything was awkward. She fumbled, took too long, then rushed out: 'My name is Astra.'

'And last,' said Oga.

Astra took a second to comprehend, her puzzling distracting her from the unease. When she spoke it was natural and without thought.

'Astra Lexon.'

She looked at Oga and gestured. Oga started to say something but stopped. She smiled with a blank kindness and turned partway to the camera, keeping her eyes fixed on Astra. 'Oga Thimpf,' she said, with a clear, patient voice. Then she sighed and glanced down and took the mug from Astra, putting it on the ground beside the couch. She took a hold of Astra's hand, her touch slightly cold but comforting in its actuality.

'Teddy wasn't on the plane when you came in. He didn't make it. This is important for you to accept.'

Astra stared at her with uncertainty. Oga's face was grim, but her eyes seemed to show something else. Astra began to speak and Oga put her hand up. 'I know,' she said, then reached an arm over Astra's shoulder and pulled her close, their heads nestling against one another. Astra could smell the strong, dry odor of nicotine. There was a whisper in her ear.

'I want you to just listen and nod. Don't talk unless I tell you. I can get you back to him, but I need you to go along with what I'm saying. OK?'

Astra nodded into the woman's shoulder. She was staggered and confused but most of all she was hopeful. Teddy. She was desperate to see him again. She let a hand drop to her lap and touched the hat resting there. He was close, finally. Tears welled and rolled from her eyes. She began to quiver slightly. Oga embraced her a bit longer, repeated what she had said, then pulled away and held her out.

'OK?' she asked.

Astra bit her lip and nodded, once with hesitation and then resolutely.

'Good.' Oga pulled over the photographs, flipped them over one by one on the plastic between her and Astra. Her legs rubbed together slightly. They were smooth, perfect. Astra wondered about the weather outside, if it had turned warm.

'I know you don't remember, but this is how you landed today. See — here's a picture of you. It was incredible, quite impressive, actually. Doubly so in that nobody on the ground was hurt. It seems that your flight no longer has pilots, hasn't had them for weeks.'

Astra stopped nodding and looked down at the stack of pictures, at the plane canted in the green field. That long? That couldn't be right. Where did the pilots go?

Oga continued, as if she'd read her mind. 'We don't know what happened to the pilots, however this possibility was recognized ahead of time and contingencies set up for all flights airborne at absolute zero. Do you remember being asked to volunteer...?'

Astra did not but nodded nonetheless. Oga seemed relieved.

'Yes, good. Well, unfortunately it seems that our timing wasn't so good. Only a few days of training happened before they were needed. Not that more would have mattered. There's damage to the plane, the radio lost. A terrible situation. Almost impossible. Almost. But this,' she tapped on the photographs, 'this happens to be a stroke of luck. Allows us to understand the situation more clearly.' She was staring intently at Astra. 'So that we can prevent anymore needless tragedy.'

'You see, that plane is a grave risk. I'm not talking just to those of you inside of it — it's also the people on the ground, innocent people that it re—, um, that it killed when it crashed. Three times, three separate locations in the city. Today we were lucky, but it has to be the last. We cannot allow the plane to threaten more lives unnecessarily.'

Astra moved her head mechanically, looking away from Oga, trying not to look at the camera. She didn't understand. There were no other crashes. Just yesterday she was with Teddy, there had been no problems. Was this a trick? She turned her gaze back to Oga, not fully listening, searching for signs of deception. Oga appeared to sense her concern, took Astra's hand again in hers. Her expression seemed unnaturally still, yet her eyes glistened deeply with tenderness, and Astra felt there was an understanding within them that was beyond the words she spoke.

'...difficult but necessary decision to ensure that the plane was brought down over water on every subsequent loop. We would ask the passengers to bring it down themselves, however it is unfair to place that responsibility on anyone, expect it of them, especially day after day. An impossible request, perhaps. Instead the plane will be taken down by the military, likely by a young man in a fighter jet, following orders. I want you to think about that poor boy, performing his duty, a duty that will save countless lives. How much easier do you think the burden of that duty will be if he knows that the plane is empty, if he does not need to worry about the moral balance of choosing one life over another?'

Oga looked at the camera for a moment, as if she had noticed something in it. Astra imagined Teddy flying a jet, guiding them in. A thought interrupted by Oga's voice.

'There is another thing to consider. If you go to sleep today, you will never come back to the city. Your zero hour will be permanently in front of you. You will—' Oga winced, sniffed, before settling back into composure. 'You will die over and over again.' Oga took a deep breath. Squeezed Astra's

hand and looked at her with intense sincerity. 'But there is an alternative. If you choose to die today, none of this will happen. You will be removed. You will avoid inflicting the pain of death on yourself day after day. You can escape this limbo.'

Astra was shocked. Dying? Removed? This was not what she had agreed to. How did she get here? Her mouth fumbled over words, unable to articulate coherency from her jumbled thoughts. She tried to pull away but Oga held tight, leaned closer.

'You're going to see Teddy again. This will take you to him.' Oga looked as though something inside her was about to break. 'Please, you don't want to fight this.'

Astra let out a low wail. She was shaking, her breathing shallow. Her head dropped but didn't rise. She couldn't nod anymore, just fell forward into Oga's grasp. She didn't understand what she was being told and her mind revolted, filled with Teddy. Ice cream. The zoo. Head back swinging. Grandma's dinner. Pulling at her sleeve. Spitballs. Giggles. Whispering in her ear.

'Don't give up now. You're almost there. If you don't go along, they'll never let you see him. I've set it up for you, I'm getting you back. Remember, you don't speak except for when I tell you. I won't lose you. Someday we'll meet again, I promise. You can tell me then. You can...I can finally meet Teddy.'

Oga continued to hold her. Thoughts of Teddy melded with thoughts of tomorrow. Astra's breathing relaxed, her body stilled. She still couldn't make sense of why she couldn't just sleep, but there was so much that didn't make sense and she wouldn't let them keep her away from Teddy. Oga knew the way past them, she would follow her.

Oga sat back, holding Astra up resolutely. 'Alright? Trust me?' she said. Astra nodded.

Oga glanced to the side and Astra followed her gaze. There was a man in a suit with thin glasses and slicked-back hair standing in front of the door, arms crossed, watching them. A hand pulled her back, back to Oga's face. It was staunch, earnest.

'Don't worry about him. It's just you and me right now, OK Astra? This is the right thing to do. It won't hurt. You won't have to remember any of this. It'll be you and Teddy, just like always. Don't forget.'

Oga pressed her lips together tightly, like a stiff grin, and Astra nodded. Something touched her hand and she looked down and saw Teddy's hat being placed into it. Then Oga's hand lifted and her thumb brushed across Astra's cheek, picking up a tear.

‘Alright, now it’s time. I’ll tell you exactly what to say. You look right into the camera — don’t worry about him — look right into the camera and repeat what I say.’

Astra turned towards the camera. The man was right in her view and she narrowed her focus and he became a blur and then nothing, disappearing into the surroundings. As she spoke she worked the hat between her hands, the redness in her mind, exploring every part that she had so many times already, to know it in its entirety before releasing it back to her son.

‘I, Astra Lexon, authorize the execution of my removal...’

...one after the other...

Morris threw the dice: four. Again: seven — eight — three — five — four — ten (skip) — seven — seven — eight — seven — four. Four: cream jacket.

He did his rolls again for the pants (eight: black with pinstripes), vest (seven: purple), suspenders (five: dark green), hat (four: black with white ribbon), and shoes (three: patent red). He laid the chosen outfit out on the bed and looked at the combination. The pinstripes seemed to clash with everything, but that was what came up. Better than choosing something deliberately, where he knew he would revert to the same three or four outfits. Morris needed spontaneity, a different look every day. It was part of his emancipation from what he had gotten himself trapped in. He'd been stuck feeding the insatiable and receiving nothing in return. Money no longer mattered and escrow had become worthless to him, too. Now he was free and that required a declaration that routine would no longer be imposed upon him, that every day would be fresh and distinct and that the man people used to leech from was no longer. He was Morris now, again and anew.

At first he thought he would just walk through every permutation: selecting a single suit set and cycling through all the different shoes, then modifying one item in the set — say, the suspenders — and cycling the shoes again. When all the suspenders had been passed through he would change to a different pair of pants, then with those go through the suspenders and shoes again. And so on. However, he quickly realized that the outfits looked too similar day-to-day, plus it was difficult to remember the previous day's combination without it getting muddled with all those preceding it. (It wasn't like choosing codewords, where he only had to remember the page number of a book.) So, instead, it was random selection by dice rolls. Number each

component starting at two. Any rolls higher than the largest number get ignored. Even the chances using craps odds: Two requires one roll. Three two, four three, and so on. The beauty of it was he didn't have to worry about remembering what combinations he'd worn before — even if he by chance repeated an outfit it wouldn't get noticed in the noise.

Morris glanced at the clock — still a bit early. It was too warm in the apartment to hang out in the suit, even with the window open, so once he put it on he would have to leave. Ever since the power went down the heating in the building had been cranked up. Maybe it was due to a removal. Maybe a delayed realization that there weren't anymore bills to pay. Whatever the reason, inside he wore only his underwear. It was as if, despite the everpresent winter outdoors, within the building time had advanced, the season now summer.

He lit a cigarette and sat on the bed and stared out of the window. The curtain swayed and he felt a refreshing chill graze his skin. The building across the way was lit by the morning sun, a dull glow that would fade as the sun traveled its low arc. Though Morris knew it was the same clear, unremarkable light shining down from the sky, reflecting the same colors, casting the same shadows, he could not dispel the sense that what he was seeing was completely different from when it had begun. And with this sense came a feeling not of progress but of precariousness, that things were not stable, that they could break down at any moment. He had changed and so too could everything else. He felt fragile, mortal. Things were good now, what if that couldn't last? Would Jass always be there? He turned to the suit. The more he looked at the medley the more natural the pinstripes seemed. It actually was pretty sharp. He overlapped the pieces, picked up his camera and took a picture. As nothing dissolved into image, the colors and patterns arising from the dark acquired a permanence and he began to see in them something natural, inevitable. He held the image out next to the suit, feeling pleased with the unexpectedly timeless style, certain that she would be too.

When he got to *Early's* he knocked on the door and waited. A shadow passed over the peephole then Frolup's face poked out and nodded him in.

'Heya Morris.' His voice was thick, like he was talking through mud. 'Lookin' good, as always.'

Morris smiled and stepped inside, pulling out the white sack and handing it to him.

'Cmon, man, you know you don't need to do that. You're a regular now. Regular's don't gotta pay.'

'It's just going to go to waste. Anyway, this'll cover Jass too.'

‘She’s more a regular than you.’ Frolup opened the bag and looked inside. ‘You know, carrying all this around is dangerous. Hooligang catches wind and you’re likely to get rolled.’

‘I can take care of myself. Besides, would anyone carrying something worth stealing call attention to himself with a suit like this?’

‘A fool would. Though even a fool wouldn’t pay for something that was already free.’

‘Then consider it a donation.’

Shaking his head, Frolup curled the sack closed and tossed it behind the bar. A old man with a round, bald head and an even rounder belly snatched it out of the air.

‘Well ain’t you the philanthropist?’ Earl’s voice was soft and saucy, full of easy confidence that didn’t need volume to assert itself. ‘I’m sure we can scrounge up a few souls to save with this.’ His hand went below the bar and came back up empty. ‘What’ll you have, the regular? Be sure to get yourself something to eat, we got another great spread. Fitsy brought a ham.’ He put a glass on the bar and got a bottle and began to pour. ‘Haven’t seen Jass today.’

‘It’s still early,’ said Morris, ‘she’ll be around.’

‘Yeah, it’s always early here.’ Earl laughed at himself and pushed the drink to Morris. ‘I hope she makes it. We could do with more like you two around here. Maybe Frolly can learn something and find a nice girl rather than playing with himself all the time.’

Frolup looked up from the house of cards he was building in the corner. ‘Gimme a break, pops. You don’t even know what it’s like. Girls ain’t looking for relationships nowadays. They just want a good time and then it’s “forget you.”’

‘They forget ya because you don’t have any romance. A woman needs to be cared for, treasured. When I first met Tressa I brought her a different colored rose every day—’

Frolup waved his hand dismissively and went back to his cards, letting Earl continue. Morris took his drink and headed to the buffet. While he was assembling a sandwich a clamor suddenly arose behind him, the dull clatter of metal striking metal. Morris looked over his shoulder and saw Earl pick up the alarm clock from the shelf and twist at it. Then he pointed a remote at the television behind the bar, changing the channel one step, and did the same for the TV in the corner near Morris. They both were showing the same thing. A woman with big hair and makeup was explaining in court the damage her friend’s pet had done to her couch. The no-nonsense judge asked to see the dog, a miniature ball of fur and energy which the defendant — a dopey, unsteady beanpole — proudly held up and then put down on the courtroom floor. The dog sniffed around until it found the bailiff’s foot and

lifted its leg. Cut to a man speaking in suspenseful, hushed tones and then to a commercial asking victims of abuse to call and report. Morris wondered why they even had ads anymore, what the point was. Maybe it was a belief thing. Rather than pretending that anybody was ever paying attention, he wished they'd just cut them out, let the shows run straight through. Now kids were on the television having a grand time dodging an out-of-control sprinkler. He wondered what was going to happen — would the judge hold the dog in contempt? Hold it in his lap and chuckle? Levy some round-robin fines that left everyone owing nothing and begrudged? Another commercial came on for fun-inducing chewing gum. He bopped his head anxiously to the jingle, warily looking back at the bar. He wondered how much time was left. Suddenly, the fate of the little dog seemed crucial, of paramount importance. He glanced back again and saw Earl looking straight at him, expectantly. Morris averted his eyes but felt the stare behind him, holding him in obligation. He put a handful of chips on his plate and grabbed his drink and walked back to the bartender.

'I wonder if that dog is still alive.'

'Huh?'

'On the tube.' Morris gestured at the television. It was still showing ads, this time for something indeterminate involving a bikini'd lady jiggle-jogging on a beach with a breathless hound. 'The little fellow could just piss and shit all day wherever and people wouldn't have to care, because all the stains and stinks would clean themselves. "Sir, my divan is ruined." "Go sleep on it hon. Case closed."'

'You alright, Morris? Been drinking before you got here?'

'No, no, I'm fine. Just letting my mind wander.'

'This is exactly why I got the rule. A couple minutes and you already zoned out. Before long I'd have a bar full of zombies.'

'You know, you could just turn them off.'

'I like—'

The alarm bell jangled. Earl picked up the clock and reset it. The court show had come back on. The judge was speaking sympathetically to the bailiff when it cut to a fuzzy replay of an old baseball game. Morris shrugged and took a bite of his sandwich. It was a pre-loop rerun, it'd come back on eventually.

'I like to see what's on. Also, it makes sure there is always something happening. Nothing worse than a room full of awkwardly staring silent into their drinks because they have nothing to do with one another.'

Morris peered into his glass, spinning the ice, wondering when Jass would show up. He looked over at the entrance, as if he might catch the exact moment she walked through. Frolup was hovering a card between his hands, its edges barely held between two outstretched fingers, delicately placing it

atop his edifice across two spires that were maybe just close enough together for it to reach. His hands shook slightly, his eyes and the rest of him frozen, like a scene from a show or movie where a mannequin once alive returns to a pose of stillness, the truth of its inanimate pause belied by the incessant life of an actor wavering out through extremities. Without warning, the structure fell, latticed volume turned into a flat, overlapping spread of suits and faces and intricate red filigree. Frolup blinked a couple times, still staring at the card he was holding as if the collapse had not happened. Then, without seeming to move at all, he let it drop and with an effortless flipflop it joined the others and seemed to disappear, face-up or face-down, lost instantly amidst the jumble of apparent indistinguishability.

‘Up for a game?’ said Morris.

Frolup turned to him with a look of abashment, as though he did not expect a witness to his catastrophe. He tilted his head and began to gather the cards. Morris pulled a chair over to the other side of the table and sat down. Frolup split the deck and they each worked through their half, Frolup placing down or turning over into a single pile, Morris dealing into two groups. Morris finished first and he squared up his stacks and inverted one on top of the other and passed them across the table just as Frolup was laying down his last card.

‘What’re we playing?’ said Morris.

Frolup cut the deck and riffled the corners, sliding them together before repeating the process.

‘War?’

‘That’s no game. I might as well watch you fail to build another house.’

‘Help me play out a turn of solitaire?’

‘So we can both lose, together.’

‘Whatever you want. You asked to come over.’

Frolup reached over to the ashtray on the sill and picked up his cigarette and sucked at it. He put it back and continued shuffling, his eyes remaining on the cards the entire time. He blew a stream of smoke out that wafted across the table. Morris waved his hand at the air and pulled out his own cigarette and lit it. He put a finger in his glass and stirred, then pulled it out and tasted it.

‘Speed?’ he said.

‘Too old for that, specially against you.’

‘But not for war?’

Morris watched Frolup’s face. There was a twitch at the corner of his mouth like he was tonguing his teeth. He knocked the deck on the table and without looking up put it in front of Morris.

‘No matter what we say, here we are,’ Morris said while he cut the deck. ‘I’m afraid this is getting to be a habit.’

Frolup took the cards and began to deal, ten to each side.

‘You asked to come over.’

Morris arranged his hand, glanced up at the door. Behind him the alarm rang.

‘She’s not late.’

‘Yeah, it’s a different time everyday, I guess.’

‘You shouldn’t get too hung up on her. She’s a good one, but if you’re not careful some day you may find waiting is all you do.’

‘Don’t listen to a thing he says,’ Earl called out from back at the bar. ‘He’s just bitter because he can’t muster up enough charm to get an eye batted in his direction.’

‘Oh, I think he’s charming enough,’ said Morris, winking at Frolup. He took a card from the stock pile and slipped it into his hand, then pretended to pull a different one out and discarded the just drawn card. ‘Not to worry, doesn’t mean I listen to him.’

‘You still got a lot to learn, kid.’ Frolup was staring at the card Morris had just put down. ‘But I guess there’s a hell of a lot of worse teachers than Jass.’

‘Frolly couldn’t imagine what you’re learning. Before Tressa—’

‘Hey Wrinkie, will you turn this shit off?,’ someone grumbled loudly. ‘I’m sick of having to watch these lies all the time.’

‘Goddammit Peck, I’m in the middle of a conversation here. You can see the clock, there’s a few minutes left still. Why don’t you just ignore the screen and try talking to Rhutt, he’s right next to you.’

‘I can’t talk to him while this is on. He actually believes in this crap.’

Morris turned to the television across the room, squinting to make it out. It looked like it was in a classroom and a young woman was being interviewed by a man in a t-shirt and jeans. Peck and Earl were squabbling but above them Morris could just make out the sound from the TV at the bar. The interviewer didn’t seem to understand the definition of a question and was lost an intricate ramble that was heading away from a point. The woman was bouncing slightly from side to side, nodding her head not at the interviewer. She stared at the camera and pulled at her wool beanie. The man changed his tone as if he was starting to actually ask her something but the sentence kept running along and at some point she just grabbed the microphone, pulling his hand over with it, and began to yell and point vigorously at the camera.

‘Half of the people still have no power! The politicians and the cities made a backroom deal meanwhile the backbone of the country is left in the dark!’

‘Aggggh, see what I mean?’ said Peck. ‘She won’t even let the reporter talk. Just yelling her lies.’

The interviewer was pulling back the microphone and trying to speak into it. 'Where— where—' was all Morris could hear while they struggled.

'Yeah,' said Puck, elbowing Rhutt. 'Where are these people? I don't know anyone who knows anyone without power.'

'It's 'cause they're cut off. Everyone thinks they're gone but they're not.'

A distorted voice blasted from the TV: 'They need our help! Go out and see! Tell 'em to rise hey! Hey! Money still—'

The alarm went off and Earl already had the remote in hand and the channel changed. Whatever was being argued faded out mid-sentence as Peck and Rhutt refocused on the new show. Morris was about to turn away when Earl caught his eye with a look that seemed of wanting, as if hurt that Morris had left their non-conversation for Frolup, as if this didn't happen every day. Morris suppressed his inclination to smile, feeling it inappropriate, and instead just nodded and at the same time averted his gaze back to the game. Frolup had discarded face down and laid out his hand.

'You know I'm just joshing, right?' he said.

Morris looked at his cards and separated them out on the table, shaking his head. There was nothing he could do.

'Good thing we don't keep score.'

'Hey, don't worry about it. She'll be here.'

They played some more. Morris mostly lost, had another drink, smoked. He watched the light slatting through the blinds, shifting in ways ineffable yet clear to him, towards the deep afternoon. Occasionally shadows would slide past and when they disappeared into the door he would wait expectantly until they continued on the other side. One time they didn't continue yet there was no knock so Morris let Frolup know but when he got up to check it was just some kids that he turned away. ('They should find a hooligang, they at least know better than to hassle us.') Morris wanted to ask the time, to get another drink, make another sandwich, get up and walk around. Instead he remained seated, distractedly playing, afraid to find out not that little time had passed but too much, that there really was a reason to lose hope. She had missed days before however that was early on. He didn't want to think what it could mean now.

Another shadow passed and he resisted his eager interest, attempted to ignore the far windows, studied his cards without the ability to make sense of them. At first he thought the tapping was his imagination but Frolup looked at him and then over his shoulder and put his cards down and stood up. There was a brief, quiet conversation at the door then Frolup turned back towards Morris and opened the door.

She stepped in with her head down, bundled up in a long woolen coat, arms crossed. But upon reaching the warm air of the bar she straightened up and twirled, her coat splaying and sliding away somehow so that it was off

and in her hand, revealing a summer dress in bright yellow that flared and she spun. All this happened in not even a full circuit for she stopped suddenly when she faced Morris, her eyes and smile aglow, the coat continuing to coil around her like a snake and then when its embrace was full, loosing itself and falling away to reveal again her bright outfit and the tender curves that filled it. Morris didn't even bother trying to play it cool, just jumped up immediately with a broad grin and took her in his arms, lifted her and completed the turn and did another and when they stopped their lips were still pressed together.

She wasn't hungry so they got drinks from Earl and went to their table. They drank and talked and held each other's hand all the while. She apologized for being late, said sometimes it happens, and he said it was fine since she was there now. He told her she could always call the bar to let them know but she said until she was there she wasn't Jass, which he knew. They talked about the weather, an old joke from the beginning where they argued about it being colder no sunnier and the punch line was they compromised and agreed it was the same. He complimented her dress, she liked his pinstripes. Their conversation flowed: hopes, worries, loves, observations, speculations, silliness, complaints, nightmares, dreams, and whatever else crossed their minds. The only rule was nothing about their pasts. Not just before the repeating but before their first date. They *could* — and did — talk about things that had happened, things they'd seen or known, about history, just so long as it wasn't their own. Yes, there were adjacencies that created difficulties, hints of a prior existence that surfaced from within or without and brought them towards the darkness which they preferred to be a barrier. But it was best to avoid these, so as to not chance a leak which might spoil everything. What of his Jass would be lost if he glimpsed her previous self? He could not imagine her not as her, which was perhaps exactly what he most feared. And if she knew about him, how could they continue? The puzzle pieces more fully revealed would no longer interlock. This meant not knowing where the other lived, since that provided a direct connection to before. As Jass would say, 'Until we met, we didn't exist for each other, so let's keep it that way. Don't touch that which can remind. The only thing that matters is now. Us. The world's built on forgetting — why don't we?' It seemed easier for her, although Morris' difficulty was born out of habit not desire. He was plenty happy to cut off his past, to lose what had been known and done by the man he no longer was, never was for her.

He wanted to take her picture and she put both hands to her face and shook her head. Morris said he only wanted the dress and she reluctantly got up and stood with her face still covered, like a weeping angel. He told her to put her hands down, that he promised. She did and was looking right at him such that he forgot what he was doing until she told him to hurry up.

He put the picture between them on the table and when her headless body came into view she took his hand again and looked as though she would cry.

‘After all this time you doubt me?’

Jass blinked her eyes at him. ‘Never,’ she said, running her finger across his skin, tracing the ridges of his veins. ‘Though I wonder sometimes if you might be tempted...to try something different.’

Morris told her not to worry, never to worry. Tried to explain again that they were being tested, that by settling into habits, repeating themselves, they were offering themselves up for removal. The only way to guarantee their continued presence in the world was to mix things up, avoid getting caught in routine.

‘We can’t live without routine. We have to wake up, and eat, and breathe. The problem is if the routine starts to take over, that our variations are subservient to our habits. That’s when you are lost. That’s when removals happen. But the entire context matters, both big and small. That’s why these photos aren’t a problem. Sure, everyday a picture, everyday neck down, but everyday a different outfit, a different pose. Everyday you make me feel something new inside. It’s never the same.’

‘Listen, the world will no longer be overrun by hordes of the dully alive, persisting through mindless urges and ancient reproductive drives. Now the fittest are those that can transcend the trap they were born into, find new in every day, even as that day resists mightily. It may seem that we are stuck, but we’re going to make of this life more than it ever was or could be. That is how we survive: Becoming new, proving that we are.’

Jass was watching him with her hand backwards over her mouth, looking amused.

‘What?’ he said.

‘You’re cute when you get worked up.’

‘I’m being serious.’

‘Mmm hmmm. But isn’t your line sort of arbitrary?’

‘What line?’

‘Between what counts as new and not, what counts as routine. Seems like you’re fitting it to how you want to live.’

‘We’re still here, aren’t we?’

Jass laughed. ‘What if it’s not enough? What if we’re tempting fate? Maybe we should stay here all night. That would be different. Or what if one of these days I didn’t show up?’

‘Don’t say that.’

‘Or you? Or both of us? We just skip a day.’

‘That’s not funny.’

‘What’s one day out of forever?’ Her eyes were twinkling. ‘One day to make sure forever happens.’

‘I know you’re teasing,’ said Morris, ‘but it’s different. We can’t become routine in what we do together, but us being together already broke a routine. That’s a bigger cycle and it’s already taken care of and now we’re on the cycle within that. If we don’t keep things mixed up the bigger one might be able to close and we won’t be here anymore. If we skip a day that’s doing the same thing, going back to how things were originally, returning to the old cycle. We may never again be able to break it like we’ve done now. Understand?’

Jess shook her head. ‘I don’t understand how us meeting here is a bigger routine than the clothes we’re wearing. I picked my outfit out before I came here, I always did. I was picking them out before I even knew you.’

‘It’s a dependency. It’s—’ Morris tapped the table lightly with his fist and picked up his cigarette and took a long drag. She was leaning on her elbow, smirking but not a bit mean-spirited. ‘You know, it doesn’t matter. I mean, it does, but... What matters is that you’re here. That we see each other every day. That we don’t miss a chance to be together.’

‘And that we dress different each time.’

Morris smiled.

‘And that I never arrive at the same time.’

Morris nodded.

‘And that today I tease you, and tomorrow I understand, and the next I don’t anymore and you tease me instead.’

He laughed. ‘And I tease you instead.’ He took her other hand. ‘Come on, let’s get out of here and find a room.’

‘Get a room? We’re becoming a bit routine, aren’t we?’

‘If you want I could find a car. Something with plenty of space in the backseat.’

‘Sounds romantic.’

‘You never know.’

‘What if it’s our last night together. Don’t you want it to be special?’

‘Don’t say that.’

Jass curled her finger at him. He leaned forward and she did too and gave him a big kiss on the cheek and then on the mouth.

‘Let’s have one more drink,’ she said, ‘I’m not ready to go just yet. Look, Earl’s opening the claret.’

It was the same every night, each trying to avoid calamity in their own way. He rushing to precede it, she delaying its possibility. The barman with his rare bottle of wine. There was tension, there was release. They relied on one another though their necessity felt tenuous, manufactured. Jass skipped over to pick up their glasses and when she turned around the alarm went off and she nearly spilled them, pausing to let the wine settle, watching the glasses and glancing up at Morris with a coy look. He watched from his

seat, enamored and uneasy, drifting in a reverie of drunken expectation and foreboding.

They stumbled along the sidewalks, nuzzling, holding close, laughing, deciding where to stay. There were many choices. He had his contacts, she had hers. Favors owed, apartments known to be vacant (and keys accessible), bartered trades. By unspoken agreement they kept clear of those held by escrow, however this was hardly limiting.

He watches from the shadows, cautious and curious, wary of getting involved. The hooligang leaves her in the gutter like trash, filthy and beat. He approaches with worry and shame.

There were enough places that there were still plenty that they hadn't ever used. Some too far to walk to, some partly forgotten, others too disrespectful. They each let the other guide their way, walking in a part-instinctual part-arbitrary path until fate made its selection. Warmed by alcohol and each other, they were, as always, both in a hurry and not.

She can barely move. He knows a place nearby. Gets her cleaned up, someone else's clothes, a pot of coffee. Her face is scraped, she is crying, mortified, nervous. She's beautiful. They talk, not about what happened or each other, but about the world, about the madness and being stuck and people disappearing. About loneliness.

Sometimes the place was being used and they would retreat in a rush, squealing and running into the street like teenagers caught messing around where they weren't supposed to.

She returned looking clean and fresh, smelling amazing. He pulled her close, finally. Her arms wrapped around his head, his hands slid along her curves, she pressed into him, her lips and breasts, straddling his leg, he grabbed her flesh, touched her skin. They tasted and breathed and held.

They crossed a street at a corner much like the one at which they had first met. He wasn't sure if she noticed, but for him the memory was immediate. He felt the gun which he carried to protect her, a signal of his strength, and his weakness. Pulled her closer, squeezed her hand protectively. Kept walking, put it out of his mind. But it wouldn't leave.

She limbers, their touch entire. It is only this time, given up completely, the walls felled. He is her support, she his. He feels what is inside her, that he has given her. And she melts into him.

Survival on the backs of the weak. Then he is released, yet still burdened by their need, by others. It is too much. To survive he must be free. So many removed, killed by their own hand but his intention. Give them an uncut dose. Another burden lifted.

They lay on the bed, damp, limp, spent. She lit a cigarette and offered it to him. He took a long drag. The anxiety was returning, pressing against

his ecstatic calm. He wanted to talk, to tell her what he was, what he had done.

What does it mean to survive? We can't ignore what we've done. She will not listen, refuses to hear it. It is a bad world, people do bad things, we do bad things. But we can be better, we can forget. Nobody has to know, including ourselves. We can become perfect for each other. He wonders if he can.

He unzips her dress, she his pants. They stumbled, fell onto the newly-made bed, entangled in their efforts to disrobe each other and not let go. Laughing and awkward, passionate, relentless. Slowing down, feeling each other, skin to skin, at last, at last. By now they know the rhythms, what the other wants, what they needed. He struggles to last, he always did. A physical recurrence his mind could not tame. It became another inevitability, something to accept and enjoy and play around. They touched new places and old favorites, exposed and discovered, find routines and dead ends and revelations. He would return and so would she. They fucked away their fears and searched for escape and fuck some more. It is always better than they remembered.

On her hands and knees, heaving, crying. She is pushed over by kicks more indifferent than hateful, fed by group confidence and the humor of cruelty.

They picked a place, one they'd been to before, one of his. She said she wasn't sure she remembered, but he could tell she did. There's an elevator, lights in the halls. The apartment is spare, a cheap attempt at modern — white walls, simple furniture, empty. They made spaghetti from the pantry, white sandwich bread garlic toast. Tried the wine coolers and laughed themselves silly acting like they were fancy. When she stepped away to the bathroom he slipped the clothes from the bed and tidied it up, sweeping any reminders of those who'd been there just hours before.

He could feel her watching him, waiting. He finds a spot, the same spot. Taps it. She tenses. He hesitates, steadying himself and she fights to do the same. She sucks her breath as the needle disappears. He eases the plunger back, a swirl of red, slides it down. Her head rolls towards him, her eyes still open, watching him, awash in endless satisfaction. Their hands are clasped, his firm around hers delicate and relaxing.

He held up his camera, told her to smile. She looked away. Every time. She waited and he waited and finally her smile in the mirror and he pressed the button. A flash and the picture slid out. He pulled it off and put the camera to the side. Waving the picture in the air, he leaned forward and thanked her and kissed her cheek. She turned to him, smiling larger, kissed him back.

Jass is dressing, leaving. Morris wants her to stay. She never does. Can't bear the thought of falling asleep together and waking up alone. She is right, he knows it, but still wants her to stay. At least to talk. She pleads with him to not mess this up. Talk to somebody else. Forget. Our future started when we met, we don't need the past. She starts to go and comes back, giving him a long, deep kiss that he hopes will never end.

Morris could have stayed and gone to sleep. He often did. But this time it didn't feel right. Laying there, remembering her from just a few minutes before, he felt adrift, alone. He needed to separate, clear his mind. Get to his own bed, his own space. A blink was too short, he still needed time.

He stepped out into the cold night and stopped, looking up and down the street. Many blocks away he saw a car's lights, unclear if they were moving or not until they floated out of sight down a side street. As the beams swung their turning arc the shadowed outline of a figure strolling momentarily appeared, but afterwards Morris could no longer locate it. It was surely not Jass anyway. He had waited long enough before leaving. He was afraid of her thinking he was following, more afraid still that if he caught a glimpse of her he would be tempted to.

It was a bit of a walk to his building and he started out in its direction. He had chosen *Early's* because it was not in his neighborhood, though still within walking distance. Plus it didn't seem touched by escrow. Morris was sure there would be little chance he'd be recognized. Their meanderings, however, would often stray far from the bar — sometimes even past his own building and probably hers too. (Those times required extra diligence to not provide any hint as to his origin or even that he might be more familiar with the area. Though it could be a struggle their relationship depended on them being orphans from their pasts, and maintaining that disconnection — even if in truth it could only be for the other and not themselves — was essential. Of course, the feigned indifference or ignorance was probably a tell, but neither was looking to discover what was being hidden and having the secrets kept, even poorly, was satisfactory.) Even as they wandered, their paths did seem to become anchored to a few recurrent landmarks, sometimes passing by one multiple times in a night, from same and different directions, as if once encountered it would attempt to hold them in an orbit which limited the extent of their ramblings. *Pop-In Grocery*, *Mario's Super Hero House*, *Clover Park*, a pay phone graffitied with an arrow bent around into itself, the cramped cemetery behind the old stonework church. They created familiarity and pattern that Morris and Jass seemed to both embrace and resist, attractive and repellent forces that guided worldlines tracing the spatiotemporal trajectories of their whims and desires, struggles against repetition, cravings for dependability, control of information.

Turning a corner, Morris scanned the darkness and listened for any signs of trouble. He touched his coat where his gun was, pressing it into his chest. He loathed the thing and the reassurance it gave him. He never used to carry one, however he wasn't protected anymore, and now he was the protector. Only once did he have to pull it out, to scare off a couple of rowdy kids — not even enough to count as a hooligang. There'd been nothing before or since — he didn't know if the gangs had gotten removed or moved along or maybe they just avoided each other by chance. He wondered if the gun would make any difference if he ran into a real hooligang. He felt his confidence waver, questioned the purpose of carrying something which would only point out his inadequacies. Morris touched the weapon again, then moved his hand and felt the picture. He thought of her. The way she pressed behind him when he'd pulled it out. Afterwards she never spoke of it, neither did he. Behind him and the gun she was safer than just behind him. Maybe it wouldn't save them but they needed it. He wished they didn't. Maybe they didn't anymore. But he would not let his own doubts risk losing her belief in his protection, even if it was futile, even if it never happened.

When he got to his building he went inside and up the stairs to his room, steps heavy with his lingering drunkenness. Unlocking his door, he didn't bother turning on the lights and went straight to his bedroom, dropping his coat onto the bed. He flicked on the table lamp and opened the closet, removing his hat and placing it next to the others. He knew that he could just toss his clothes wherever, however that was something he used to do. Now he preferred to put them away neatly, another point of difference. Before he'd revel in the discontinuity, accentuate it, whereas now he avoided it. He pulled off his suspenders and felt a slight chill at his side. Did he leave the window open when he left?

'Hello Chef.'

Morris spun around, nearly stumbling backwards into the hanging suits. There was a large man standing in the doorway.

'Jesus Lino. What the hell are you doing here. How'd you get in?'

The detective was swaying slightly, leaning against the doorframe. He looked tired, his face sagged. He tossed something on the bed, it looked like bricks, some wires.

'What's this?'

Morris didn't say anything.

'It was in your safe.'

Morris looked back into his closet, the safe was closed. 'It didn't come from there,' he said.

'Oh yes it did. I pulled it out myself'

That fucking liar. What was he trying to do, frame him? That didn't even make sense. 'What are you talking about? You can't—'

‘What’s your game, Chef? Is the world not bad enough? Are you trying to ruin every last thing?’

Morris didn’t understand. He fumbled for words.

‘You’re a killer. You always have been. Does it make you feel good? Everyone who dies has someone who loves them, do you ever think about that?’

Was he talking about the uncut drugs? How would he know? Morris looked at the bed, trying to figure out what was on it.

‘Tell me about my wife,’ Lino sneered, his face trembling.

‘I—I don’t know your wife.’

‘Don’t bullshit me, what’s this?’

Morris flinched as a stack of instant photographs were thrown at him. One landed face-up by his foot. A naked woman in a fur coat sitting down in a chair. Her legs were spread wide, her face looking hungrily at the camera. He didn’t have to see the others, he knew what they were. He looked at the detective, trying to understand.

‘What did you do to Des? Have you been screwing with me this whole time?’ Lino wiped at his face. He pulled his other hand out of his jacket. It was holding a gun. ‘Why? Was it because of me?’

Morris put his hands out and tried to talk calmly. ‘Easy Lino, someone is feeding you a story. I don’t know a thing about—’

‘Why was it in *your* safe?’ Lino took a step forward, holding up a picture, shaking it. It was a red blur.

‘Whatever you’re thinking, you’ve got it wrong. It’s just a picture, it means nothing.’

Lino raised the gun. ‘Nothing? Is that what you think of her?’ His eyes squeezed shut and he pressed his arm against them. The revolver trembled at Morris. ‘Why did she have to die?’

Morris leapt at the bed, fumbled in his coat, got a hold of the pistol and didn’t bother trying to pull it out, just lifted it and fired. There was a deafening blast and he was thrown to the side, into his dresser. He lay there, face down, stunned. His head felt full, his ears rung. There was a burnt smell. His head rolled to the side. The coat was wrapped around his hand and in it he could feel the thickness and smoothness a photograph. There was a punch in his back and a distant sound. Then another and his breath knocked out. He tried to shake off the coat, to see Jass. A flash, a punch through his shoulder. The coat collapsed. He screamed. He couldn’t hear himself. Screamed and screamed and screamed. No sound. Just another flash.

...leave some dust behind...

‘You like that?’

‘Mmmmm.’

The moan was too soft, she couldn't hear him. It didn't matter. With cursory glances toward the road, Gnorry watched her — pulling open the fur, biting lip, hands through hair, hands raised high, laughing, head back, feeling the wind. And those tits. Boyoboyoboyzee. She wasn't looking at him, didn't need to — she knew what was happening, knew what she was doing. He checked to see if anyone was around, in front, in the mirrors, then back to her. His face was hot, skin tingling. She rolled her head, let out a whoop, screaming straight up into the wide sky. Her arms were held up, her chest soft and huge and swaying with the movement of her and the car. It pushed aside the coat, bursting from and nestling in the soft gray hair, delicate and noble, nipples proud. He wondered what they felt like.

‘Uh uh uhuhh, not yet. Gotta wait.’

She gently took his wrist and moved his hand back to his leg. Gave a side glance wink as he adjusted himself, moving his cock from the uncomfortable burrow it had dug for itself. Gnorry had just barely touched the coat, a wispy tickle that he had to leave unscratched. It seemed like something completely new, something he'd never seen before. On Soph it was merely an expensive garment, to be shown off, to be deserved. Bought as a sign of status and fidelity without any inkling of this potential. Even when he'd brought it today he didn't consider he'd get anything out of it directly — it was a special gift, for her to appreciate, for her to reciprocate. Now that it was actually being worn, worn this way, hoowee. Soph would say ‘everything looks better in fur,’ but Gnorry never imagined it could look like this.

He'd almost forgotten it this morning. Before taking his shower he had slipped it out of the closet and tossed it into the guest room. Hoped it would

be a morning that Soph would sleep through but when he stepped out of the bathroom the light was on and she was sitting on the bed. 'Going in early again?' She said the same thing every time. He'd tell her she didn't know what it took to keep the world running and she'd call bullshit and he'd shrug and say nothing more. Even from the beginning he never felt shame so never worried about showing it, but the tiniest thing could be misinterpreted and set her off. The pattern was important, it kept her at bay. She'd grumble or flop back into bed, make a dramatic attempt to get attention or sympathy or to lay some guilt trip on him. But at least she wouldn't get riled up and chase him through the house. As quickly as possible he would get dressed and go, and with any luck she'd leave him alone and he wouldn't have to think about her until the next morning. Today, though, she'd called out to him as he was leaving the bedroom. 'You know your children would like to see their father once in a while. You're some kind of bastard to just completely ignore them.' Exactly the kind of crap she'd pull. Every morning he woke Queeble up and they'd have a talk. Sometimes about music or movies, sometimes about important stuff. But every morning. He probably knew his son better than his mom did. And she acted like it was some big mystery why he found her so miserable. Determined to prove a point, he went straight to the kid's room, turning on the lamp and shaking him awake. 'Hey, Bull, it's me.' A drowsy smile. 'How you doing?' 'Tired.' Asked him about his day, did he listen to anything new. Basically the same stuff as always. The kid had it made. He was nodding off. 'Well, I just wanted to say hi before I left. You can go back to sleep.' 'I love you Dad.' Queeble looked past him with seeming interest and Gnorry half-expected that his wife was in the doorway, that his son was about to admonish her: 'I see you Sophpesh. Don't come in.' What child calls his parent by their first name away? 'I love you too,' with emphasis. Then he turned to leave but she wasn't there, looked back before switching off the light to see Queeble burying his face into a pillow. A sneer down the hall in the direction of their bedroom then across to the twins. Cracked the door and peeked in. The nightlight reached through the dark to the bunk bed, faintly uncovering their shapes, both curled up and turned away, breathing in sync. Hanging from the frame were the signs he'd had carved for them — Toh up top and Tay below. No use waking them now, they would just be groggy and weird. Wouldn't remember anyway. Besides, they were hers. She wanted another and he gave in. Got two, so what was she complaining about? He'd spend some time with them soon enough. A glance back she still wasn't there and he lightly headed to the front door. He was on the front step, pulling off his ring, when he remembered the coat. He tossed the ring into its customary spot in the bushes and snuck back inside quietly to retrieve the present, hoping he wasn't tempting the chance of an unwelcome interruption.

He was going to have to have to remember it every day from now on. Oh yessiree. He wanted her to have it every day, to wear it just like she was now. She turned away and wiped her nose with her palm, like a child, and suddenly the image of a playgroup in the den with moms all around flashed before him. Her mother reaching to keep her close. How could two related people turn out so differently? Gnorry pressed his fingers to his eyes to push away the thought, shaking his head in frustration at his stupid mind. That was a long time ago, it meant nothing to this moment. He stared at her — she'd pulled the coat tight around her front, arms bundled tight against her waist. A receding sliver of skin was just visible beneath the quivering fur below her neck. She looked so hot. It didn't matter what she'd been, she was a woman now.

'I'm cold.'

'Huh?'

'It's freezing. Can we close the top?'

There was a side road up ahead and he pulled off, going a little ways to a small clearing in the trees which had been graded and staked out for some construction project, probably a new home that would never get built. A pole was driven into the ground with a sign that said 'No Trespassing' and another with writing too small to read, probably a permit. Gnorry got out and worked on closing the car's roof. He felt an urge to go over and read the permit, to find out what plans had been thwarted, what dreams would remain so, or maybe to dream a little himself about what could be. A place of his own. He heard the window being cranked down behind him.

'You coming? Or are you going to stare at dirt all day?'

He got in the car. It was already starting to get warm and he turned down the heater. She put her hands close to the vent.

'It's not dirt, it's a dead end.'

She grinned, that bright and smarmy look that seemed beyond her years. 'Ha ha, it's still just dirt.' She ran her hand down her front, spreading the coat, showing a band of satiny skin terminating at the dark, enticing dimple of her navel. 'Can I have a little?'

'You make me wait, I make you wait.'

'It's been a half hour.'

Twenty-seven minutes, actually. 'You watching the clock?'

She stuck her lip out and buried her hand in the fur, kneading herself through the coat. 'What if neither of us gives in? That would be a shame, to have to wait forever.'

Her hand reached out and a single finger traced a delicate line up his leg, starting at the knee. He let it continue, watching it slow as it approached his center. It paused, drawing a small circle on his pants. Its track along his

thigh was tingling. The muscles in his loins tensed. He grabbed her teasing appendage and lifted her hand up to his face.

‘You are too much.’

He smelled her skin, the clean, slightly floral scent he knew well but seemed to always forget until the next time. With his other hand he picked up the cup. Thick, textured plastic, flared at the rim, green color faded by countless dishwasher cycles, the opaque, spouted lid centered with concentric circles that formed a bullseye pointing to the treasure within. He nodded at the textbook which she picked up and held out obediently. After carefully peeling off the lid, he tapped out a pile of white powder onto the shiny surface, partially covering the prosaic block lettering of the title. *A bra II* Using a protractor, he shaped it into four parallel lines slashing through the quadratic formula. As he tightened his rolled bill she put a hand out with anticipation. He shook his head slowly and mouthed the word *wait*.

Gnorry leaned forward and snorted the first line, then switched nostrils and did the second. Sniffing hard to catch the drip, he put the tube down and sat back, letting the buzz spread from the middle of his head. He watched as she put the book on her lap and did the lines, holding her head back for each one. She let out a squeal of delight and shook her shoulders and head and whole body, the coat slipping to show her breasts jostling out of sync with the rest of her, a dark crescent just peeking out from behind the furry edge. She began to alternate between licking her finger and swiping it across the book cover, mopping up the remnants they had missed. He slipped a hand beneath the coat, squeezing her, running his thumb across the nipple. Throwing him a coy glance, she writhed but did not resist. Hand pressed to his thickening crotch. Finger picking at her waistband. Lungs heaving. Heart throbbing. Rubbing. Clutching. Finger in a mouth.

It was time to get moving. Gnorry popped the car into gear and spun out into the road in a wild fishtail of dust and gravel. Out onto the empty highway, rapidly accelerating, racing past the gray sky, its dull monotony broken only by the mysterious orb burning vaguely, ceaselessly, unquenched within its depths.

‘Where are we going?’ She was leaning forward, giggling.

‘Anywhere. Nowhere. Let’s keep driving until we wake up, just to see what happens.’ He could go forever. What was the point in thinking about stopping?

‘I wonder how far we can get.’

He gripped the steering wheel and spread his legs. ‘What if this road never ends, just like everything else.’

‘Maybe we’ll find the epicenter of the view.’

‘The what?’

‘The violent un— uh, um, unexplained something...’

Gnorry looked over at her. Her face was almost at the windshield. ‘You know about that?’

‘Sure,’ she said, peering up, as if for birds. ‘It’s fascinating, it’s like now.’

‘It sure is. From a singular moment a catalogue of experience which only shows that true understanding is beyond our capabil—’

‘—capability to accept or comprehend.’

What in the hell? He did a double take. That smile again, turning into a wild laugh, head tossed back, hands pressed one on top of the other against her partially bare chest.

‘You said the exact same thing last night,’ she said, still laughing.

It took a few seconds for him to comprehend, then a flash of annoyance, frustration at being let in on a secret you should already be privy to. She was watching him with a big grin. One half of the coat slipped open without her noticing. His irritation died away and he began to laugh himself. At least I’m consistent, he thought. He glanced at the road then back to her. Hubba hubba bubba.

‘So have you seen it?’

She shook her head. ‘Silly, how am I supposed to do that?’ Seemingly without thinking she covered herself back up.

‘Hmmm. How’s this for another interpretation: mortality transcended via a cloacal regression merging desire with waste.’

‘Are you making fun of me?’

‘Merely trying to stimulate your mind. You have a lot of catching up to do.’

‘Don’t act so hoity toity — I think maybe these fancy pantsy ideas are just distractions from the fact that you don’t actually get it either. “Too profound to make any sense.” What’s that supposed to mean anyway?’

‘Hey, that’s great. You been reading something new? Who said that?’

‘You did!’

Gnorry was laughing again and she was too. Up ahead the road sloped away and he floored it, taking the curve at speed, fighting to keep the car on its line. The road continued a serpentine path, rising and falling and winding past leafless forests and ragged cutslopes, through blind turns and passing lanes, all of it deserted. With every change in direction they were pulled harder to each side, closer to losing traction, tires squealing madly. She was crying out, sharp exaltations rising with every new twist and acceleration, hands high against the roof like riding a coaster, boobs bouncing with abandon, free from the coat. Gnorry stole as many looks as possible while still concentrating on the increasingly precarious trajectories. A moment of weightlessness from a sudden dip (look) then a hard right which seemed to never end, holding and (look) holding like a corkscrew which the car was about to slide off of then (look) the other direction and finally a rise

and everything flattened out and the hills were gone and the road became just a straight shot off into the vanishing distance. He could now look at her uninterrupted, chest heaving, arms flopped back, face glazed with overstimulation.

His nerves were buzzing. He rubbed at his ring finger with his thumb. Tapped at the steering wheel with rhythms he couldn't keep up with. Dum da da dum dum da. Babybabybaby. Popitopitop pop pop. Acatacatictyactiiumyummyum. The rush of the last few minutes trailed away and a broken thread reconnected, leading him back.

'That was pretty good.'

'Oh yeah. Wanna go again?'

'No, that thing I said. Profound senselessness.'

'Oh, sure.' She looked back behind them, then out her side window. 'Sounds like giving up, though.'

She began to talk of meanings and purposes, something about how there must be a point, that it couldn't just be ambiguous chaos. It was cute, to see her trying to work things out. She didn't yet realize how little she knew. Still, she was amazing. She turned to him, head tilted, eyes fluttering. Zoinks! Amazing. The fellas back at the— oh, she was asking him. He didn't know what. He gave her a riff on senselessness, that forever thwarted any conclusion. She was running with it. So cute. The fellas would be impressed. Talking big about their parties and flings and secret getaways. What would they say if they saw him now? As she spoke she mindlessly pulled at the coat, offering a glimpse at the succulence within. Someday he'd go back, with his own big talk. Boiyoioinging. Dingdongdingdong. She was wondering about the disappearances, how they cut things off. He said that didn't stop anything, that technically they were an even greater forever. She said that was cheating. Glib. People were gone. Were they? It was funny, he'd already talked this out, back with the fellas. Did anyone know a single person who actually went away? Was there a difference between not seen and disappeared? Disappearances were a ruse. People seeing what they wanted to. Someone decides they don't want to be around you anymore. Disappeared. Someone starts a different routine. Disappeared. Someone forgets about you. Disappeared. It was just a cover for their insecurities. He told her as much. She rolled her eyes.

'You already said that.'

'Does that make it less valid?'

'It's the way you do it. Like you're coming up with it for the first time.'

'Sometimes I am. You should be impressed.'

'With what, that you forget half our time together?'

'That's not true.'

‘It doesn’t help that you start dozing off the minute you lay down. Do you even remember the movie from last night?’

Gnorry struggled to bring it to mind. It wasn’t like yesterday wasn’t unique but they’d picked up videos before and from the inside all motels seemed the same so even though he could remember the broad details the specifics escaped him, like they were a distant memory fogged by time. He found a particularly clear moment in the store when she’d made a joke about chapstick comedies and attempted to play the scene forward from there. He was almost to where he thought they picked something when she spoiled his immanent epiphany.

‘You know, the one with the cross-dresser?’

The answer sprung forth with an embarrassing obviousness, leaving his obsolete recollections to fade back to obscurity. Though he’d seen it plenty of times, he found himself a bit ashamed at not remembering watching any of it with her.

‘Did you like it?’

‘Sorta, I guess. It was black and white, and wasn’t much of a comedy. Seemed to be trying too hard.’

‘It’s funny because of the way it plays with our expectations.’

‘That’s what you said last night,’ she said, sounding almost exasperated.

‘You could keep saying that and I wouldn’t know the difference. What if I told you I remember you telling me last night how hilarious it was.’

‘I’d know you were full of it because I didn’t think that. I don’t think that.’

‘Are you certain?’

‘*I’m* not the one who can’t remember.’

‘You seem pretty sure of yourself.’ Gnorry smirked at her. ‘You wouldn’t believe the secrets you’ve told me. Like that time in the ladies’ room when the toilet clogged...’

Just for a second her mouth fell open slightly and she looked like someone had caught her picking her nose. Then she said ‘Shut up!’ and slapped him on the arm and he gave an exaggerated flinch and they were both laughing again. The landscape rushed by, to the left a hill began to rise and on the right fall away. The road was flat but it felt as if they were rising, flying. He wanted to put the top down again.

‘It’s too cold. Anyway, somebody might see us.’

‘I haven’t seen anybody for ages.’

‘But what if they do, what would they think?’ She chewed on the tip of her finger and batted her eyes. ‘I’m a minor.’

‘Ha! Is that even true anymore? I guess it is. That’s quite the conundrum.’ He ran two fingers down her arm, stroking a disappearing line through the filamentary surface. ‘You know, the longer we go the less difference age

is supposed to make. I guess at some point we'll both just be infinity. So if you're a minor, and I'm the same age, then I'm a minor. Look at you, making me younger. Sure is a long time to wait, though, to be legal I mean.'

'You and your infinities. You're so smart, Mr. Menurd.'

'Hey.' He'd told her not to ever call him that.

'Oh, come on, Gerd.' Her eyes were petulant. 'Gerdie No—'

'It's Gnorry!' he snapped. Glaring at the road. Gritting his teeth. He was back at home, Soph wagging her finger, where have you been, we don't have the money, be a man, look at them, what's in there, what about me, you make me sick.

'I'm sorry.'

He shrugged off her touch. She hesitated, then reached out again.

'I'm really sorry, Gnorry. Don't be like that. Let me make it up to you.'

She took his hand in hers and pulled it to her chest, pressed it against the soft fur. It slid apart and beneath she was warm and silky. He felt her skin, the curve of her flesh, a squirm of desire. She guided his hand down, running it across her belly and underneath her panties. His fingers slid into her hair, course and secret, stroking, exploring. She massaged his lap, grasping at his stiffening erection. His pressure increased and she hummed, moving away and then back. His belt opened and zippety zapppp the zipper split his pants and he was free, released into her grip. Pulled, caressed. Something mumbled about little Gnorry, big Gnorry. She moved his hand away and leaned across, licking at herself, her eyes watching his, asking for permission.

Gnorry stopped her with an open palm. His heart was drumming, skin prickling. He slowed his breathing to a deliberate pace, trying to keep himself cool. Usually he would wait until later, but not today. Oh yeah, this was going to be good. Helluva story. A real zinger. Gonna blow the fellas' minds. She watched him curiously as he throbbed in her clutch. He eased the seat back, then picked up the cup and pulled off the lid with his teeth. His hand shaking, he tilted the green container and a quavering stream spilled all over his cock, dusting it like new-fallen snow.

'That's for you.'

Never releasing her hold, she pushed her face into his crotch, sniffing and snorting and snarling and gasping and licking and whimpering and groaning and he wasn't even watching, just laying back as he felt himself slip inside her, wet and warm, sliding and sucking, beyond restraint. The accelerator was on the floor and the engine roared, everything a blur. The road was barely there. It wouldn't be long now. He was lost, she was devouring her prey. Something pulsed deep inside, it was fire, burning out to his ends. He whispered words only he could hear, his breath too weak to manage. She leaned forward, still holding him, still surrounding him. Reached up for leverage and pulled down on the steering wheel and it jerked free of his hands. The car veered

across the road, headed for the guardrail. Gnorry didn't even bother fighting it, there was no use, it did not matter. His foot pressed down, he braced himself against the wheel. His whole self trembled and tensed. The car exploded through the barrier with little resistance, flying out over the cliff, the sound of the crash continued by an unimpeded revving, an oddly unsilent flight. Would he remember this tomorrow? He'd better, who could top it? She was up, watching as the ground tilted towards them, book and cup and dust and fluid flung about. And he floated along, caught in strained rapture while she let out just enough of a yell to let him know that she realized where they were headed.

...please don't reveal the secret...

thump thump

Squinch looked up at the ceiling. What were those idiots doing? Banging around like that and it might start falling in. Sure, a little sleep would fix any damage, but if anything hit him tonight he was going to have to crack some skulls. He kept watching, daring them to give him a reason. Thought he heard giggling. The light above him — one bulb working and the other burnt out, the milky globe half-illuminated — spread an uneven dinge across the dilapidated surface, casting the cracks and stains in harsh shapes of yellow and brown. Rather than mask the ceiling's questionable soundness, the dim, shitty light drew attention to it. Staring at it wasn't going to keep it up, but he'd better not get knocked while his head was down...

He glanced at the tabloid in his hand and tossed it on the table. How many times had he read about the supposedly mundane suburban life of a bloated has-been that had faked his own death? It was starting to feel like it was closer to truth than trash. He thumbed through the other magazines that Felda had brought from the store — chick fluff, money-obsessed jerk fests, no longer relevant sports, teen dreams — did she even think about who might actually read this? She could at least have picked up a gun rag. At the bottom of the pile was a stack of papers folded in half and crookedly stapled. It was a mishmash of typed and handwritten articles along with rough drawings and cutout pictures, all photocopied together into a flattened collage. He flipped it over to the front. Up at the top, in bold, quasi-cursive, it said *The Loop*.

Shit, where did this come from? Squinch hadn't thought about *The Loop* in forever, though this wasn't like what he'd seen before. No big pages of newsprint, no well-organized layout, no finger-staining ink. This was more like amateur hour. Maybe it was a joke. Under the masthead was a slogan

messily written in all caps: STILL ALIVE! The first headline said *Gone!* Below it was a crudely drawn picture of a wanted poster with a cat face that looked like it was from a pet food wrapper. The story began:

One of the most troubling mysteries of this new reality has been the rapid and mysterious disappearance of our most loyal friends, our furry partners, our reliable companions: our pets. Everywhere animals are being removed from their homes without explanation or trace, leaving their owners devastated and confused. Thus far there has been no satisfactory explanation, leading to an explosion of rumors, theories and accusations which

He started to skim down the article. It was nothing new, every issue of the *The Loop* he'd read had a variation of this. Claims that some animal instinct provided escape from the cycle. Assertions that anti-yardshit patrols were secretly hunting WoofWoof and MeowMeow. Birdowners blaming feral cats. Catowners blaming wild dogs. Dogowners blaming murderous, savage-taloned raptors. Whispers of satanic cults performing sacrificial rituals. Realists claiming that the pets just ran away and would eventually find their way back. Children and seniors and mothers and grown men begging for whomever had them to please let them go. Much of this seemed very familiar, and forgettable. He was looking for something new, something concrete. He himself missed Girby, and though he'd accepted that she was gone, the idea that he might see her again sparked a touch of unexpected optimism. Unfortunately it seemed to be all nameless anecdotes and unsubstantiated ideas, heartstring-tugs and provocations. That is until the last paragraph where, probably for lack of space, two incongruous stories were mashed together: First was a discussion with a real expert, a cold fusion physicist who claimed that conservation laws wouldn't allow cats or dogs (or humans) to just vanish, and that he believed they actually fell into 'worm-holes' that transported them to a new locations on the spacetime continuum. Second was a bit about a family that had lost their all-black puffball, Falvac, but weeks later (according to their count) found him two towns over, leashed up to a street entertainer who spent his days hopping on a contraption that looked like a planet with rings. The bouncing busker claimed to have had the cat since it was a kitten and suggested it was merely a case of mistaken identity. Squinch found himself daydreaming of his dog passing the time with a nice old man in the distant past until she got bored and dug through the earth to return to him sometime soon.

Around the corner he could hear something clomping down the steps. Grick came strutting into the kitchen wearing only a pair of cutoff jeans that looked more like a loincloth. He walked his wiry ass over to the fridge and started pulling out some beer, his rattail winding across his spine.

‘You do realize it is winter,’ said Squinch.

Grick didn’t turn around. ‘The only reason I put these on was out of respect for you.’

‘They’re barely doing their — hey, aren’t those Felda’s?’

Grick tipped his hip daintily and let out a fart. The movement or gas opened a gap and Squinch caught a glimpse he’d have rather forgot. A hand raised up holding a familiar plastic tub.

‘Mind if I take this dip?’

‘Just be sure to put it back.’

A middle finger extended above the container. ‘Ha ha, very funny.’ Grick kicked the door closed, his plunder spilling from his arms. As he walked out he grabbed a sack of chips in his mouth.

Squinch called out after him. ‘Hey, keep it down up there, I’m trying to relax.’ Bottles tinkled as he was waved off. *think think* up the stairs. Fucking moron. Loud enough to be bugging Ini. Hopefully she’d already fallen asleep, Squinch didn’t want her worked up. She had to spend yesterday saved but he let her have today to herself. It was supposed to be a break. They had an appointment tomorrow.

He turned back to *The Loop*. Next to the pet article was one titled *Outrage! What Are They Hiding?* The headline wasn’t familiar but once he started reading the text — typewritten and filling the entire column width — he was certain he’d seen this before. It was about a professor who was doing research on memory and disappeared in a suspicious explosion. She’d been a regular contributor to *The Loop*, hoping that the paper would prove to be a model for disseminating ideas and data such that humankind would eventually uncover the truths of the world. Yes, this was the exact story he’d read earlier, right down to the writer’s copious use of the phrase ‘information terrorism.’ He flipped to the middle of the papers to get to the continuation of the article. A lengthy discussion of her research closed with a paragraph hinting at the important discoveries she was on the cusp of. An explanation of how memories don’t reset with the body, that ‘knowledge and remembrance must extend beyond the structures of the brain or our physical being. Time is constant and simultaneous. We trace its interconnected threads to transcend the illusions of space. This is consciousness.’

Squinch read this three times without getting any closer to comprehension. He doubted he’d understood it before, either. It sounded like bullshit but even if it wasn’t what did it matter? The professor was gone, the theory useless, Squinch’s mind still chugging pointlessly. He skipped to the end of the story where a bunch of punctuation caught his eye.

Pass the word; pay attention; continue her work! Find the Truth!
The terrorists must not win! Dr. Caltrop will not be forgotten!!
You’re not blind! Watch the world!! Watch the world!!!

He didn't remember this tone the last time he'd read *The Loop*, but he wasn't sure. Back then he probably didn't bother reading that far. Back then there were plenty of unread tabloid stories to be distracted by, plenty of novelty. This little pamphlet seemed inadequate compared to the real paper and he wished he'd paid more attention when he'd had the chance. Might have been something useful in there. Mindlessly riffling through the pages, he stopped at the end where a two-page spread was laid out with a border of power poles and lightning bolts. It was titled POWER TO THE PEOPLE then in smaller lettering: *The Real History of the Energy Crisis*. Squinch had no interest in this one. This was such old news, why rehash it? That mess wasn't happening anymore so why did it matter?

A little while back he took Ini into the city and an old man was at the place, talking to the cute chick running things like it didn't matter, like she was available. He was wearing overalls and his white hair looked like one big cowlick and he was huge, sitting uncomfortably across two seats. Squinch never saw him move, he just sagged there in those poor chairs, drooling over the girl while she came and went and batted away his advances. A bull put out to stud would have figured it out and steered clear. But he kept at it, giggling and panting, winking knowingly at Squinch, as if they were in on some joke. Squinch knew better than to get involved, but this blob was testing his patience. He sure hoped Ini wasn't going to get him, he might kill her. Eventually the receptionist disappeared for a while and the big guy started yapping his trap at Squinch. Transitioned right from shameless come-ons to bragging about work. Turns out his job was at one of the generating stations and he was taking a part-day off, something he'd earned as a result of the strikes.

'We got a pretty good flow of new blood, hopefully soon they won't be needing me. Then I get to retire, just like I was promised.'

'But someday it'll come back around and *you'll* be the new blood, right?'

The man chuckled, as if the notion seemed incredible. 'Never gonna happen.'

'Never?'

'Tell me, what have *you* done? It's your turn first. Over and over. When you've put in the same time, come and get me.'

His entitlement was irritating — tons of people were chipping in, yet he acted like they were beneath him, like Squinch was beneath him. One of the perks for the long timers, the contribution of escrow, was free rides, which was why he was here. With all that jabbering maybe he was nervous. Squinch would be too if he thought he might crush his lay. He never did find out if Ini had him or not. She came out alive but he forgot to ask so the chance was gone.

Now, while everything had finally settled down, while everyone was figuring out how to keep the world working, this article was trying to bring back that miserable time. It had even been miserable here, and they had the generator that Grick got from The House every morning. Without even reading the story he could tell what it was about, someone upset that things were all basically the same as they were before, trying to rile people up as if this was a bad thing. Written by someone with the same contempt as that fat-ass. There was a reason whatever political movement or point they were obsessed with never stuck. Everyone else was doing just fine figuring shit out without their stupid meddling.

Irritated, Squinch tossed *The Loop* on the table. It flipped open to a page that was less busy than its surroundings. A plain black frame with big lettering:

**Do you have troubles?
Are you trapped?
The Perpetual Angels can help**

There was a list of phone numbers and a warning that the services were ‘irreversible’ and ‘unending.’ Usually ads for these vigilante groups had at least some explanation of what they did. He turned the page to see if there was more to it. There was another *thump* and loud laughing. Squinch looked up at the cracks with annoyance. As his eyes fell he saw movement outside. He got up and went to the window over the sink. It was black out there, the moon and stars blocked by the clouds. The vegetation visible close to the window quickly faded into complete darkness. He peered out into the nothingness, searching for motion, light, anything. He was sure he saw something. He thought of Ini — she hadn’t been saved. If she wasn’t asleep yet... He cocked his ear towards the stairs but Grick and Felda were carrying on again and that was all he could hear.

The basement door opened up to darkness just as deep as outside, absorbing the light that peeked in from behind him. Squinch leaned forward, trying to make out Ini, but it was only blankness. Not wanting to wake her, he whispered her name and it was like talking into an empty hole. Reluctantly he stepped down on the stairs and flicked the switch. The bare bulb flared above him, its sharp light slashing onto her bed. She was there, sitting on its edge, staring up at him, expressionless besides her big black eyes.

‘Shit Ini. Is everything all right?’

She nodded. Her thin legs were poking out of her nightshirt, hands in her lap.

‘Can’t sleep? Do you need to go to the bathroom?’

She shook her head almost imperceptibly. It was a dumb question, she didn't need his help with that. 'Do you want your juice?' She shook her head again. 'Alright, why don't you lay down then. I'll tell the others to be quieter.' Ini slid into bed and pulled up the blanket. She was lying flat, staring straight upwards. 'See you in the morning,' he said, and turned off the light.

She didn't seem tired at all. It was probably silly to not just let her come out and play, but he didn't want the other two seeing and thinking it was OK for them to do it. Squinch couldn't trust them to not get lax and risk losing her. They'd already fucked up with her sister.

He went around and checked outside through all of the windows before grabbing a beer and sitting down. The Perpetual Angels ad was still showing. What would happen if he called them as a prank? Told them some ridiculous story that a man was after him and he needed help. Would they fly in with white robes and crosses to exorcise the demons? He chuckled to himself, imagined rolling some religious freaks, sending them fleeing down the streets, barefoot and screaming, back to their churches or phone banks or prayer meetings. It would probably play better if Felda called them, though. Or Ini, though that would just be too much. Maybe he could set them on that Escalante creep that tried to buy them off. He wondered if they could trace the phone line.

Squinch pulled open a random page in *The Loop*. It was the *Anti-Obits*, a series of short items on people who'd died but then reappeared afterwards. The senator who blew his brains out. A kid who fell down a well. A woman who bled to death after getting run over by a train. An old fart who went out surfing without a wetsuit and returned seven days later. The focus was always on their demise, with little to nothing about their continuing lives. A schoolteacher demonstrating rocketry. A kidnapped paperboy. A baby snatched by dogs. Car crashes, gunfights, heart attacks, house fires. Squinch had definitely seen a number of these previously, yet what was strange was that he couldn't remember any of the details, at least, it seemed, until the moment right before he read over them again. It was like a fresh experience robbed of its novelty.

Then there was a rambling opinion piece about the 'scourge of hooligans' that were

running rampant. Graffiti, arson, wanton destruction of property, intimidating the peaceful citizenry. Joyriding. Thievery. Drinking. Drugging. Sexual profligacy. This crisis has brought out the worst in society, literal cycles of delinquency which are being perpetuated by parents who have given up on parenting, adults who abandon their responsibilities, the utter lack of values, faith, family...

Gawd. How did this get in here? It was the first piece he'd seen with a credited author, one 'Deli Jo Michelangelo.' Had this dope ever been a teenager? They're just having a little fun. DJ was probably just jealous that these kids get to spend the rest of time skipping school and having a blast. Squinch knew he was. Loud car, cherry red. Cruising. Different girl every night. Not a fucking worry. They were definitely lucky bastards. He ripped out the page in case he had to drop one tonight. Behind it was a story titled *The New Economy* which discussed 'belief,' an idea which apparently claimed that if everyone kept earning and spending money just like before the repeating, peaceful society could continue forever. The key was to earn as well as spend, which meant people had to continue to work, not just to produce the goods and services that would be consumed every day, but to 'create a sense of balance, a psychosocial equilibrium where the maintenance of the systems we're stuck with leads to an illusion of function, an illusion which our minds will interpret as neverending productivity and progress.' This dude (must be a man, girls always wanted to change shit) was speaking Squinch's kind of language. It was exactly what he'd been saying for so long: that if everyone quit—

There was a loud *bang* and he heard Felda yell and then running and then another scream and a door slammed. Squinch stormed out, taking the stairs two at a time and throwing open the first door, about to lay into them when he realized the room was empty. Down to the one at the end of the hall, annoyed at having to chase them down. The door was cracked and he kicked it.

'Listen fuckheads, you need to cool—'

This room was empty too. What the hell?

'*BOO!*'

Grick jumped from behind the door, arms and legs held out like in the middle of a jumping jack. Squinch leapt back and had his pistol drawn before he even thought about it. Grick was standing frozen, a big X staring at the revolver.

'Fucking-a! What are you doing? You're going to get yourself shot you pinhead.'

The curtains in front of the balcony parted and Felda slipped out from between them, giggling and pointing. She appeared to be wearing a sheet toga. 'Ohoo, you should have seen your face.'

'I oughta shoot both you dipshits right now.'

'Come on, Dewlap, it was a joke.' Grick has his hands raised and was backing away.

'We're just trying to cheer you up,' said Felda. 'You woke up grumpy and have been on the shit side all day.'

‘Hardy har har. Real fucking comedians. You know, Ini can’t sleep. You’re driving *me* nuts. Why don’t you call it a night? You’ll have the whole place to yourself tomorrow. You keep acting like tards I’m gonna give you bucket duty for the rest of your natural fucking lives.’

Squinch put the gun away and headed back down the hall. He could hear the two snickering behind him. Downstairs he pounded the rest of his beer and threw the bottle through the doorway into the fireplace. It sailed true, a glorious strike that busted into the brick louder than he expected and he immediately felt stupid. He got another from the fridge and slumped into the chair, dragging *The Loop* over in front of him. The economy story continued, now talking about union shops, which he was already familiar with.

...naturally many will not work if they can avoid it, and in the current environment employment appears unnecessary for survival. Some will even claim that it is a detriment to their happiness and well-being, an embrace of an old way that is no longer relevant. Except that it is, that it will always be. Their happiness and well-being is predicated on a society that still requires some labor; the echoes of the endless yesterday are not enough. Whether we like it or not, our lives are wired for work, and similarly we are wired with a sense of fair play. The inequities of the (re)distribution of the labor force will eventually cause crisis. Belief is the answer, but it cannot be arrived at solely by volunteers. The energy strikes are evidence of this, but also point to a solution. We see the proliferation of union shops which operate on the basis of Belief, where the employees are committed to supporting the business by supporting each other, agreeing to divide the labor equally, and enacting mandatory membership to provide consistency. However, these loyal Believers are a fraction of the people, and for Belief (which is really the only viable long-term strategy) to succeed it must be embraced by all. Soon it will become clear that in order to do this, the mandatory membership must be extended to the demand side: to consume at a union shop one will need to work at a union shop. Only members can participate...

Squinch flicked the paper across the room, its pages flapping like a dead bird. What a crock, warping a good idea into some idiotic crap. Trying to tell people how to think would only make things worse. If they wanted it to be how it was, they needed to give everybody more freedom not less. It may have seemed like everything had gotten all messed up, but really it was the opposite — nothing had changed and nobody appeared to realize it nor that all they needed to do was to quit fighting against an imagined disaster. Look at everyone in the house. They all quickly settled back down

to business and now it was just like before — better even. Especially for Ini. The sleep kept her safe and, maybe more importantly, meant she didn't have to remember her work. As far as she was concerned, she'd been on an extended vacation. She was happier, the clients were still satisfied, it was really a fantastic setup. She'd only have to deal with it if Squinch needed to retrain her, in which case she'd of course have to remember, but that had only happened a couple of times. Even for her weekly tests Squinch made sure to rest her first. It actually lessened the barriers between them, improved their relationship. Just the other day they had tried something new and it had not gone well. The poor thing really cried. But now, for her, it had never happened, and for him, it was another boundary learned, to navigate around. And then there were days like today, easy for everyone in the house, unspoiled by inconvenient memories or lingering wounds.

If only her sister were around to enjoy it with. He could see them laughing or playing games or whispering in the corner. Making complete worlds out of nothing. Ini still often showed that youthful magic, but he could tell that she missed her. It was a real loss, for the customers too. Only one Zerang to go around now. Squinch nearly took out Grick for it, for whatever that idiot did. Luckily they were able to pass the removal off on a client, otherwise Grick would have had to go and that might have collapsed the whole setup — once escrow loses faith you're done. So it was back to babysitting, only now it seemed his two charges were the free ones.

A high-pitched scream shot through the ceiling and cut off before it got very far. When it ceased Squinch was already standing, about to go and really give them a reason to yell. He was looking upwards, waiting to see if they'd test him again, when he heard a loud scraping coming from the far room and then a *thud* that reverberated through the whole house. Grick was talking, the words indistinct babble yet rumbling into the kitchen at an unnecessary volume. Squinch headed to the stairs with his hands crushed into fists, teeth clamped. He made it two steps up when there was another sound, this one to his side, *below him*. What the fuck?

Without hesitating he leapt down the stairs and ran to the basement door. His gun was in his hand as he threw it open and hit the light. Ini's bed was empty. He didn't see her. Shit. Squinch rushed down, checked the clasp but it was closed and padlocked and the key was upstairs. She wasn't in there, though. How did she get out? He ran around the space, desperately calling her name, his mind spinning with thoughts of where she might be and what could have happened and all the horrible ways she could be hurt and how did she disappear? He stopped and tried to collect himself. He was standing in the middle of the basement, staring at the bucket, trying to remember what that sound was. He was sure it came from down here. Was she removed? He should have made sure she went to sleep. *The bucket.*

He bounded up the stairs. If this was a joke they were going to regret it. ‘This isn’t funny! Ini!’ Across to the other stairwell and the second floor. ‘Quite fucking around!’ If Grick screwed up again he was through. Felda too. Fucking stupid motherfuckers. He kicked open the first door but there was nobody in the room. He heard the babbling again. It sounded like it was coming from everywhere. He spun around and ran down the hall, this time using his weight to slam into the other door, hoping to smash the dumbshit. It flew open, revealing Grick, alone, sitting on the floor against the bed. His eyes were wide, his mouth agape. His arm was bent strangely, hanging to the side like it was about to fall off, the hand resting in a red puddle. There was green spatter all over his face and body. Squinch reeled around, checking behind him and in the corners and under the bed, then knelt down next to Grick.

‘Oh man, what happened? Who was it? Where are they?’

‘bragha aggh tchk tchk’

‘Shit. Where’s Ini? Where’s Felda? Did someone take them?’ He grabbed Grick and shook him. His arm flopped and a bubble welled up under his sleeve, blood oozing through the fabric. He didn’t acknowledge or react to Squinch or his wound or anything, just stared off at a blank wall. ‘Come on, help me out. Did you see Ini?’

‘rrraaa rrr mmm rrrrrrrrrrr’

Frustrated, Squinch stood up and pushed him with his foot. Grick began to keel over and stopped partway, his body leaning diagonally, senselessly, defiant against the forces of gravity. He continued to ramble incoherence. Who nailed him? How? Squinch looked about the room and felt a slowly forming clarity. Did *she* do it?

‘Felda!’ He crept out the door and began moving down the hall. ‘I don’t know what you think you’re doing. Let’s not make this any worse.’ He edged towards the stairway, craning his head to try to see around the corner but only a couple steps were visible. As he passed by the first room Grick’s babble seemed to echo and hum. He glanced through the doorway and there was a pool of dark liquid seeping out from beneath the closet. He stepped past and looked down the stairs, his gun pointed out in front of him. They were empty. He pulled back and slipped into the room, quickly looping around it, checking again to ensure it was empty. He ended up off to the side of the closet, well wide of the spreading ooze which looked almost black against the aged wooden floor. Something inside was whimpering. He reached forward and pulled on the handle.

The door flung open as if it had been pushed and Squinch jumped back in surprise, aiming his gun and almost firing as the figure of Felda slumped forward onto the ground, pushing through the wet spot and smearing a red streak with an impassive face. The sheet that wrapped around her was

tied off on her thigh in a sopping, bloody knot with a verdant tinge. He yanked open the other door and tore into the closet, searching and calling for Ini. He tossed Grick's shit backwards — ratty shirts that had no business being on hangers, a suit which looked unused and three sizes too big for anybody in the house, a large wicker laundry basket stuffed with hats, a mound of shoes, a mound of toys, a mound of blankets and other bedware in a questionable state of cleanliness covering a stack of nudie mags — flinging it out into a discordant pile around and on top of Felda, all to make sure that Ini wasn't hidden anywhere. He stepped out and paused, looking around nervously, wondering who had done this, where had they gone. Any thought of interrogating Felda was abandoned at the sight of her gurgling crimson bubbles, mouth jawing uselessly like a goldfish gasping on a drying land.

He stepped over her and out of the room. He looked down that hall and through the door could see Grick's feet, twitching irregularly. His prattling moan increased in volume and slid into a whine, an aching bellow that hung in the air. There was a loud crack from the first floor and Squinch turned and made his way to the stairs, scanning the limited view down them with his revolver. How could anyone be here? The house was cut off, set up to be secret, deniable. At the bottom of the stairs he slunk back against the wall, searching the room, looking around the corner, watching for any movement or sign of another's presence. It was empty, seemed as empty as when he was down here before, alone. He felt stuck, unsure where to go first, how to search for Ini, if he would even find her. Would she be like those two upstairs? He thought of his last image of her, staring at him with those big eyes and that frail, straight little body. He thought of it going limp, reduced to a gurgling zombie, and a rage began to churn within him. If she was hurt, if she remembered this... Squinch wished he'd made sure she'd gone to sleep. He looked at the basement door in front of him. Her juice was down there. He could knock himself out and he'd come to in just a few minutes. Then he wouldn't have to worry about himself, and if he found her he could use it to save her too. That was the move.

He looked around again and gently walked across to the basement stairs. The light was still on and— What the? The door was open, the padlock hanging from it unclasped. Squinch glanced behind him and then back at the cage, trying to assess what this meant, to understand how it fit together. If she was already out of there, why was it open? He started down, peeking around to see more of the basement as it came into view. A step creaked loudly and he froze, then realizing his secrecy was compromised rushed down the stairs and backed up against the bars, watching both back up where he'd come from and the rest of the basement that was visible. He couldn't breathe fast enough, yet had an urge to hold his breath. His chest and body and head

throbbled with tension as blood surged through him. It was so quiet, could they hear him? Where were they?

Then blackness. The lights were out. Squinch blinked his eyes — it was so dark he wasn't sure if they were working. He looked in the direction of the stairs, towards the light switch. There was nothing, even from beyond. All the lights in the house must be off. He tried to remember where the breaker panel was. Down here? Upstairs? He was sure he'd seen it but for some reason his mind couldn't remember. No matter, he needed to get the juice first. He couldn't see a thing, but he could follow the bars to where it was. Squinch felt his way along until he got to the gap for the door. He reached out to where he thought he remembered it was and found nothing. He stepped forward and tried again, this time his hand hit something solid and there was a loud squeak as the door moved. There was a whispering, not of voices but of feet, an indistinct shuffling that sounded like it was coming from down here and above him and up the stairs and in the far corner. He pointed the gun aimlessly, continuing to move, being careful to not swing the door but go around it.

The whispering rose, this time it sounded like voices. He waited, listening, trying to locate it. In the dark it was like it was everywhere or anywhere. Squinch wanted to cry out, to make his presence known so forcefully that they would have to respond, be it by sound or action, initiating the escalation of a chase whose muted inaction was leaving him paralyzed and vulnerable. Yet he remained silent, holding out hope that it or they were more lost than him, that they thought they were *his* quarry. If he could get to the juice quietly, there might still be a chance for Ini.

There was a light, up past the stairs, a wavering like from a swinging lamp. He pointed his gun up at the doorway, cocked it, finger against the trigger. He needed to be sure not to fire on Ini. The light flipped away and it was dark again and then it flipped back, stronger than before. The whispering was louder, Squinch felt he could almost understand it. A burning white lit up from his side, a blinding brightness, and he swung around in surprise and without thinking fired at the other side of the basement. The light went away and Squinch's ears were ringing and all he could see was a fading-intense-fading circular afterimage that carried the light wherever he turned. He couldn't make out the top of the stairs. He felt he might have gotten turned around. There was a screeching in his ears as he swung his hand out, feeling for the bars.

'Ini! Ini are you alright?'

His voice sounded thick. He thought he saw the shelves and started moving towards them, his arm straight out ready to feel for the juice. The white light flashed at him from the other side and he pulled the gun around

but something punched him and the gun dropped and he stumbled forward, towards what he thought was a wall but was only air and ground.

The darkness was swirling, like shades of black that were all the same but he could see them twisting and spreading and intersecting even though it was one color. His shoulder felt like pain itself, drilling into his chest through his heart, yet as much as he tried he couldn't move, couldn't touch it, his shoulder or chest or the drill between them. It was just there and it would probably be everything right now if it wasn't for the black that was spinning all over or maybe he was the one who was spinning.

The black shrunk to wavering columns and everything was lit up because it was day now, the sun straight above in a low, dirty sky. It all was on a gray cloud and he was above it, waiting, his arm a nerve twisting itself into new knots forever. A creature was coming down, its white head flapping and swaying. The lips were red juicy and moved towards him and then away. The creature detached its head and placed it onto the cloud, leaving behind the black body. The neck talked to him but the words went someplace else. The head spoke, maybe with its mind, and he responded. The conversation was complete, continued, nothing was understood. The creature was gone.

The creature, a creature, returned with a new head. He knew this. It walked away on the cloud until it was no longer there and when it came back it was headless too, dark and straight. The talk meant nothing but he could not stop. He had something to say though it didn't come out right. A black column listened. It could not help his arm.

A larger creature entered, it was like a man in black, a horse-man whose belly swayed low. It split in three and left its middle by the head. Two bodies. Everything was talking. He knew this. He waited. The new head was back, its own body. Things seemed to be melting, the sky dripping into the creatures into the clouds into each other and then back out again. The black columns not the creatures became lines and wrapped around him but they would not could not touch him because he hurt too bad. He told the creatures about this but there were too many words.

The head and the creatures and the belly began to melt and pull and the head that was a body stretched away however it was stuck. The mass was talking denser and he knew it was power and then the head at the other end flashed and popped and was red like the mouth that had ceased. The head that was a body was barely distinct and roiling around then slowed and the creatures were talking though there was no sound and thus no words. He heard something that he knew, it was the head that was a body and the belly went red like the head and it was quieter still.

Black lines that were not creatures flew back behind the creatures who were one in front of him. The sun was right there, its burning drips flowed

through them, connecting the cloud and the sky and though they never touched they were becoming the same. There was one creature over him then the head that was a body was the body, not over him but at him. It wasn't melting, it was undulating, its eyes throbbed and rolled and switched. He was looking in a mirror, but the reflection was too far gone. He knew this. To the side, to his side, there was a polished stone, the facets gleaming and cracked. It was on his arm, it was sparkling at the nerves, the pain was everywhere. The head that was a body was not a mirror but a mouth, it opened and kept opening until the head and the creatures and everything else folded up inside of it. There was only an open mouth and the stone running the drill through his heart. The back of the mouth was black and the black got bigger until it was the only thing and he could hear it again, clearer now. It was right on top of him and he felt pleased it was not gone and right then the pain would have been all but for that familiar scream which he knew so well.

...spend our time...

Tarry stopped on his porch and took a long view across the neighborhood. He was not interested in the houses per se, but no one should know that. His look passed across them, unable to hold on to them anyway, for despite differing layouts and paint jobs and yardwork all seemed to blend into a similar image, and if one could focus on them individually (a confounding effort because concentrating on one was no different than concentrating on another, and it was thus impossible to keep track of what you were paying attention to) what would be seen was reflections and permutations of the same elements: colors swapped, a facade mirrored, a nondescript bush exchanged for nondescript lava rocks or a nondescript patch of lawn, the raised square on a garage door rotated to a diamond. They were shallow novelties, an effective camouflage used not so much to hide than accentuate any dissent, to hold in relief those irregularities which the peeps longed to notice. Or to mask secrets known but never admitted, whose shame followed not from their existence but their expression, their exchange. Part of this, too, were the identically-sized windows, half-obsured by unnoticed treatments, looking into indistinguishable, vaguely familiar interiors. Tarry found a way to pause at their glass cloaks, his true target, showing attention to their invisibility. There were peeps everywhere, peeking, sneaking glances. How did they like to be looked at? He'd only gone over to pick up a couple videos, same as every day. The door was unlocked. He didn't hide in the shadows. He was standing proudly on his porch holding the tapes in plain sight. They likely still thought he was stealing, were judging him a criminal. The nosy peeps probably didn't even realize Darren was gone, wouldn't even bother to step out and investigate what they thought they saw. They didn't know a thing. And, of course, the very act of exposing himself watching was also a deviance, though only because of its duration, which he lengthened to ensure

they understood. It was too cold to be standing outside but he'd show them there was no scandal here — if that's what they wanted they should look someplace else. Tarry straightened his back and spread his shoulders, took a deep breath. His lungs flinched at the cold and he started to cough, forcing him to stiffen his gaze while he tried to suppress the convulsions. Little puffs of steam burst out from his mouth, evidence he couldn't hide. When his breathing finally calmed down, or when he felt like another big breath was due and didn't want to risk it, or at least when he felt like he'd stood there long enough to prove something, Tarry did a final smooth scan along the entire panorama of the street and, seeing not a single living soul, turned to unlock the door.

Vira was in the kitchen finishing the dishes. He called out to her that he was back and went into the TV room. One tape he hid on the bookcase shelf, behind a row of half cookbooks and half biographies, shiny, colorful spines that looked pristine, opened once or probably not at all. At this point, that is — many of these Vira had definitely read since, giving him the lowdown on an aging celebrity's reminisces of their dalliances from decades ago, or running by him a new dish which might be workable with a few substitutions, or reciting some earnest philosophy about success or eating or life that seemed at once prescient, dated, and completely inarguable. It was the traditional spot for the tape, not really a secret but hidden nonetheless, so that Vira could look and ponder without spoiling herself, building up a bit of suspense for the evening, something for them both to look forward to: He to reveal his selection, laden with unspoken meanings and hopefully rousing a bit of excitement. She to accept it, perhaps finding the meaning and excitement as much in the reveal as the revelation. Today it was a horror flick, actually a sequel of something which they'd seen before, which he remembered as being more gruesome than scary but with a good sense of humor. Laugh and squirm and cuddle, that was the menu for the evening. Time would tell if it he got the recipe right.

Tarry clicked open the other video's clamshell and slid it into the VCR. He put the remote controls on the coffee table by the couch and the case under a pillow. At the front window he pulled the cords to ensure the drapes were closed completely, then folded them across one another to block out any sliver of gap. On the way to the kitchen he glanced at the pipe resting on the table, felt the typical urge to have another smoke, an urge which he knew to put aside. In the doorway he watched Vira as she laid out a towel then a tray and put paired plates and silverware and glasses on it.

'Almost ready, V?'

'Almost. Just setting up for lunch. How was it outside?'

'Same — cold, quiet. Nobody admits to being around. Other than Darren we might have a full neighborhood and not even know it. Guess I

could sit in front of the window all day and see who sticks their head out, or be a friend and go around knocking on doors—'

'I wish you'd quit saying that. You know it's not safe.'

'I'm only talking.'

'Well it's not funny. Hearing you say it every day makes me worry that one of these mornings you'll get a whim and actually do it.'

'I don't say it every day...'

 Before Vira had a chance to respond, Tarry turned serious, genuine, and with eyes piercing through the back of her head, intense enough to be felt and impel her to turn around and almost drop the bread when she saw his heartbreaking gravity, said: 'You know I'll never leave you. I'd never risk that. Never.'

Vira turned away and busied herself getting two cans from the cupboard, putting a frying pan and a pot on the stove with the kettle, checking the butter dish, carefully folding napkins...

'Soup and grilled cheese for lunch?' he said. Vira nodded without looking at him. 'Well, when you're ready the movie's set up. I'll be waiting in there.'

He passed by the pipe again without a thought and sat down on the couch. After the light of the kitchen the room seemed dark, moody. He turned on the television and started the movie, letting it run through the opening boilerplate of warnings, the screen's radiance pushing at the dimness. Hopefully he hadn't messed things up. Usually he didn't let himself get so heavy, since it reminded her. He'd just gotten caught up in the moment. A white-on-blue rating message flicked off and he hit pause, causing jagged diagonals of static to appear, a motion blur across the plain blackness. Craning his head back he looked towards the kitchen, but couldn't see her. The kettle started to whistle and she appeared, approaching the stove, a hand to her face. Tarry turned back to the TV, embarrassed by his intrusion. He picked up the remote and counted the buttons, read their labels, traced out their demarcations. There was a lot of unused space. He looked over at the VCR which had many more controls, imagined how they might all fit onto the remote.

After a few minutes, Vira came in holding two steaming mugs, smiling. She didn't seem upset at all. He had already put down coasters and she placed the drinks on them. The soft smell of warm cocoa wafted in the air. She sat down next to Tarry, pressed up tightly against him, grabbed his hand in both of hers.

'What are we watching?' she asked.

Tarry reached under the pillow and touched the box. 'Do you want me to just tell you?' She looked up at him and they knew the answer but she shook her head anyway. He pulled his hand back out and hit play, then placed it on top of the other three. The static scratched and spun away, and with a bit of a warble the opening music started and before the credits had

begun she knew exactly what it was. The one about the lovable loser and the impossible girl who could never end up together but somehow do. Plenty of denial and heartbreak and defensive wit along the way. They'd seen it before, plenty of times, but it had been a while. Vira squeezed him and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and turned back to the movie.

They watched it together, the glowing screen performing its magic transportation away from everything, the room and the daylight and the cold outside still there but flown away, the two of them floating alone, drawn into another world, unaware of time. She leaned into him, hooking his arm and pulling it tight, tilting her head. He finished his chocolate and had some of hers. Sometimes, out of the corner of his eye or when he glanced at her, face flashing with the rhythms of the movie's flicker, he could see her smiling. Not a smile of happiness or humor but of anticipation. At some point, maybe around the first distress, or perhaps flowing from the girl's exuberance, Vira began to rub Tarry's leg. His arm stretched across her shoulder, slipped beneath her shirt. Gentle strokes synchronized to their shared chronology. He turned to her again and she lifted up and kissed him and he kissed her back. They did not part. They kissed for ages, love then passion then deeper, lost completely to one another. She straddled his leg, rising over, pressing down on him, pressing their bodies together. He held her, grabbed her, head and body and ass. Tongues intertwined, played, licked, explored. The movie receded, no longer of importance. They saw, heard, felt only each other.

He traced her silhouette with his hands, moving in unison, up the wide reach of her legs and circle of her hips and softness of her body, a form he knew perfectly yet which still seemed to hold within its familiarity undiscovered pleasures. His hand slid between her thighs, finding a resistant pressure of desire, a fight for control that quickly subsided as the crease relaxed and he moved his hand up into its delicate terminus. He ran his fingers across the tightness of her pants, feeling for hints of her veiled biology, furrows and lobes and hair and holes hidden beneath layers of fabric whose denial of their existence now seemed charged with their secrets. Vira moved with him, rocking, kissing, pulling his shoulders, feeling under his shirt, her hands slightly cold against the immense heat of his skin. She lifted his hand to her chest and fell into his grasp. Her own hand went down into his crotch and he squirmed, having no way to protect himself. Through her shirt and the rough laciness of her bra he held her. She ran her fingers over him and entangled their legs. Each of them trying to manage too many limbs and digits and lips and touches and thoughts and it all collapsed to him squeezing her boob and she suckling at his ear.

Then Vira whispered something to him and began to tug at his shirt. He went to work at her buttons and after a bit of focused effort and giggling and non-progress they switched roles, quickly disrobing themselves down to

their underwear. From the TV Tarry caught a glimpse of a familiar ethnic joke but it passed by irrelevant, without a laugh. His wife stood above him and unhooked then slipped off her bra casually. He watched, captivated, as the breasts released from their buttress and pulled towards him, pendulating slightly as Vira tossed her clothes away. He reached under his belly and felt himself, working his excitement into his dick and balls and then, as another vector of stimulation, licked his finger and tickled her nipple. She squealed and pulled away. He leaned forward and let his hand move down to her waist, gently grabbing her flesh and pulling her towards him, meeting with an open mouth that just moistened nub, licked and nibbled and held tight against her teasing resistance. Then he switched to the other side and sucked hard, devouring her while he continued to massage himself and she held his head and ran circles through his hair.

A hand moved under his chin and around his neck then pushed him away. Tarry fell back into the couch and Vira collapsed onto him, kisses across his chest, his nipples, his stomach. He closed his eyes so as to not see her against his big, sagging gut, just feeling her touch as the delicate lips traveled randomly over his body, their next target a mystery whose surprised pleasure overwhelmed the contours they uncovered. He felt her hands on him again and mumbled non-words to which she replied with an longing groan and slipped under his briefs. Tarry could feel her cupping and squeezing and playing, at first thrilled then increasingly anxious as he felt his limpness going nowhere, and when she pulled on the elastic and dropped her head down he reached under her armpits and lifted her away. He lay back on the couch lengthwise and pulled Vira on top of him. Her tits and lips and body pressed into him, and as they kissed he slipped a finger along the buttliness of her panties and stretched all the way around to touch deep on the inside of her thigh. She shifted and twisted but the distance and angle were all wrong so he switched to the front and worked his hand between them, reaching straight down and as if by instinct in one movement sliding right past her underwear and across her vulval mound. He retreated a little, pulling his finger across her lips and humid hair. Vira dropped her hips into him and the dampness gave way to a wetness and he was inside of her, at first still from the suddenness then initiating a rhythm. As his pace quickened her kisses stopped and she lay against him, moving as if by compulsion, following a primal urge. He added another finger and a thumb for her button and his focus was completely given over to this claw, moving with and against her in just the right proportions, listening with satisfaction as he pincered her towards a crescendo.

But before she climaxed, Tarry's hand began to ache and stiffen and he pulled back, leaving her moaning with want. His other hand didn't have the coordination so instead he tried to sit them both up but the weight was too

much and he had to coax her off and roll himself up to a sitting position. She was standing in front of him, running one hand across her breast and another along her hip, her scent everywhere. He whipped her underwear down and ran his nose across her pubic hair. She let out a playful yelp. With a wrestler's embrace around her waist and leg, he slid her onto the couch, his face at her groin. She shifted and said something annoyed and there was a banging next to him. He looked over to see the tape case lying next to the mugs and behind that two lovebirds in a car, haltingly about to kiss. *Prudes* flashed through his mind and he turned to his wife and pressed his mouth into her pussy. He knew her taste well, a tingling saltiness and hint of soap from this morning's shower. Tarry kissed and licked, her juices and his saliva mixing and spreading all across his face. He teased her hardness with a swipe of his tongue or a brush of his nose or a tiny kiss, pulling away after a touch, intentionally denying his attention while he explored the rest of her womanhood. Finally Vira pulled his head down and raised herself into him and he obliged, sucked and licked and flicked and swirled her erection and fingered her too. He moved faster and she began to cry out, insistent voicings of desire and joy. Her tone changed as did the movement of her hips, and he fell into sync, forcing himself to maintain pace through the near cramping of his mouth when she suddenly clamped her legs down on him and he couldn't breathe, writhing against her like a collared animal trying to break free while she thrust and held him tight with her unrestrained ecstasy.

Tarry lay on his back, panting, his face raw, her smell in every breath. His head flopped towards the TV and the movie seemed wrong — a scene he didn't recognize, the people like strangers. Before he had a chance to regain his bearings Vira was on top of him, kissing all over him, pressing her tits into his mouth, rubbing his crotch. She mumbled to him, words of affection and direction. She slid down his body then pulled off his underwear and took him in her mouth. Tarry closed his eyes and felt her surround him, tingles of stimulation running through his loins, a surge from within. But he remained soft, imagined her chewing dough, and his moment of confidence and vigor trailed away.

He let her work on him, thinking about her swollen breasts and sopping cunt all over him, then letting random memories of naked women and porno mags and fantasies run through his mind. He caught on an image of Vira from when they first met, slim and enticing and innocent, felt the sexual charge return. However, when he leaned over and saw her lifting his balls to her lips by his penis, the deflated cockhead flopped to the side, he knew it wouldn't happen. It rarely did. With a sigh he rubbed her head and pulled her up and gave her a kiss, his deepest kiss, and hugged her tight. Then he told her to wait and she nodded and he went off to the bedroom.

He came back wearing the harness, the protuberance sagging under its own mass. They had originally bought it for her when she was a bit lighter than now, part of a failed bit of experimentation, but he was still able to stretch into it, the straps and his bulk straining against one another, the apparatus absorbed into his flesh. Vira was standing behind the couch, leaning on it with her legs wide, waiting. One hand was down in her privates, the other squeezing her nipple. The TV was flashing, creating strobing shadows that made her face look otherworldly. She watched him and said just the right words and he came up from behind and entered her. He worked a few slow pumps, then quickly ramped up to a vigorous tempo, grabbing her big hips and jamming the tool in and out of her. Vira was calling to him, pleasure and need, orders to sustain. Tarry kept going, even as his body tired and his breathing thickened. Her skin became tighter, slicker. He rammed and gripped her then was leaning on her and finally had to stop in the middle of her escalation, stumbling off to slump down on the couch.

He was panting and sweaty and spent. In front of him the movie credits were rolling across the screen. Then they were gone, replaced by his wife, staring down at him with a face of unfinished business. She fell to her knees and kissed the dildo, licked it up and down and then paused with a longing gaze into his eyes before she slid her mouth over the top of it. He felt her playing with his real member, rolling his balls in her hand while she fellated the strap-on. He wasn't anxious anymore and it felt good and he let her go on, lightly guiding her head while he caught his breath.

Then Tarry guided Vira onto her back, lifted her ankles up onto his shoulders and looked her over. The TV had turned blue while the video rewound, giving her face and skin an ethereal quality. Her arms were back and her chest had turned into oddly enticing puddles of breast. The hair between her legs glistened and in the shadows he could just see the ripple of flesh that she was offering to him. He moved forward and stuck the penis inside of her. Her moans were louder than before, filling the room. He paced himself, working slow and deliberate, making every inch of every stroke felt. Eventually he began to quicken and there was a tingling around his face that ran down his chest and through his center into her. He felt his excitement grow and with all the thrusting couldn't tell and thinking it might actually be time he reached down but he could feel that he was just slapping against her uselessly. So he pulled his hand up and wrapped it around her leg and pulled her tighter and kept going at it.

Upstairs, in the spare bedroom, Tarry flipped through the car magazine, skimming the details about a model update for this year. Despite how many times he'd read it the information never seemed to sink in. The acceleration times, the wheelbase, gas tank capacity, a long-winded commentary about

the interior, pontifications on how this will fare in the current economy, little snipes at minor flaws, bigger complaints brushed aside because it was just fun to drive. He'd seen it before, but it all seemed new. Or, at least, a new variation on the same theme. Dozens, hundreds of reviews and articles had blended together to form a vague average which this was both a component and descendant of. The pictures he definitely remembered, though. The shape of the headlights. The flare of the fender. The location of the tailpipe. The exact camera angles and backgrounds. They were perhaps the only real confirmation he had already read this. He closed his eyes and turned the page, saw the image of the car driving around a bend. Then he opened them and saw the same image. His mind began to wander, trying to locate when he had seen this last. It existed absent any external anchor. He looked at the words, read them individually but found he could no longer pull them together to form complete thoughts or sentences.

Tarry closed the magazine and put it on the pile. He leaned back in his chair and puffed his pipe. The sweet, rich smoke filled the air. He was drowsy, as he always was this time of day. It was time to himself, when Vira left him alone to do what he wanted. Which was mostly read old magazines and try not to doze off while he waited for dinner. He'd made an effort to pick up a hobby, and still would occasionally play around with sketching landscapes, but he couldn't stand having to start anew every day. She had a fundamental patience and tolerance that he lacked. Her needlepoint was a tapestry completed across time, in her mind. He might remember what he had accomplished, but if he couldn't hold it anymore it was as if it never existed.

He got up and went to the closet. Picked a box at random and opened it on the bed. There was a baseball glove holding a couple balls and some folded up ribbons. A bunch of baseball cards had spilled all over the bottom. A trophy was wedged in, holding up a stack of magazines. He pulled one out. It was one of Proddy's from when he was young. Sports and camping, hobbies, role models, ads for bodybuilding or pranks or utility knives.

A ray of sunlight found a gap in the blinds and flashed in Tarry's eye. Wincing, he leaned away, then moved his head back and forth to see if it would repeat. He made it through a couple cycles before getting hit again. He went up to the window and pulled on the slats. The sun was low on the horizon, the color of an overripe yolk. Down in the yard he saw the doghouse, wondered once again about Sir Hairy. Disappeared as well. It was like a goddamned curse. It was Proddy's dog, he should have been taking care of him. Damn that kid. How did he get himself so screwed up? How could he do that to his mother? And now he was who knows where, leaving her all alone. Tarry leaned his head against the wall, balled his hand up and reared back but when he brought his fist forward only lightly tapped the

surface. If only Proddy would call, just once. Or Tammynn. Where did the dog go?

Vira called up from downstairs. Dinner was almost ready. 'OK!' he hollered back. He sat in a chair and finished his pipe and composed himself. Then he went to the bed and threw the magazine in the box, loosely put the lid on top, shoved it next to the bed. He left the room and went across to the bathroom. When he came out he casually glanced down the hall, in the gloom saw the pink script *T* hanging on the far door and shuddered. Wished he'd never looked back.

Dinner was a stir-fry with rice. As they ate they talked about their day. She told him about the section she had embroidered today, getting up to retrieve it and show to him. He told her about the articles: cars and baseball and pitching a tent. She perked up at that latter one, but he avoided elaborating. He got a second helping and she recounted what happened in her soap. Some guy Jarren controlling a town. He listened without understanding, nodding along with the singsong of her voice as she buoyantly gossiped about the day's drama. When she was through they moved to the final question of the evening.

'So, what will we have tomorrow?'

'Well, we could have steak.'

'We just had that tonight.'

'Yeah, but it was sliced up. And not with potatoes.'

'Too much red meat. Let's have something light. Maybe salad?'

Tarry scrunched his face. 'What are we, rabbits?'

They looked at each other and started laughing.

'Taringer Dowell Fulling, you're horrible.' Her eyes gleamed and then she continued. 'How about spaghetti? I'll make that cheese bread you like.'

'Of course you will. Sounds great.'

'OK, spaghetti it is.'

Vira stood up and collected the plates and took them to the kitchen. He followed her, coming up behind and giving her a soft kiss on the nape of her neck. She leaned her head back and he grazed her temple and her waist. Then he returned to the table and sat down.

'Well, I guess I'll go upstairs until you're finished up.'

'Please don't go,' she said without turning around. 'I don't like to be alone at night. What if the power goes out again?'

'That's all over now, but I guess I'll stay. Do you want me to help with the dishes?' He picked something out of his fingernail. Mouthed her next words as she spoke them.

'No, just talk to me. Tell me a story.'

'I've already told them all.'

'Then tell me again.'

The book was already on the table. Tarry pulled it over and opened it to the front, looking through the contents. He found a good one and flipped to it. He started reading.

'The Star-Child. Once upon a time two poor...'

When Vira was finished cleaning up she opened a bottle of wine and brought it with glasses to the table. He passed the book to her and she read for a while then passed it back to him. They continued to read and listen, finished their glasses and filled them again. When at last he turned to the final page he looked up to see her watching him, eyes heavy, intent, peaceful. He reached out for her hand and held it and waited for a while before finishing the story.

Tarry and Vira were sitting on the couch, watching the movie. Vira was cuddled up against him, wrapped up in a blanket, her head nestled on his chest. His arm draped over her, rising and falling with the slow rhythms of sleep. He was himself fighting to stay awake. His legs stretched out in front of him, resting on the coffee table. Next to them was an almost full bowl of popcorn and two empty wine glasses and, further away and lying on its side, his pipe. The movie was not as good as he'd hoped, pretty awful actually. Its humor was silly, not wry like the first one, and the effects were really cheap. Of course it wasn't scary either. Tarry was working to keep his eyes open while a girl ran through her school, searching for a friend who she didn't realize had already been decapitated. Pretty soon she'd find her head and he wanted to at least stay up for that.

She ran down the hallway, opening up one classroom and calling for her friend before moving across to the next. She opened up a door and the room was empty and when she closed it the killer was behind and set an axe right down through her head. Tarry jumped and kicked his feet, knocking the glasses to the floor and spreading popcorn across the table and sending the bowl into an irregular spin, wobbling near the edge and then back again. Vira shifted and drowsily asked him if he was all right. He could only manage a whimper. Something was stabbing through his shoulder into his jaw, pulling at his chest. He was breathing in shakes. He tapped at Vira to get her attention. She rolled slightly and settled. He continued, more insistent. She lifted her head sluggishly and then the signals — his shaking and tapping and panting and whimpering — collapsed together and she was turned around and in his face, calling his name and freaking out. She moved all over and screamed and held his face and cried out for help. Tarry watched her desperately, wishing she would stop for a second and look into his eyes, hear that he was trying to talk to her, to tell her what she needed and what he wanted to say. But all that spoke was the pain and it was spreading, deep and unbearable and indecipherable and forever. She couldn't hear and had fallen

onto him, sobbing and just as useless. On the table the bowl vibrated and tittered to a standstill and further back the television continued its flashing onto their hurting, shaking, petrified bodies.

...had something to say...

Tommy bounded down the stairs two-at-a-time in loose, almost careening drops that glided him over the steps without impact or sound. His hands were held out for balance, shoes in one, the other ready to grab the railing at the landing and swing him around and into a silent slide across the floor towards the kitchen. In there the only light was the dull glow of the microwave's clock, showing around the same time as always. It was super early but Tommy still needed to rush. By feel alone, he slipped on his shoes, pulled down the straps, pegged one pants leg, grabbed a package of toaster pastries, and carefully went to the front door in exaggerated, soft strides. At the door he eased the deadbolt free and patiently opened it, skulked outside, then with an even greater deliberateness and soft touch, closed it behind him.

Already having forgotten waking up, the just departed interior of the house fading into the vague haze of his repetitious memories, he zipped up his jacket, put on his gloves, hopped off the porch and ran back around to the side of the house, confident in his steps despite the dim moonlight. He felt around for the bikes and disentangled his from the others. Then he tossed off the newspaper bags, wheeled around to the front, kicked the pedal around then stepped up onto it in one automatic motion. The bike lurched forward across the yard and over the driveway, past the same thick pair of unfolded newspaper blocks with their same old stories in the same places, waving back at the front door which now might be open with his mom standing in it, having missed her chance to slow him down with a hug or promise of a handmade breakfast so that she could delay and plead with him not to go, never looking back to actually see and riding out into the street, pedaling hard with one hand on the handlebars and the other holding the pastries which he ripped into with his teeth as he made his way alone through the gloomy, cold neighborhood.

Other than the streetlamps, whose unvarying regularity of pattern and hue became as unremarkable, as unnoticeable as the darkness, or the stop-lights, wasting their clockwork precision on abandoned, faraway intersections, or the moon and stars, a forgotten cosmic background that offered little in the way of useful illumination, the only light that Tommy saw as he rode through the streets, past houses and storefronts and murky parks, along the edge of downtown and across the drawbridge and railroad tracks, into the run-down brick-built oldest part of town, was the radiant beacon of the *Circle's* buildings, more a halo rising high up in the chilly mist until its obstructions passed and the white-hot beams emanating from its windows came into view and cut through the black air as charged indications of activity and life. Nearby, along different routes, some shorter or safer, were other competing sources of ceaseless light — gas stations and convenience stores and businesses worried of break-ins and homes with porches left lit due to carelessness or fear — however Tommy had learned to avoid these, to follow a path as shadowed and dark and insignificant as possible so that the resplendence of his destination, as he approached and when it finally appeared, was maximized. The road sloped up and he stood on the pedals, lowering his head and pumping to get past the short, steep incline, and when it leveled out and he looked up again his view was completely filled by the two tall structures, equal in height and aglow as if within their encompassing bubble daytime had already arrived. High up on the left side building — the printing wing, three stories tall but internally consisting only of two — backlit in orange, was a large version of the newspaper's fancy nameplate: **The Times-Circle**

Tommy rode around the side of the publishing wing, past the back lot where a handful of cars had filled up the closest parking spaces, back between the wings to the loading dock at which a half dozen vans emblazoned with the paper's logo were lined up. He steered between them and the building to park his bike, a spot out-of-the way and inconspicuous so as not to draw complaints from some of the more cantankerous workers. When he stepped from between the vans and headed to the publication entrance he heard a dull knocking and turned around. A window rolled down and the saggy, unshaven face of Grufford Mastid stuck out, the stub of a cigarette hanging from his mouth.

'Hey buddy, watcha doin'??'

Tommy gave him his pat rejoinder: 'I'm apprenticing under Mr. Cogmash, helping him set up for today. What are *you* doing?'

As usual, Grufford was taken aback and stammered something about today's crossword puzzle. Clearly a lie since it was far too dark to see anything. Tommy neither knew nor cared to find out what actually was happening in that van, ever. He turned and started walking away.

'Hey! Printin's in the otha way.'

Tommy waved a hand and kept going, knowing he wouldn't hear from Grufford again as long as he didn't look back or say anything else. He hopped up the stairs, skipping every other one, and went inside the building. In the breakroom a short woman with puffy curls of brown hair and a long, loose-fitting sweatshirt was making herself a cup of coffee.

'Hi Miss Versie,' said Tommy as he pulled off his gloves and jacket.

'Good morning Tom.'

'Have any problems clearing things out today?'

'Nothing other than the usual. Dell and I have got our system pretty well down. Most of the ones that freaked out are gone which makes it a lot easier. Flake Cogmash could be a real terror...'

Tommy went over and poured himself a half-cup while she went on about the old printer, a story she had told him many times. She stopped when he started dumping sugar into his coffee, giving him an admonishing look as from a mother to her patience-testing child. Sheepishly he put the sugar away and got the milk from the refrigerator and filled the cup the rest of the way to the brim. Miss Versie continued on about Cogmash's antics and he mixed his drink and sipped it. It still needed more sugar. He resisted an urge to spit it back out and quickly swallowed, grinning and nodding like he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

'Is Gruff still out there?' Miss Versie asked.

'Yeah, but he's not a problem.'

'If anyone should get removed it ought to be that creep.' She immediately looked down at her cup and turned it in her hands. 'I didn't mean that. What a horrible thing to say. Nobody deserves that.'

'It's OK,' said Tommy.

'No, it isn't. Do me a favor and forget you ever heard that.' She smiled and stood up. 'Come on, it's time to get to work.'

Tommy walked up to the assistant editor's desk and handed him the number. The tall, balding man snatched the index card from Tommy's hand and checked his book and then the pocketwatch sitting next to it.

'What's this? It's barely been two minutes.'

'It was a short story, Mr. Stickle. She finished and hung up.'

'We're supposed to get at least five minutes for every one of these.' He held up his hand and stretched out his fingers. 'Five minutes. Two minutes is barely enough to get past the lede. We're not running a tabloid here, kid. What happened?'

'I-I guess it was just ... short ...'

'No, Sheet! What happened in the story!'

Miss Versie leaned into the aisle, a phone cradled in her shoulder and typing like mad. 'Ease up, Purse. Sometimes it happens.'

Mr. Stickle held up a finger at her and looked at Tommy expectantly.

‘There—’ Tommy paused, making sure he was thinking of the right one. ‘There was an old lady who was surfing and drowned, but then came back and is surfing again.’

Mr. Stickle threw up his arms. ‘Sheet! Haven’t you ever heard that one before? That is *not* a two minute story. That is not even a five minute story. Why are you even here if you let crap like this happen? Here, take this and call them back and get our five minutes! Better yet, ten minutes! I don’t want to see your stupid blank face again until ten minutes are up!’

A hand reached in and grabbed the card from Mr. Stickle’s hand. Tommy looked back and saw Miss Versie move in front of him.

‘Percy Stickle! You should be ashamed of yourself. Why don’t *you* call them back and *you* handle it? It’s not like you’re doing anything important right now anyway.’

Mr. Stickle’s face was dark red, like he had been holding his breath and was about to pass out.

‘No,’ continued Miss Versie, pulling the card back, ‘on second thought, maybe it’s better if you don’t. I doubt you could get two minutes of material from a thirty minute call. Why don’t you just keep watching your clock. Get Tommy a new number and I’ll deal with this, if I have the time. Though,’ she patted Tommy on the back, ‘I bet I get nothing more out of it than he did.’

Tommy heard some clapping behind him amidst the clacking of typewriters. Mr. Stickle snatched up a new card, scribbled in his book, and handed it to Tommy while giving Miss Versie a nasty glare. She winked at Tommy and he turned and walked down the aisle, feeling everybody’s eyes on him, self-consciously trying to hold his face blank and not-blank at the same time. Behind him he could hear Miss Versie, still snippy: ‘Here, chief, I need a new card too...’

At his desk, Tommy took the page from his last call, planning to take it over to Miss Versie, however when he looked down at the scribbly mess he just folded it in half and put it to the side. His typing was getting better but was nowhere near fast enough to keep up with the memorants, so instead he still had to take notes by hand. With the help of others, especially Abna, he’d learned how to write what they called shrtnd. It wasn’t real shorthand, which Abna said was atmtc scrblng n rly hrd, but a system which used abbreviations and dropped words and letters such that, with the help of your memory, you could reconstruct what was said. By now, Tommy was good enough that he could usually keep up with a story and not have to ask for repeats or pauses.

Tommy checked his pencils and paper, then picked up the phone and dialed the number. The line was busy. He looked at his watch and waited

thirty seconds before trying again. Another busy tone so he waited and the third time the phone started to ring then picked up.

‘Hello?’

‘This is Loop 547,’ said Tommy.

‘OK, that would be ... manual.’

Tommy looked down the code sheet prepared by Clent. ‘Film,’ he said. He moved his pencil across the sheet to the column corresponding to the last digit in the phone number. He read the column header: ‘Tube.’

‘Lead.’

‘Right. You can go ahead.’

The memorant gave a dateline, then started reciting the story. ‘In a horrific daytime explosion, an entire research wing of a university hospital was leveled, removing hundreds including the preeminent expert on zero neurobiology and *Loop* contributor, Bess Caltrop. The source of the blast is unknown, with some witnesses claiming to have smelled leaking gas nearby prior to the collapse while others reported seeing something fall from the sky and strike the building. Those latter accounts fueled speculation that this was an intentional attack, although neither the perpetrator nor motive was clear. Anonymous sources indicate that Caltrop had been under investigation for possibly subversive activities and was receiving funding from organized criminals with known foreign ties...’

The typewriter clacked an unsteady rhythm, rapid keystroke bursts which slowed down when Tommy turned away from his notes to watch his fingers, disrupting the mysterious, instinctual flow which had started to form from muscle memories and untraceable nerve pathways, then slower still when he looked up at the page and read over what he’d typed, surprised enough by his accuracy that he read over it twice, three times to be sure, before returning to his notes and starting again a barrage from whose unconscious chaos emerged a legible story. Sometimes, he would need to fix a typo, marking out the mistake with an ##### or XXXX and handwriting the correction above. He had a dictionary handy but rarely used it, either not realizing he needed to or finding that if he didn’t know the word in the first place his phonetic translation often wasn’t helpful for looking it up. According to just about everyone he had horrible spelling anyway (‘What the hell do kids these days learn in school?’ Mr. Stickle would say. ‘I’m surprised you can read at all if this is what you think words look like.’) so the editors already expected him to have plenty of mistakes and it was better to just focus on keeping up his speed. Not that he was very fast, at least compared to everyone else, but with all of this practice he was getting better, though sometimes it felt like his fingers were tripping over themselves while they tried to keep up with his mind. Despite this, even when he felt like a fumbling mess the letters

managed to come out mostly right. Still, the whole process seemed strange and inefficient: listen to the words (maybe not for the first time) that anyone could understand, turn them into scribbles that only he could read, scribbles to fingerpresses to misspellings that someone else would have to fix into print that anybody could read. It would be better if he could just type directly like Miss Versie, or even better if a computer could be taught to listen to the phone and print out exactly what was being said.

Tommy was just finishing typing the last sentence of a piece about a spate of milk poisonings — with competing viewpoints as to how the illness-inducing substance was being introduced: syringe injections at grocery stores or leeching in from the udder side — when the back of a head dropped in front of him, blocking his view of the page.

‘Heya Shoe, got anything good for me?’

‘Hi Clent.’ Tommy had only a couple more words to type however the dark slick of hair he was now staring at had thrown off his concentration, and he struggled to remember what the next letter should be. He wanted to tell Clent to move, that he was almost done, but instead just stared and waited.

‘Hmmm, I think I’ve seen this before. Thought it wasn’t worth wasting my mind on.’ The head spun around and Clent’s face was right in Tommy’s, eyes bright behind his thick-rimmed glasses. ‘You know, your spelling’s atrocious.’ The same could be said of his breath.

He moved away and started flipping through the already-typed stories that were sitting on the desk. Tommy saw Ms. Barr standing behind Clent, stretching to look at the page in the typewriter. Her lips twisted critically. Tommy tried to ignore her scrutiny and found where he’d left off. As he typed out the final words he forced himself to not look at his hands, maintaining as professional an appearance as possible. When he’d finished he turned to her and smiled sheepishly, then pulled out the page and handed it over.

‘All done? Got any more left? I’m here to help you out.’ She looked at the sheet. ‘Is this real?’ Tommy shrugged.

‘Why you asking him?’ said Clent. ‘You’re the one who should know, seeing how your coffee’s more dairy than cheese. Though you know who else drinks a lot of milk...’ He grabbed his belly and grimaced.

‘That’s not funny,’ said Ms. Barr, who glanced at the cup in her hand and bent down to nestle it into Tommy’s trashcan. The barely-brown liquid rippled precariously above the dry, unsupportive crumples of paper. Tommy folded his notes neatly and laid them carefully in the can, on the opposite side from the cup.

‘I’ve got one more,’ he said, picking up the last of his notes and sliding out from his chair. ‘Let me know when you want me to start.’

He stood on the side of the desk making faltering eye-contact as Ms. Barr sat down and rolled in a new page. She nodded at him and he began to read the story about the building getting blown up. Though he'd done this many times before, Clent's presence combined with his nervousness with talking aloud and difficulty comprehending his own writing caused him to speak haltingly, and Ms. Barr spent more time waiting on him than typing. This created tortuous pockets of relative quiet which focused attention on him as he struggled to form sentences, punctuated by roaring interjections from the typewriter, condensing his stumbling words with authority and efficiency. After the first couple paragraphs, Clent snapped his fingers and when Tommy snuck a glance he saw the tall man waving over Fudlight from across the room. Tommy turned back to his notes (searching desperately for where he left off) and attempted to ignore the new audience member. He was intimidated in many ways by many at the paper, however Fudlight had a particularly strong ability to make him feel like the faker he was. With his no-nonsense habit and unpredictable insights, the mussy hair and sagging suit and unwavering stare, the way he always seemed to be leaning in one direction or another, slightly off-balance or perhaps ready to run at a moment's notice — it was as if he was not quite of this world and thus could see through its facades, penetrating not just Tommy's but anyone's charade and revealing their falseness, leave them reeling in a state of exposed inadequacy.

Tommy tried to not feel the stares on him as he worked through the story, reconstructing words and phrases like a little kid who was still sounding out letters and breaking apart syllables, reading out half or full phrases and then backtracking to start again, adjusting for context which he hadn't recognized or remembered. When he got through the last line — 'With the continued offensive against the knowledge seekers of our world, there are concerns that the full story of our present situation may never be understood.' — he slid the notes back on the desk and kept his eyes on Ms. Barr, who had already finished the typing and was scanning the page for errors.

'Well, man, ain't that the shit?' It was Fudlight, though Tommy didn't dare look up. 'I've heard this one before — you guys remember it? It'll come in for a couple days and poof! It vanishes into the ether. And this ain't the only one. When's the last time we've had anything come back through the loop about the energy strikes? Or The Mysore?'

'We had a story about that two days ago.' A different voice. Tommy glanced over and saw Abna sitting on a turned-around chair. He must have come over with Fudlight.

'That was a pansy job. And have you seen it since? I'm telling you, it's a fu— Sorry kid. It's a goddamned conspiracy. I don't give rat's A what they say happened, the naughts are still around. Faked their own removal and consolidated their power. They're pulling the strings, man. Controlling

the information. Anything that pops up and disappears — that's what we need to pay attention to. If they don't want us to hear it, then it must be important. I'm building a mental catalogue of all these pieces and someday the puzzle will reveal itself. Remember that, kid,' he bumped Tommy on the shoulder, 'in the future, when all this is clear and obvious, you'll be able to say you knew the man who figured it all out.'

Clent was watching Fudlight with a satisfied smirk. He turned to Tommy and told him: 'Nice job with the recording, you put it together real good.'

'Yeah, good work Sheeoot,' said Fudlight.

Abna gave him a nod. He was wearing a shiny blue baseball jacket and a ballcap to match. Tommy pursed his lips to keep from smiling, then smiled. Ms. Barr handed him her typed page and asked him to read it over. Behind her, on the other side of the room against the wall, almost a shadow in front of the windows, Clex Ffst was in a side stance, aiming his camera at them. Tommy lifted the sheet up and hid behind it.

'We won't need to worry about this one disappearing,' said Clent, 'I'm going to memorize it and be a source.'

Fudlight looked aghast. 'You be careful with that. It's dangerous.'

'We all just heard it and we're fine.'

Fudlight pointed to his forehead. 'Here, it's my problem. Here,' he pointed to his mouth, 'it's our problem. There,' he pointed at a telephone, 'it's everyone's problem.'

Clent pointed at his nose and crossed his eyes. Tommy giggled.

'Listen, dude, you let me know if you start adding that to your routine and I'll be sure to steer clear of this place.'

Clent scoffed and winked at Tommy.

'What if there is no puzzle?' Abna asked Fudlight, smiling. 'What if the pieces never fit together because they can't? Because there is no bigger picture?'

'Says the sportswriter. You spend half your time spouting statistics in search of some underlying truth. This is no different.'

'Except I know what parts of my information actually go together. You might end up telling me how somebody slam dunked a home run in the end zone.'

'You just don't see it, man, and you'd do yourself a favor to take this more seriously. We all know there's been attacks on the loop. It could be us next.'

'Oh please,' said Clent, 'we're just an itty bitty paper, and most of the stuff Wendell lets through is just local interest or washed-out versions of these loop pieces. He cuts out anything that he thinks might be a problem. He probably won't even print this.' He tapped the paper in Tommy's hand, and Tommy remembered he was supposed to be reading it over.

'How do you know that the problems are getting cut out? How does Wendell even know what the 'problem' stuff is? Either he's shooting in the dark or is an agent, and either way we're screwed.'

Clent and Abna both started arguing with Fudlight about his accusations. Tommy shrunk away as he tried to focus on the typed story. Towards the end, when it was asking the reader to demand answers, there were a few places where *her* had been substituted for *his*, and *she* for *he*. Tommy pointed this out to Ms. Barr.

'Don't bother about that, I always change the stories that way.'

'But you didn't change it up here, when they were talking about the possibility of a bomber. "...*he could have snuck in easily and would have free run of the entire facility.*"'

'I take care to even things out.'

'*Selectively* even things out,' said Fudlight, breaking away from his argument. 'You manipulate your agenda and invalidate your whole point.'

'You don't even know what my agenda or point is.'

'Sure I do, Hershe. You hide behind a pseudonym pretending that it makes you some kind of clever cultural retort, but you're fighting against the wrong hegemony. Plus your name is stupid.'

'You should be one to talk.'

Fudlight walked over to Ms. Barr and began to shake his finger in her face, telling her that she wouldn't know good wit if it kissed her on the lips. Behind everyone Tommy saw Arsesnob walk in the outside door, heading towards Wendell's office. Ms. Barr and Fudlight were really getting into it and Arsesnob stopped and glared at them. Tommy pointed and quietly made a shushing sound. Fudlight looked over and waved as he continued to bloviate about the difference between liberation and freedom. Ms. Barr was yelling something about his being stuck in the jockstrap of the patriarchy. Abna had his hands behind his head and a huge grin. Wendell came out of his office, stared briefly at the commotion and went over to Arsesnob. The two of them talked and scowled and shook their heads. Tommy pulled Clent to the side, distancing himself from the turmoil.

'So, what should I do about this he/she thing?'

Clent took the paper. 'Don't worry about it Shoe, I'll remember it how *you* wrote it.'

The memorant walked off, holding the page up in front of his face. Tommy slowly shuffled off in a different direction, not looking to see if (but worried that) Arsesnob and Wendell were still watching, heading for an exit from the echoing clamor.

Y o u f o l d i t l i k e S t o p ! W h a t ? Q u i t i t
. Y o u r m e s i n g i t u p . G e t y o u r o w n . F i

n e h o w e s i t g o ? O p e n i t a l l t h e w a y n
o n o t t h a t m u c h t h a n t a k e e a c h c o r n e
r b a c k l i k e t h i s a n d h o l d i t d o w n h e a
r a n d s l i d a c r o s s . S e e ? Y e p . I d o t h i
s a n d N o n o u g S e e i t s a l l c r u k e d n o w
. S o ? I t o l d y o u a l l r e a d y . T h e r o o f
h a s t o b e p r e f e c t o r e l s e i t w i l l f l y
o f f w h e n t h e t o r n e d o h c o m e s

Tommy's fingers moved over the paper keyboard he had drawn from memory. Out in front of him, in the corner of the breakroom, the three Techstech girls were playing and he was intently listening to them talk. He didn't look at them, though, instead focusing his eyes above his hands, following in his peripheral vision that that every letter was correct, that there were no false moves, that his speed kept up with the words whose meaning he barely registered. If he glanced down at what he was actually doing he would slow, and if he glanced away he would lose confidence in what he was actually doing and slow down. The vague non-stare allowed him to settle into a flow that was natural and automatic, as if he had surrendered control to another self.

E k s c u s e m e ? E x c u s e m e ? T o m m y

Huh? He looked up. Dolba was leaning on a table watching him. Her head was cocked and a dark-stained hand was stretched out, waving at nothing. A section of this morning's paper was folded up underneath her like a giant origami.

'Did you want to play? I'm making a paper airplane.'

'That's OK,' said Tommy, 'I'm practicing.'

'Whatcha practicing?'

Tommy smiled sheepishly. 'Typing.'

'Hmph.'

Dolba went back to folding her airplane, squirming her head and body in a mindless, exuberant rhythm. Behind her Cassie was carrying a piece of accorded newspaper which she carefully put down between the edge of a table and a chairback. She picked up another corrugated section and placed it between the chairback and the counter, creating a flimsy bridge. On the other side of the structure, Crolyn was lying on her back with her knees bent. Suddenly she popped up into a back arch, her dress flopping over her head, exposing a bare chest and a pair of pink underwear. Tommy looked away in embarrassment, back to Cassie, who was kneeling on the floor, neatly creasing another piece of newsprint. As if sensing his gaze, she looked up.

'We're building a fort,' she declared, as if challenging him to prove her wrong.

Tommy nodded, raising his eyebrows for effect, but she had already dropped her head and gone back to her work. None of them were talk-

ing anymore and he stared at the array of uneven squares, trying to think of something to type out. The four of them were the only ones in the breakroom, all waiting for Hess and Mangles to finish their meeting and take them to the printing wing. The girls' father — who would chew out anyone who referred to him as anything but Mangles, including (as Tommy once got an earful for) Mr. Techstech — had taken over running the press after Mr. Cogmash was removed. They were always shortstaffed due to removals but mostly because the normal crew was still (and preferred to be) asleep. So he brought his family along, the little girls acting mostly as janitors and supply runners while Hess — who similarly refused being called Mrs. Techstech — kept production moving as Mangles rushed back and forth from layout and flitted about the machines, grousing and threatening and panicking about having no help or appreciation. Hess seemed to know as much about running things as her husband, and it was she who took in Tommy as an assistant, using his help for whatever Mangles was not keeping up with, be it setting up rolls of newsprint or exposing and installing plates or bundling finished papers. By both action and reputation, the sharp-tempered, quick-to-blame and never apologizing Mangles had driven away just about all of the other workers, and Tommy had lasted through a combination of Hess' protective interference, his natural compliance, and Mangles' inborn sentiment that bullying a child would threaten his masculinity. Truth be told, Tommy was actually more interested in learning layout or phototypesetting — or, even better, reporting — but those departments wanted nothing to do with a kid who they assumed would just get in the way of their already blown deadlines, so he stuck with manning the phones and working the presses, happy to be included in any way with the creation of the paper.

Tommy went over to the stack next to Dolba and pulled out a front page. She watched him hopefully as he went back to his seat, her fingers in her mouth, teeth streaked with black. However, rather than play her game he just left the paper folded in front of him, tracing out the print with his finger: the calligraphy of the paper's title, the thin lines separating the text, the bold letters of the headlines. **F I R E D E S T R O Y S H I S T O R I C B A R N E D N A R T O R U N D U C K S F I N D N E W H O M E** Above them, sandwiched between two long bars, was the date: the month and day and year that never changed. They used to keep track of the number of days since it all started and add that to this one to make the date for each new run, but according to Miss Versie there was controversy in the community about whether that was helpful or confusing or if they had even counted right. Now they just printed *Loop Edition* in that space. He pressed his thumb across it, over and over, rubbing it into an indistinct smudge.

There was a sound behind him and Tommy turned around and saw Ms. Dashen stumble to the refrigerator and pull out a carton of milk, then take it to the nearest table and collapse into a chair, wincing and holding her belly. She was young and had fancy hair and always seemed to have a stomachache. She looked around the table and then at the others nearby and when she noticed Tommy watching her gave him a pained smile and spoke.

‘Heya Short Long. Why don’t you do me a favor and get me a mug?’

‘You want coffee?’

She shook her head and Tommy went a grabbed a mug from the cupboard and brought it to her. On its side was printed *World’s Greatest Father*. Ms. Dashen filled it with milk and took a sip, then closed her eyes and rested her forehead in her hand. She let out a groaning sigh. She began to mumble, her voice scratchy and breathy. ‘What was I thinking...when does it end...gotta wait wait wait...’

Tommy wanted to ask if she was alright. Instead he backed away to his own chair, where he sat down and continued to watch her. Even with her face scrunched up and half covered by her hand he thought she looked real pretty. Her lips were bright red and glistened like they were wet, moving slightly as she rambled indiscernibly to herself. Tommy tilted his head to hear better and right then there was a pounding in the hall and a gray streak passed by and with a shoes-on-tile squeak stopped and pulled back. Arsesnob filled the doorway, glowering, tall and straight-backed in his multi-layered suit and wavy slicked silver hair.

‘There you are. We need to go.’

Ms. Dashen jumped and then groaned, stared wide-eyed at the table as she spoke. ‘Just need a little more time, Jerm.’

‘You always need a little more time. Well I’m out of it, having wasted plenty searching for you.’

Tommy slunk back in his chair, eyes frozen on the legendary reporter. He rarely got to see him this close, certainly not when he was angry. Tommy wanted to turn around and start playing with the girls, but he didn’t move, didn’t dare move.

‘Just my luck that I get stuck with a Friday who’s on the perpetual rag.’

‘Such an asshole. You couldn’t even understand.’ She still wasn’t looking at him.

‘Oh I understand, pottymouth. In my day we had a name for girls like you.’

She started to jerk around and caught herself. ‘Please, Jerm, just five minutes and I’ll be better. It always gets better.’

‘Yeah, yeah, heard that before. Why don’t you take the whole day off? Hey Squint! Yeah you, I hear you write pretty good shorthand.’

Tommy’s mouth wasn’t working.

‘Don’t tell me you’re deaf, ’cause that won’t work.’

Tommy managed to shake his head and mumble out a negative.

‘Good — come on, I need someone to take notes for this interview and scrape here needs her beauty rest.’

Tommy fumbled something out about needing to help Mangles.

‘Phhft. He’s got his kids, right?’

Tommy looked back at where he was gesturing. Dolba threw a big floppy airplane that glided right over the top of the fort, causing the roof to shudder perilously. Crolyn sprinted to catch it before it touched ground. Cassie was stuck in a pose of stiff tension, snarling with astonishment at her sister’s impudence.

‘...and Hess too. Heck, she practically runs the place. Listen kid, I don’t care if you’d rather not talk, but we need to go.’

Tommy looked at Ms. Dashen.

‘What, do you need to ask her for permission? She’s not your mom.’

Ms. Dashen tipped her head. ‘Go ahead, Short Long.’ Her eyes followed Tommy as he jumped down and ran over to Arsesnob. ‘Be nice to him, Jermill, will ya?’

‘I promise to treat him like my own son.’

Down the hall, on the way outside, Arsesnob knocked on a window.

‘Hey Wendell! I’m taking Shooter with me on the Gizner job.’

They were almost to the exit when the managing editor stuck his head out of his door and Tommy looked back to see him call out: ‘What about Gravia?’

Arsesnob barely turned. ‘Bah, you can give her to Mangles. Let them whine together.’

They rumbled through the streets in Arsesnob’s car like they were riding in an old, imposing, once-luxurious yacht. The exterior, surely at one time a mirror-like finish over a shimmering bronze base, had faded into a drab sandy beige. Inside it smelled sweet and stale and smokey. The leather seats and console were splitting and peeling, the wood trim scratched and cracked, the floor carpet frayed and dusty. The hood and trunk extended far out from the cabin, a bow and stern pushing off the annoying, encroaching waves of traffic that ebbed and flowed around them. Somewhere deep in the bowels of the vessel the engine strained a lagging response to its captain’s commands, fighting the forces of inertia and drag with a low and distant roar. Even over seemingly smooth streets it rolled and bobbed, and when confronted with rougher seas its attitude barely shifted, tamping any chop into a dull shudder. They lifted, tilted, leaned, crested, dipped, almost ran aground before lifting again, giving Tommy the vertiginous sensation that they weren’t touching the road but were actually cruising above it, separated from the harsh reality

of the cracks, bumps, cuts, curbs, potholes, buckles, tar and gravel and grit by a hydro-pneumatic skin that they hovered across.

When he first entered the car, Tommy had searched in vain for the seat-belt until Arsesnob told him they were 'long gone.' That was the last thing that was said for a while, and Tommy sat in the seat, awestruck and nervous, not quite comprehending the fact that he was riding with *the* Jermill Arsesnob, not quite comfortable riding in a vehicle with no safety belts. If his mom heard about this she would flip. He looked back and forth through the windshield, pretending to be interested in what was happening outside so that he could steal glances at the old man. While from far away he had always given the impression of being vaguely elderly, from close up he seemed comprised of grotesque components, each individually ancient: the thick and creased skin hanging from his cheeks, the massive ears, the bulging, pored nose, the monstrous eyebrows that clung to his face dolorously or bounced around as if springing for escape. Despite the fact that it was freezing outside, Arsesnob had his window rolled down and the heater on full and would wave or point or flick a couple fingers or nod or all of the above to everyone they passed, whether they were walking on the street or in a car or running a store or in front of a house. Even if nobody was there or saw them the possibility was enough for the reporter to send out a cool, effortless acknowledgment of his ubiquitous popularity. Here or there one might get a toot of the horn, responding in kind or with a 'Heyoo!' which caused Tommy to search for the source of the reply, stretching up or turning around in his seat to catch a glimpse of what warranted the special treatment.

Eventually the reporter turned to Tommy and asked him what he was going to take notes with. Tommy's belly knotted up and he didn't know how to admit that in the rush he hadn't brought anything. Arsesnob laughed — the first time Tommy had seen him do so, a back-throated jeer that was simultaneously warm and snide — and pushed him on the shoulder.

'Don't worry about it Shootem, a good reporter is always prepared.' He reached over and popped the glovebox. As if released from being under pressure, a bevy of spiral notepads and notecards and cigarette packs and candy wrappers and pencils and pens came bursting out, spilling onto Tommy's lap and the floor. 'You should be able to find something usable in there. Just don't let me catch you empty-handed again. Hey, hand me one of those packs there. You smoke? You want one? No — well, you got plenty of time to learn.' He pushed in the car's lighter. 'You wouldn't understand anyhow. I started when I was about your age and all it did for the next ten years was make me feel older. Now it does the same, heh heh. No, it's better to wait, enjoy your youth. You'll grow up eventually.' He looked up into the sky, squinting at the sun. 'Or, maybe not...'

The lighter popped out and he lit his cigarette. He took a drag and exhaled without removing it, raising his wrist at a passing truck. 'It feels like this day's been going on forever, like it could go on forever, but it won't. We should be thinking about when this happened, what it's trying to tell us. Half of the country can't make a living. Kids don't have parents anymore because they're too busy working or divorcing or looking in the mirror. Money's worth less. Gas is going to run out. The idiots up top are looking for new ways to ensure our self-annihilation. Computers are supposedly taking over the world. Pretty soon we'll have a bunch of robots doing everybody's job. Not mine though — writing's one thing a computer will never do. They might be taking over the layout and the printing and editing — you know, I hear that soon they'll be automatically fixing spelling and even *grammar* — but you'll never make a machine that can take the facts and information and quotes and write real news from it. Want to know why? Because half of all that stuff is lies. And it takes a human being, with a brain and intuition and skepticism and,' he reached over and gave a couple surprisingly hard raps on Tommy's chest with his finger, 'heart to tease out the essential truth and find the story that people will want to read, that they'll *need* to read.

'The problem is that nobody's reading anymore. Everybody wants to watch their news or listen to it, have it summarized in five seconds or three panels of a cartoon. The funnies are supposed to be funny, not news. Television is good for passing the time, not understanding our world. There's more quality information in the first two pages of one day's newspaper than in an entire week of newscasts. And then there's all you kids obsessing over a bunch of lipsyncing fruits or walking around with your radios plugged into your ears or crowding around a TV playing games. Everyone's checking out, nobody's looking around. And then *BAM!*, it all stops — and rather than take the time to look around and wonder what is going on and how we could make it better when it all starts up again, no, instead everybody's even more wound up in their own little lives, afraid of disappearing or letting their kids out or just giving up, ceding control to those higher powers they're sure are running everything. Or, we get a bunch of opportunist jerks making a power play and giving leftists and unions a bad name, getting everyone to kowtow to them because they've found a way to make us all miserable. The way things are headed, we're going to come out of this worst than we went in.

'Not only that, but while we're screwing around, other countries are continuing to eat our lunch. Think they're boo-hooing about what's the use and things aren't going anywhere and it's somebody else's fault? Uh uh. They were already out there making the games and the radios and the video cameras, mesmerizing everyone and especially all you kids with these screens. You got one of those game computers? Of course you would. But I see you're not glued on your butt in front of it, wasting your life. You're out

here, getting some experience, establishing a work ethic, learning from your elders. Your kind is going to inherit the world. They already were, but when this is over... I'll tell you what, you stick with me and we'll help each other out. Kick out of neutral and leave all these fools wondering why they're still stumbling around in the dust.

'Hand me another smoke. You sure you don't want one? You're smart, Cheroot, save it for the right time. There's a few places where nothing beats it. After a woman? Whoowee. You'll understand. You know how babies are made? Hey, don't look so scared, there's nothing to it. Even a mug like me has been able to enjoy that pleasure quite a few times. Still do. When you're ready for that, I'll get you some smokes. Just do me a favor: don't mess around with girls like Gravia. I'll tell you what, she's a doll, smart as a whip, a real beaut. Doesn't know how to keep her legs closed, though. Gets herself knocked up and picks the worst time to take care of things and now she's paying for it. Typical woman, too, wants everyone to suffer with her. Bah, I give her a hard time but sure knows how to get a story. Give her a couple days and she'll be aching to come back out. You pan out and maybe the three of us can collaborate. You just keep your mouth shut and your ears open and you'll learn a few things.

'Speaking of which, in this interview, you let me do the talking. Just take down everything that's said. Both me and her. They say you're pretty good on those phone loop things so you do this the same way. And when I pull on my eyebrow, like this, that's the most important stuff. Don't miss a word. You got that? Just like this.' Arsesnob turned away from Tommy, back to the road, but kept pulling and untangling the big gray bush above his eye until it stretched out inches from his face. While he continued talking he mindlessly rolled it around his finger.

'This interview is part of a bigger project Wendell and I are working on, about removals in the local community. You know who we're going to see, right? Minda Gizner? Wife of the recently deceased Lark Gizner? The Never-Slip Grip? No? You've got a lot to learn.' He pulled his finger free from his eyebrow, holding it up like a talon. The hair briefly remained as it was, a tubelike curl that slowly broke apart as the strands eased from their absurdly rounded uniformity to settle back to a wiry, expressive chaos. 'Lark is a finger pulling legend: Won thirty-seven straight matches, three world championships, never defeated. Quit after he devastated Flappy Flexmex in a grudge match, leaving Flappy's index finger so mangled that it had to be amputated. Disappeared from the scene after that. Never became a coach, never took any protégés. Wouldn't talk about his strategies or techniques, his training methods, nothing. Not even to me. Jermill Arsesnob. Preminent expert on the sport of finger pulling. Chairman of the World Championship of Finger Pulling held right here in this fair city. Director and curator of the

Finger Pulling Hall of Fame. You ever seen our exhibit in the library? I tried to get Lark to lend some of his memorabilia for that, a championship ring or one of those fingerless gloves with NS on the back. He gave us nothing.

'You ever seen a finger pulling match? Your parents never took you? Raised in the Finger Pulling Capital of the World and without a clue of your heritage. I'll tell you what, to watch two men compete is to observe the very essence of what makes us alive: strength, stamina, nerves, skill, brains. Its a battle of will *and* wits. There's nothing like it. I'm planning to hold the tournament even if summer never comes, though it might have to be a locals-only thing which'll be a golblamed shame. I'll make sure to get you front row seats...'

A: k lts strt w/ wt hpnd, hw L rmvd?

G: dnt no

- u dnt no? anyt?

- mbe dnt mtr cnt prv nthng nw nyhw

- dnt u wnt 2 no?

- 2 lt f u ms ur chns gn 4vr

- hoo lst 2 se hm?

- i ws tho wn i lft he tkng 2 darla fon

- u bk n fnd hm dd

- nvr sw agn

- u nvr acly sw hm dd?

- np

- ws drng dytm?

- mm, i wnt 2 slp n he gn

- so cldv gn ot?

- L nvr wnt ot

- bt cld hv

- hoo nos he dng, i aslp, he brly nythng do w/ me nywy, u rly intrsd y u sk shrf Rufel? dd invsgn nvr sd nythng bt gng ot

- thnk he rmbr?

- if mprtnt sr wl

- nt sr tht, wy u dscrbr snds lk L dd ln, sd

- t is, vry sd

A: lsn M nt pring clct bkrnd. u ms hm?

G: of crs

- wt u ms

- sml i gs. i gt 2 ck 4 mslf nw

- no ida L ck

- ddnt i nly mn i hv 2 ck 4 mslf nw

- b4 he rmvd wt ur tprl dy lk?

- gt up, brkfst, tv, bk, lch, sr hrry bth, hv 2 wsh evy dy, cln hs, - i ht tht, wndr y lps ddnt strt dy ltr, af bg chr dy, wk 2 drty hs evry dy

- hs lk ns

- i no

- wt prt dy invld L?

- bsclly nn, smtm he cm i etn spr n he et w/ me, mslly kpt rslfs

- wsnt lny?

- ftr lng we mrd u get usd 2

- dd he evr mk u ngrly?

G: thts strng qstn

- nt rly i nvr nw hsbn wf hoo ddnt ft, trng no cmplt pctr 4 cmprsn, sm thngs btr nw rt?

G: u wnt 2 no hrt me

- I, dd he?

G: L hd strng hnds, bt, dnt rly wnt tlk bt ths

- u sr

G:

- lts mv on 2 wt lk nw whts dy lk 4 u nw L gn?

- vrydy wk cmpltly slnt, no snrng, n L rstlng rnd blinkt, bt nt lk he gn, stl wrm ws clths still thr flngs plw

- tth flngs?

- mm, thts nt all, n shrt blk brnt no bld psmkr, ddnt wt ws 1st tm, pt rm 4 hm n wrm shrt hrd lmp cnt stnd ttly crpy

- lk gst?

G:

A: u fl hntd?

- L gn J, ths mrng he n bd mch u wr, tmrw i rmbr u tlkng w/ me, ds mmry mk u gst?

- wt u rmbr bt L?

G:

- wt u wnt rdr 2 rmbrr?
- nstly thnk hd rthr vrbdy mv on no thk bt nymr
- dnt thk tru
- he rly prfrd vry1 no fs
- bt ppl wnt 2 fs hs nvr slp grp fngrr plng lgn
- 2 u, he wntd nthg w/ tht, aftr insdnt nthng w/ fngrr jrkn, wsnt 4 u bgng prbly frgtn all
- dnt ngr, hs mprtn hstry u cnt jst frgt
- y nt? vrybdy prt lvs wnt fgtn, dnt thy hv rt 2 rt on strys?
- u cnt chng hpnd, pblic nos L 4 ths, cnt mk go wy, f rd rtcl bt hm gng wnt 2 no
- i see hpng, no mtr i sy wt -- hsbnd or he lzy dd nthng pk ns dy hdlr rd L gznr blvd fgr plr
- thnk ths wy, mst ppls lfs nt ntrstng, i go ot wy ld xtdny lf im fms 4, mst ppl rnt lk y mb frctn pct lf ny1 or abt, nbdy wnt hr brng stf lrdy no, wnt no wn sm1 spsl
- ws prty spsl tm?
- unprld
- mr ntrstng thn nthr brng bs- hsbnd
- rt
- all dl gsp dsprn, mn rmvl, nbdyl rly cr wn rmnd fgr plng
- grtst fng pg wtnd
- wt u wnt 2 no?

::

A: wl 1st thng dd he kp ld stf frm bk thn mbla nts eqpt

G: sr bx grg u wnt 2 lk

A: nt jst yt wt mmrs tm? u rmbrr trnd

- dnt mbr mch wt rp plys wd st up tbl
- u stl hv
- 1 tgs bstd tm insdnt
- ur tlkn bt flksmks
- vrythng prpshn mtch dstd
- pprs?
- pby, i fcsd mshnlly rly brk, trn n2-

- bt strgy wch flm spr ptr?
- dnt no L kpt mslf, ddo thng w/ me i wrstl hm hd prcts vrs grps f i qt
fre jst 1 fngr hed mk cldnt scp ncrbl
- dmnst?
- thnk cnt mbr ws dng me jst vktm
- ha
- no jk hy kd
-
- L bks trn hld dn
- mbr hd hs tm
- scr - me new nt
- hrt?
- qt bks hrt tm lng J no no how jst
- yrs b4 thrt mgc tm
- rnd ll tm gld qt
- we wnt
- bxs? wnt chk?
- sr

‘What you think of that? Did she seem guilty as heck or what?’

Tommy glanced at Arsesnob and nodded cursorily, returning to the notebook and his rush to resurrect from memory each line of the conversation, his notes confounding as often as helping, his panic rising as he felt the details of the interview wither away into a scrambling haze of ambiguity, doubt, and agitation. He’d started just fine but without being able to — or rather being afraid to — ask them to wait or repeat and speak more clearly, he’d begun to slip and then when Arsesnob pulled his eyebrow and then the lady had interrupted him he lost his flow and had to think too much for each word and by then he was only getting farther behind, trying to listen and write things that were hopelessly spreading apart in time until he was no longer following the conversation just catching words and occasionally getting them down in a frenzied haste. And because he had not actually comprehended much of the interview, his attempts to remember it were proving impossible. He had started from the end, with the notion to fix the worst bits first and that he had a better chance of remembering the more recent parts. However, his notes were enigmas, stirring only an occasional recollection and forcing him to step backwards line-by-line in search of familiar context, a process which only scrambled things further.

Arsesnob continued to talk, and though Tommy could sense the old man's gaze upon him he couldn't turn away, couldn't face him nor could spare a second from his task, hoping he might at any moment find that one grounding point of recognition which would align his memories and allow the entire interview to unfurl back into clarity. He read a line then reread it but it was only symbols with no sense. Who had even said this? He found the nearest person mark and counted — Arsesnob. That still didn't help. Arsesnob pushed him, trying to get his attention. If he could just get another minute, he might be able to figure it out. Arsesnob shoved him again, harder.

'Hey, Cheater. That interview was pretty interesting, huh? Did you get it all down, especially that last part?'

Tommy turned to him but didn't look up at his face, staring instead at his collar, at the tiny button holding it down.

'I'll have to show you how to lock someone down with just your finger. If they don't— Hey, you all right?'

Tommy flipped through his notes, searching for *lk* or *lck*. 'I— I, I couldn't...'

The old reporter laughed and reached over, closing the notebook and placing a small sliver object on top of it. 'Relax. Don't get yourself worked up. You know what that is?' Tommy picked it up. It looked like a tiny tape player. 'I recorded the whole thing. Had that right here in this pocket. I didn't expect you to keep up with all that. Heck, Gravia can't either. The sound's not great but you with your notes you should be able to write the whole thing out.'

Tommy turned the recorder in his hand. 'My— my notes aren't so good.'

'Bah, don't worry about it. It'll be close enough. You can always ask me. I was there, you know.'

Tommy stared straight ahead, watching the street, blinking his eyes dry. He realized he was hot, starting to sweat. Arsesnob's window as up and the heater still on full. He twisted around in the seat to work off his jacket.

'That's an amazing little device, I'm surprised you don't use those on your phone duty. An example of your people's ingenuity I was talking about. Sorry I didn't tell you about it, but I wanted to see how you'd do. The most important thing is that you really cared about getting it right. I could tell. That's something most people don't have. That's the instinct of a real reporter.'

Arsesnob brushed his nose with a finger. A smile pulled at Tommy's cheek as he felt himself calming down.

'You should've seen yourself at the end there. Bent over, head down, hand holding that red pencil and shaking like mad. You looked like you were working on your little man so he'd spit it out quick before anyone noticed.' Arsesnob shook his fist and began to laugh again and Tommy felt his face

flush but was laughing too. ‘When we get back you can help me unload this stuff and then Gravia will work with you to transcribe that. She’ll probably give you some pointers. Then if you want, I can show you some of the treasure we plundered.’

Tommy looked behind Arsesnob. A dusty, misshapen cardboard box was sitting on the seat. There were more in the trunk.

‘With all of that I can make it up to Clax, give him some work. It’s hard times for a photographer, hard when your work don’t matter like it used to. Pictures aren’t something you can bring back like words.’ He tapped his temple. ‘Everyone’s got to keep their own images now. I actually like using Clax, not for his pictures, for his eye. What he looks at, how he focuses, brings things together — it helps me see. I usually take him along but he’s so eager, I was afraid he’d mess things up with Minda. She required a delicate touch. When you listen to that again, I want you to pay attention to what I did. It’s just like a good wrestling match, you push and pull and what the heck is that?’

Off in the distance a column of smoke was rising into the sky, dark and narrow near the ground, spreading upwards into a grayish-brown cloud. Arsesnob had stopped talking, was leaning forward and looking out and up. They moved through the city in silence and Tommy watched as well, at a dirty stain against the clear blue. The shape was increasing and changing, turning into a lopsided mushroom, yet at all times seeming completely still.

‘You know, I think that might be *The Circle*.’

Arsesnob leaned back and the car accelerated. A minute before it seemed so far away, now it seemed too close. They were moving towards the newspaper’s buildings, towards the smoke. Tommy felt a quiver inside his chest, an electric spark running under his skin out to his fingertips and toes and up across his face.

‘What happened?’

The only response was the car’s screaming rumble as it pulled faster and faster through the streets. Arsesnob honked and weaved, navigating through traffic and stopsigns and stoplights with barely any resistance, everything seeming to come to a standstill, spreading a clear path before them. The sky was becoming darker as they approached, the sun shadowed by an enveloping haze. Finally they turned a last corner and the road crested and they got their first clear view of the complex at the end of the long straightaway.

‘My lord,’ said Arsesnob.

In this run up through flattened land and low homes, the newspaper’s structures usually formed an impressive sight, twin cathedrals framed by equally large trees all of which loomed over their foreground like a castle standing proud and dominant above its fiefdom. Now, however, they appeared minuscule and almost non-existent, dwarfed by a huge mass of black

smoke that rose unfettered from a churning and billowing spot attached to the earth. Off to one side were a line of firetrucks, sitting under the smoldering spires of charred trees, puny dashes of sparkling red from which frail arcs of water poured into the colossal inferno. Occasionally the smoke would shift or diminish slightly, allowing a break through which tiny flashes of orange would peek through and sometimes too the hint of what remained within, an unthinkable silhouette that showed most of the building gone, just the jagged ruins of a broken structure needlessly resisting its complete demise.

Suddenly, something moved in the periphery, out from behind a car or a bush, swaying, waving, right into their path. Arsesnob veered to pass the obstruction, but the stumbling man continued, moving with them. As the car slowed, Arsesnob leaned on the horn and yelled and motioned for the man to get out of the way, and just then Tommy recognized, through the tattered clothes and obscured face, a familiar, piercing stare.

‘It’s Fudlight.’

They jerked to a stop and Fudlight ran up and slammed his hands on the hood, shaking his finger above them and yelling something indistinct. His shirt was mostly untucked and streaked with red, one sleeve of his jacket had ripped almost to the shoulder and was flapping around like a loose scarf. His face was smeared with a greasy dust through which his wide, wild eyes seemed to be glowing in a white heat. He rushed around to Tommy’s side. ‘Get in the back,’ said Arsesnob. Tommy rolled over the seat and fell against the box just as Fudlight yanked open the door and breathlessly dove in.

‘You gotta go back. They came for us, man. They’re all over.’ He was shaking, pulling Arsesnob towards him by his sleeve. ‘Turn around! It’s not safe!’

The old reporter looked at Fudlight then out through the windshield then back at Fudlight. He popped the car into reverse and spun the wheel, whipping them around. Distracted by the hard motion, Tommy briefly forgot about the fire and Fudlight and watched through the front at where they were going, caught an image of something between two houses: a couple of ten-speeds locked together to a fence. He jumped forward against the seatback and pointed behind him out the rear window.

‘Wait, wait! My bike! It’s still there. We have to go back!’

Fudlight snapped around. ‘Sheoot! Are you crazy? Do you see that? Do you see what they did?’

‘Who? Who?’ said Arsesnob, ‘Who did it? What did they do?’

‘Without my bike I... I can’t... My dad...’

‘Dude, you’ll get it back tomorrow. Right now we have to get as far away as possible.’ Fudlight slapped the dashboard and waved to the side. ‘Here, here. Through Liberty. We can go down to Water and follow it out of town.’

Arsesnob pulled a hard turn into an alley, down a steep decline between two brick buildings with cans and boxes pushed up against their sides, the big car barely squeezing through the narrow passageway, jostling and threatening to throw itself into one sheer wall or the other while it leaned and bounced over the uneven road. The slope flattened and the car sagged and broke out into the open, cutting between parked cars and a wide street on which Tommy saw a blue truck moving directly at him before it was wiped away by another rush of brick. They were pitched downwards again, into another dark, pinched canyon, the car making a horrid rattle that did not match the small vibrations of the cabin. Something hit the passenger side and Tommy looked back through the rear window to see a trashcan topple over, its metal lid rolling down after them.

Then the canyon opened up and rotated away, and Tommy was looking back down Water Road, lower downtown rising up on one side, on the other the embankment dropping down to the river. The buildings loomed high above them, but higher than that, up in the sky, he could see the upper spread of the smoke cloud dissipating over the city. The road curved to follow the river, leaving downtown directly behind them, getting smaller as they raced away from it. While the buildings and hills shrunk into the distance their obstruction receded with them, causing the smoke to appear to be growing, almost as if it was moving towards them, drawing and pulling together into itself and down towards the ground with a tornadic gravity. In the front seat, the two reporters were talking vigorously, at and through and over one another, yelling explaining interjections exclamations whispers shouts crying decrying anger sadness fear frustration confusion adrenaline. But it was just words and emotion, Tommy wasn't really listening nor trying to understand. He was transfixed instead on the remnants of the newspaper, soaring wide, splitting the world right through the horizon. Somewhere down there was his bike, leaning against a crumbling wall, its chrome frame reflecting the flames swirling around it. He was retreating from it, or it from him. So too his house, off to the right, next to it a pile of bikes with his no longer on top. He was sure he would wake up tomorrow and it would still be gone, that by not retrieving it it was lost forever. Though where would he need to go? For he could not imagine *The Times-Circle* returned either. It seemed impossible to see it reduced to ash and blown away off into the air, and even more impossible that it would ascend again as if none of this had happened. He leaned out of the back seat, pushing his face up to the rear glass, trying to get another glimpse of the building, of the bright flames or collapsed walls or even the firetrucks, the exact spot somewhere within which his bike would be. Peering deep into the edge of the soot-stained sky, he thought he saw something but it flashed away and he loosened his stare, searching, for the first time apprehensive about his future, its destruction absorbing and

confounding him so much that he did not notice the car behind them, driving too close, nor the other one that pulled from behind to their side and swerved them into the river.

...bad times can never disturb...

She wasn't going to leave. Not today. She was going to stay in bed, stay and relax, watch television, stay until she fell asleep and woke up in the same place. In *her* house. Not *back* anywhere. Bo had first tried to scare her, like he always did, warning her about the gangs and dregs and bums, envious, dangerous shits who had it in for people like them. When it was clear she wasn't going to be intimidated, he switched to guilt. 'You're abandoning your child. She needs you. What kind of mother does this?' As if any of that was true. She wanted them to stay with her, to have a nice day *at home*, not some stupid beach house or a strange mansion, surrounded by someone else's style. He was taking Sami away, not the other way around. She didn't want them to go, but Bo was too scared of what might happen rather than face what was happening.

Geron is the head of a conglomerate which controls much of the industry in Semel. He is shrewd and controlling, intent on expanding his influence and establishing a multi-generational legacy.

And besides, she'd been around for Victor. How did that work out? Fifteen years old and they'd barely seen him in a year. Running wild, raising hell. He'd pop in for a meal, looking like a punk, picking fights with Bo. Later she'd find her purse emptied. School had stopped calling and they'd started to expect to hear from the cops instead. A real product of his momma. Then all of this started. They'd lost him, the kid was gone. The worse thing was she'd already begun to hate him. Was that any way to think about your own son? It was no wonder he turned out like he did. If Bo really cared about what was best for Sami he'd *want* to keep her away from Marlana, prevent her from getting the same sickness that infected his son.

Mary is Geron's daughter and is close to her father. She is married to Joe and they have been trying unsuccessfully to have a child.

Poor Sami, precious Sami. So sweet and smart and refined. She fit into her father's world so well. At the beach house, at The Estates. She didn't have to try to be a certain way, to change how she thought, to hide parts of herself. She *belonged*. Sami didn't worry about whether where she was staying was her taste or not. Whether she'd designed it, picked the color swatches and tile, organized the labor, placed the furniture, made it *just right*. Sami wasn't bothered by having to drive for hours every day to find security. Sami didn't care that, except for the moment she woke up in it, she never slept in *her* bed.

Sami was happy because she was around nice things and away from bad things and safe from the troubles of the world that were beneath her. At the beach house she welcomed the big windows and the nautical theme, white and blue, rope and plank. Bundling up to run in the sand, laughing, just skipping ahead of the rushing ocean. She didn't wish she was back at her *real* home. This was just as good. Better even. And when it looked like the year-rounders were going to be a threat, were going to take over the vacation houses and resorts they never had access to except as part of the help, as interlopers with as much right to be there as a rented pool chair or buffet spread — when it looked like they would have to run some more, in a different direction, she wasn't upset. Sami actually liked The Estates the best of all. She was making new friends, she had good food, multiple bedrooms, a bike. 'You can't imagine how perfect our timing is,' Bo had said. 'If this had happened two years ago, before the partnership. Or if we had to leave the beach house before Butterman left. Things like this don't just happen. It's our destiny.' Sami believed this too. The Butterman's place was huge, beautiful, amazing. They were secluded, walled off, in a community of their own. It was theirs.

No, Sami understood how things had to be. She loved taking sanctuary. It was comfort, adventure, freedom. Just like her father, she was one of the chosen few, a survivor.

Geron has a difficult relationship with his son, Richard. Richard is married to Emily and they have a son, Sam. Emily hates Geron and won't let him near Sam as she is convinced her father-in-law will indoctrinate her son and force him into a business that will ruin his life, just like it did to Richard's mother, just like it almost did to Richard.

There were noises outside, voices, laughter. Marlena pulled back her blankets and slipped through the canopy. She'd had the four-poster custom made with paintings along the tester and headboard depicting fairy tale scenes. Bo found it entirely impractical, with the mattress being awkwardly high and the gauzy canopy annoying and 'creepy.' But even he had to admit it looked terrific and, as the centerpiece of the master suite, gave the space a luxurious, royal quality. She slid down the side, falling a few inches to the ground. With her eyes stuck on the TV, she walked over to the window and waited for a commercial break. Next to the glass it was a little chillier and she crossed her arms against herself, tapping her foot impatiently as the noises outside grew louder. Finally a little cliffhanger, a slow dramatic zoom, cut to an advertisement or PSA begging for workers to stick with it. Marlena cracked the curtains and peeked out.

Down below, in the front yard and stringing out into the street, were a bunch of teenagers. They were just milling about, clustered into little groups — chatting, laughing, hugging, smoking, pushing, bundling themselves against the cold. A pair of boys were swinging on the branches of a tree. A football was being thrown around. Marlena thought she saw someone look up towards her and she dropped the curtain. It seemed like Bo was right after all — the neighborhood was being invaded, but it was just a bunch of harmless kids, and they weren't even trying to get inside. Though they also didn't seem to be moving along. No matter, even if they did come in they'd probably just be looking for someplace warm to have a good time. As long as she left them alone they likely wouldn't even notice her.

Marlena put on her wrap and slippers and headed downstairs. She dug around in the kitchen cabinets and the storage closet looking for an ice bucket which she couldn't find, substituting a small cooler instead. She poured most of the ice from the freezer into the cooler, dropped in a carton of orange juice, grabbed a bottle of vodka and package of cookies from the pantry, headed back to her bedroom.

Geron has brainwashed the whole town to think that Emily is Mary and Mary is Emily. He carried this out with a television show that held subliminal messages triggered by a drugged water supply.

She had all the supplies she needed, was down at the end of the hall, would keep the volume down and the lights off. She can let them do their thing, they can let her do hers. She wasn't leaving. There was nothing in here for them anyway. She wasn't about to let them kick her out of *her* house. She was going to sleep here tonight, in this bed, watching this channel. An all-day marathon of *Today Turns Tomorrow*. Although it had been years since she watched this she was caught up by the first half-episode. She'd

put it on more out of nostalgia, an attempt to forget Bo's nastiness when he left. She didn't even realize it when it switched to the second episode, and by the third one she was hooked. She wasn't sure why the station was doing this — or, rather, she wasn't sure why she'd never seen a station do this before. There was certainly nothing like it at the beach house or The Estates. It was a far better way to watch a show. One continuous stream, no waiting to see what would happen. Perhaps it was only possible now because so many of the demands of life had become irrelevant. Nobody knew what they had all been missing.

This really was great. Marlena pulled the blanket tight around her and settled in. She loved this show, she loved this bed. It was even better without Bo. She could sit right in the center, arrange the pillows just so, layer all the sheets and blankets high and warm, exactly how she liked them. She took another sip of her drink and reached for a cookie. After taking a bite she searched around for someplace to spit it out — screwdriver with a chocolate chaser was a horrible combination. Another drink to wash the taste away and she'd have to remember never to do that again.

There was a roar outside which didn't fade, instead sustaining and growing nearer until it sounded like it was inside the house. Marlena tried to ignore it. It didn't matter. She was alone in her room and feeling good and not leaving.

So Mary (actually Emily) has a child now, Joe Jr. (actually Sam), and Emily (actually Mary) has no children and is devastated by her inability to conceive. She blames her infertility on Richard (actually Joe) and his father (Geron, but not actually) who ran the horrible chemical plant when Richard (Joe) was a child and probably poisoned him.

The house was thumping. Thumps of music, thumps of stomping around, thumps of who knew what. Marlena had to turn up the TV a little to hear, but it was still quiet enough that she thought it wouldn't draw any attention. It was starting to get dark and the television glowed and flashed in the dimming room. The ice had melted, the orange juice carton floating half-submerged in the still cool water. The vodka was half gone, half of the cookies too. The show continued, endless and persistent. With the alcohol and laying in bed she felt tired yet wished to stay up as long as possible, to see as much of what happened. She didn't know if the marathon reset or if they would start where they left off, and in case it was the latter she wanted to make it to whenever today's endpoint was. Though it starred real actors, the show felt innately like part of the physical world, not the living one, and it was strange to think of it having a memory of its history rather than resetting. Maybe there *was* something living in the show, within the

story, within the fiction. Maybe it could only continue so long as there were people to witness it, to keep it alive. It seemed important to Marlena to not miss any of it, as if her falling asleep might kill it.

She'd only been interrupted once. There was a knock on her door and she yelled 'Busy!' and whoever it was went away. Other than that she'd been left alone. She had no idea who had knocked. It was probably just some plastered idiot stumbling around looking for a bathroom. It could have been anyone though, Sami even. Marlena imagined her daughter politely rapping on the door, hoping for a goodnight kiss then moping away sadly after her mother's rejection. That was not what happened. She was at The Estates with Bo, probably eating dinner right now. Delia probably cooked her something special so she wouldn't have to eat the fancy grownup food. Mac 'n' cheese or a hot dog or grilled cheese. Maybe she was having a sleepover with her new friends. Maybe she was alone with her father, playing a game or watching a movie. Would she ask where mommy was? Don't worry Sami, you'll see her in the morning. Promise.

How was Bo with her? Marlena remembered the years she spent raising Victor alone while Bo worked long, late hours. He was such a good little boy. Polite, goofy, a real character. What had happened? Was it the absent father? Too much mother? It hadn't been *just* her, they had Peachie and then Delia, however so much time had been only the two of them. It was probably inevitable that he would absorb parts of her that she could never fully hide. What would Sami get from Bo? She didn't need his class, she already had plenty of that. Maybe she'd be a workaholic. If she never grew up maybe it wouldn't matter. Perhaps that was for the better. It left everyone off the hook, especially Sami.

Tess is a young woman who is in the hospital with her infant child, Ava, who was born premature. They have been in the hospital for over a month and Tess won't say who the father is, claiming he wanted nothing to do with the child and actually tried to force her to get an abortion. Afraid of making Ava sick while she is nursing, Tess will not touch tap water and only drinks distilled water that she convinces a nurse to buy for her. Thus, she is not brainwashed and one day she sees Emily (Mary) and calls out to her as Mary, causing a big scene. Tess is a recovering drug addict and Mary was her counselor while she was getting clean. Tess starts warning everyone that something bad is happening in Semel.

The day was coming to an end. It was night — the windows turned to black, the room shadows and flickers. The bottle was nearly gone. Marlena lay under the high puff of the blankets, perfectly still, warm, exhausted, sleepless. She had let down the canopy in front of the bed and watched the

TV through it, the image soft and blurred like a cloudy dream. The incessant drone of kids and music filled the walls. It grew sharply louder and, with a click, quieter again. The sounds of kiss and breath, touch and moan, shuffle and embrace. Marlena wanted to call out to them, tell them to find another room, but she was silent, watching the indistinct figure writhing slowly into the room. She remembered being there, held, holding, wanting, wanted. It didn't matter who you chose because it wasn't forever. The moment was everything and she joined it.

'Why is the TV on?' A girl's voice.

'Who knows, probably been on all day.' Something deeper, dismissive. More smacking. They were almost at the side of the bed.

'Wanna turn it off?'

'Mmm, mmm, I like to see you.'

'Change the channel?'

'I like this show.'

'Turn the—'

The girl was shushed to silence.

Vince, a janitor at the hospital and henchman to Geron, attempts to shut Tess up by poisoning her, but Ava drinks the water instead and gets deathly ill. Tess figures out what happened (through clues subsequently pieced together) and calls the police, laying out her accusations about Ava's poisoning and Emily actually being Mary. Instead, everyone assumes she is back on drugs and crazy. Emily (Mary) and Richard (Joe) adopt Ava to save her from her mother, and Tess is sent off to the psych ward as a lost cause.

They were rubbing up against the canopy, a bulge pressing into Marlena's space. Arms lifted and the girl said to slow down. Marlena was watching her show and the kids at the same time. They were cute, playing at being lovers. A hand burst into view, sharply defined against the backlight of the television. The boy flopped clumsily onto the high bed, leaving his legs bent at the knees, hanging over the edge. The girl's figure rose up and into the canopied space before sliding back out.

'Help me up.'

The boy stayed flat on his back and lifted his foot onto the bed to form a high triangle with his leg. 'Use this.'

The girl wrapped her arms around the bent limb and shoved herself up, half her body still off the bed. She began to shimmy further onto it.

'No, you're good where you are. Here—' The boy moved further across the bed, right in front of the TV. 'Perfect. Why don't give him a kiss?'

The girl was laughing and Marlena could see her put her head down between him. She heard a zipper and the boy turned to his side, blocking

the TV. The girl was mostly behind him, her legs sticking out unsupported through the canopy. Whatever position this was it looked uncomfortable and stupid.

‘That’s right, kiss it. Right on the lips. Slip some tongue.’

Marlena pushed a fist into her mouth to keep from laughing. She couldn’t see her show, just loverboy’s head and shoulders. The girl’s hand moved over the boy and across his back, running some weird circular motion that looked like a beauty queen’s fake wave. He was making a strange noise that sounded halfway between a moan of pleasure and a command. Marlena slid her foot to the side and out from under the blankets, across the bed over to his neck. She traced her toes lightly across his spine, up to his nape. He rolled his head. You like that baby? She curled her foot around his neck, gripping, massaging. He ran a hand through his hair.

‘Oh yeah, right there.’

Ava’s care will be incredibly expensive and require traveling to a clinic in another county. Richard (Joe) is not about to stoop to asking his father for help, so instead he and Emily (Mary) have Dr. Simon perform a paternity test so they can find out who the real father is and see if they can force him to help with the costs. Unfortunately they find out that Geron is the father and Emily (Mary) refuses to let him know about Ava. They leave for the clinic without knowing how they will pay while Richard (Joe) secretly plans to try to reconcile with Geron so that he might be able to get his inheritance early.

He reached his hand back and caressed Marlena’s foot. She pushed harder against his back. He squeezed her big toe and then he jerked, flicking the foot away and spinning around. There was a shriek and he fell backwards, kicking the girl, catching the canopy as he went over the edge. There were ripping sounds as he thudded to the floor. The girl had gone over the side but landed on her feet. She was holding her eye and looking down at the foot of the bed.

‘What the fuck?’

‘There’s someone there!’

She turned and looked at Marlena through the torn canopy and cried out. The boy leapt up in front of the girl, one hand holding up his pants and the other held out protectively. Marlena was staring at the girl’s eyes, barely visible above his arm.

‘Get out. This is *my* room.’

Meanwhile, Mary (Emily) has been bringing JJ (Sam) over to her father (not actually) for visits. Geron, a proud and gentle grandfather, is really enjoying spending time with the little tyke. He keeps telling Mary (Emily)

that he would be happy to babysit if she and Joe (Richard) would like some time alone but Joe (Richard) is worried about what happened to Richard (Joe) and doesn't want JJ (Sam) to be left alone with Geron.

They left the door open when they ran out. She could barely make out their yells before they were subsumed into the din. They sure acted offended, like they owned the place. Who had designed this house? Who had picked this bed? How many mattresses had she gone through before finding the perfect one? These blankets, the carpet, that canopy you just ripped. The colors just right. This was hers. She made it. She *earned* it. They trying to take her bedroom over for their cute little love affair. She'd had to work for this. You can't just fuck your way up here. You have to learn what it takes to fit in, to be chosen. Giving a man sex is easy but having him pick you to be his woman, his wife, that takes determination and focus. Pick the wrong guy and all you do is get screwed — hooked on drugs, pimped out, ruined goods. Tramps don't just turn into ladies, they have to prove that they belong, fight for their spot, select the one that will select them. It wasn't luck that she'd found the right man to turn her.

Emily (Mary), Richard (Joe), and Ava return from the clinic. Ava is now a toddler and almost fully recovered from the poison. However, she is having bad nightmares that the clinic doctors say are a result of the drugs that Tess took and passed to her, and they recommend that she come back to Semel for treatment under the expertise of Mary (Emily). Mary (Emily) is failing to help Ava with her nightmares so she reaches out to Dr. Simon for help. Dr. Simon and Mary (Emily) put Ava under hypnosis to search for the source of her issues. While hypnotized, Ava remembers being in the hospital right after she was born and a woman (Tess, but she doesn't understand who she actually is) talking with Emily (Mary) and calling her Mary. The hypnosis sticks this idea in Ava's mind and she starts calling her adopted mother 'Mary' instead of 'mom.'

'Mom?'

The lights were suddenly bright and through squinted eyes and haze she could barely make out the figure by the door. But she knew his voice the minute he spoke.

'What are you doing here?'

He floated towards her, spreading clouds to show his face. He looked the same. Dark jacket, hair a little longer. And an earring — a dancing, shining cross. A whistle screamed in the distance.

'You shouldn't be here, you need to go.'

She looked up at him and smiled. Reached up for his face. He grabbed her hand and put it on her lap. Where was that cute little smile?

‘Where’s dad? Where’s dad and Sami? Did he just leave you? Fucking prick.’

He was on the other side now, in the clouds again. Something sizzled, banged. She shouldn’t talk, the sound of your own voice ruins dreams. Why wouldn’t he smile for her?

‘Geez mom, how much you been drinking? I gotta get you out of here.’

It was late. Maybe he’d notice it was past his bedtime. Give her a kiss goodnight and go before she messed it up. Behind him the window lit up in green and red, a fading star. If she could only let him know.

‘You can’t stay.’

While cleaning up in Dr. Simon’s office, Vince, the hospital janitor and henchman, noses around in the records and finds out that Geron is actually Ava’s father. Geron has already reconciled with Richard (Joe) and has been paying for Ava’s care without Emily’s (Mary’s) knowledge. After Vince tells him about the paternity results, Geron wants his child but is afraid of messing up his relationship with Emily (Mary) who is actually his daughter. So he tries to reach out to Emily (Mary) to warm their relationship, explaining how he and Richard (Joe) have reconciled and that he has been paying for Ava.

‘I can’t find a coat mom, where do you put them? Help me out, which one of these closets should I be looking in?’

Dreams are strange. That wasn’t Victor. It was his voice, but the body had changed. He was back by the door, a blur of white and pink. Looking at her, though she couldn’t see his face.

‘What the hell?’ A different voice. Its deepness filled the room. ‘I knew something was messed up with you. This is *your* house you fucking liar.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Who is she?’

‘How am I supposed to know? I’m just trying to help her—’

‘Fucking liar. I heard you, Vic. You called her mom. *Mom.*’

They were standing on each side of the bed, in the mist. Facing off. Light and dark. The story continued in front of her, another confrontation. They were talking, Victor and Mr. Deep were talking, a scream and a roar from down below. All at once, she couldn’t follow.

A machine gun fired. Not in the story, not in the room. On and on and on. Mr. Deep rushed across to Victor, a light streak, screaming in here this time. They both went down, rolling. The gunfire continued.

Upset at being deceived by her husband, Emily (Mary) questions her relationship with Richard (Joe). Geron tells Richard (Joe) about the paternity result and Richard (Joe), now believing Geron to be a good man, thinks it is in Ava's best interest to let her live with her real father. During a fight with Emily (Mary), Richard (Joe) reveals the paternity test but Emily (Mary) doesn't believe it and thinks it is a plot by Geron to get back at her for telling the truth about his evil ways. With Joe's (Richard's) help, Emily (Mary) makes plans to run away to a sanctuary for abused women. They fake abuse that Richard (Joe) never committed and tell him that they'll turn him into the police if he doesn't let Emily (Mary) go. It is well-known that Richard (Joe) has a criminal history (the result of actions that were the reason he was originally estranged from Geron) and that if he gets caught breaking the law he would get sent away for a very long time. Richard (Joe) is upset and of course thinks that Emily (Mary) is having an affair with Joe (Richard) but is worried about telling his sister Mary (Emily) because he is afraid that it will lead to him going to jail. However, one day while having lunch with Mary (Emily), Richard (Joe) breaks down and tells her everything.

Victor rose. He was at her side, panting, glorious. He held out a dark coat and pulled her arm.

'Come on, you can't be here. You need to leave.'

She shook him off. He glared at her, hair across his face, just like his father. She understood. This was why he wouldn't smile. He reached in again and she slapped his face.

'I know what you're doing. I told you, I'm not leaving. This is *my* house. This is *my* day.'

'Dammit, mom, it's not yours anymore.' He was holding his face, eyes wet. 'Quit dreaming.'

Behind him Mr. Deep started to move. Victor glanced back and threw the coat at her, running past the bed. At the doorway he stopped and turned towards her. He was Bo — waiting, speechless.

She wasn't leaving.

Mr. Deep rushed towards the door and in a moment she was left alone. She pulled the coat towards her and pressed it into her face as the story carried on.

Mary (Emily) is angry at Joe (Richard) because he hid the fact that he is helping Emily (Mary) do her brother wrong, not to mention the possible affair. Mary (Emily) goes to her father for help and Geron freaks out, not just because Joe (Richard) and Emily (Mary) are trying to steal his child away, but also because if they are actually having a relationship it would be incest. Furthermore, if Emily (Mary) knew who she really was, she'd give him

back his daughter because of their close relationship. So, Geron has Vince the janitor immediately send the deprogramming signal.

The signal involves a commercial run regularly across all television stations. Within twenty-four hours nearly the whole town of Semel has been deprogrammed. This means that Mary→Emily, Emily→Mary, Richard→Joe, Joe→Richard, and JJ→Sam. Geron begins to make a big effort to have Mary give Ava to him. While all of this has been happening, Dr. Simon has been treating Tess and doing his own investigations, discovering that Tess did not relapse and that Ava had been poisoned by a chemical produced at Geron's plant. Dr. Simon knew that nobody would believe that she had been clean all this time so he faked the paternity test to trick Geron into getting involved. This provides a motive for why Geron would have set Tess up to be Ava's poisoner, and once Dr. Simon explains this everyone turns on Geron and feels guilt and support towards Tess.

It was quieter now, the roar different. Marlena could smell smoke. They were trying to run her out. It wasn't going to happen, not today. She kept watching the story, but she couldn't follow. She leaned forward, focusing, paying attention to every word yet nothing would stick together. She rubbed her itchy eyes and when she opened them someone was standing in the doorway, choking. Was it Victor again?

'Come on lady,' the figure coughed out, 'the place is on fire. We need to go.' It was somebody else. Why couldn't they just leave her alone?

'Don't you understand how this works?' she snapped. 'I'm gonna stay here and no matter what happens I'm gonna wake back up, right here.'

'But you'll burn up.' He was standing at the end of the bed, next to the story. His voice sounded like the croup.

'Ha! Are we going to hell? It don't matter 'cause we'll just wake up tomorrow back in purgatory.' She waved her arm. 'Don't block my view.'

'You're crazy.'

Let them burn her. Let them burn it all. She didn't see any flames, they wouldn't smoke her out. Flames or not she was going to finish this story and go to sleep right where she'd been all day. No tricks, no twists, no teleporting across space. Don't believe her? Tune in tomorrow, they'll see. Same old shit. Sami and Bo and everything else only for once she'd get a full night's rest in the same goddamned bed.

It is Christmas. Everyone has come to Dr. Simon's house for a big party, warm and cozy despite the snowy weather outside. Emily, Richard, and Sam are together. Mary and Joe are together. Tess is with Ava. They are gathered around the tree opening presents, drinking and laughing. Geron is outside, bundled up against the snow, watching everyone shrewdly through a window.

Dr. Simon pulls Tess aside to tell her the real results of the paternity test. It is Vince, the janitor from the hospital. Tess is thrilled. She and Vince had a brief relationship when she was involved with Geron, and while she was in the psych ward they fell in love. When Dr. Simon told Vince that he was Ava's father, he renounced Geron and promised to lead a straight life. Dr. Simon opens his office door and Vince is standing there, clean and handsome, ready to take Tess into his arms. After they embrace, Tess starts to worry that Ava and the others won't accept him, but it turns out to not be a problem — Ava only remembers him as the nice janitor from the hospital and everybody else, feeling the spirit of the season, warmly welcomes him.

They are all sitting around the fire, watching Ava and Sam play together on the floor with their new toys. Dr. Simon walks around the room holding up mistletoe and all the couples take a turn having a holiday kiss. Mary and Joe stand up and nervously tell everyone that they have one final present — Mary is pregnant! Everybody holds up their glasses in a toast and while they are congratulating the expectant couple, Vince turns and glances past the tree to the window to see Geron outside, shivering in the cold, glaring at his henchman.

...approximately a lifetime...

It was almost completely dark and nothing moved. Not the door or tray slot, pale ghosts on the far wall, appearing more distant than he knew them to be. Nor his eyelids, unblinking, leaving his eyes exposed, frigid and drying, disallowing even a millisecond of missed continuity, the chance that the briefest motion might be lost when he wasn't looking. Nor the beadsprings, whose creaks would echo between the hard walls if he made the slightest movement. Nor the shadows which never existed — the toilet and sink and bed and walls and ceiling and floor were illuminated by whatever vague, diffuse light entered in through the tiny window, light whose sourcelessness created no distinct areas where it was absent, light which itself seemed absent now though it certainly must not be since the cell was not invisible. Nor the air itself, icy and still, with no drafts from the window or even from his own breath, which he held to see if the absolute lack of movement would induce something, finally, to happen. Such as his own blackout.

He was curled against the corner, knees pulled up, wrapped in the blanket — a blanket barely thicker than the fabric of his jumpsuit — which the cold seemed to pass right through, through blanket and jumpsuit and skin right to his insides. It was as if the core of his body had reached equilibrium with its surroundings by assenting to match temperatures. He did not shiver — generating heat was futile, plus he wasn't moving. His eyes burned and his lungs ached and everything was frozen into pinched numbness. Perhaps it was getting darker. Perhaps he blinked or twitched.

There was movement off to the side and his eyes jerked to look but it was nothing, or just the edges of his vision falling inward. He had been here before, staring just like this, in faint still life, endless impatience, precipice of consciousness. Sometimes he would fall over, other times not, yet the result was the same, the same as now: waiting, searching the gloom, bundled up

whether lying or sitting or crouching, freezing, breathing. He had taken a breath. He was blinking. The bed creaked. Was he watching the door, or was it his imagination of it, his remembrance of how it always was? Was it real, heavy and dingy white, or had it swung away, his escape blocked only by his false perception? He should get up and check — but to do so was to relent, to accept that his mind and senses could not be trusted. And if they could not then even if he did get up and found the door closed, felt its cold metal and pulled on the slot's flap, could he even believe that? Was his touch any more real than his sight or his hearing or his sleeplessness? Even if there was no door maybe his mind wouldn't let him through, would block his path to freedom, would construct this cell and this prison, would bring him back, because escape is only possible when you believe its possibility.

He stared at the door, indistinct, building new memories or remembering old ones, exhausted and compelled, knowing nothing would change, unable to accept his acceptance, unable to rest his eyes, unable to turn away.

So cold, cold all the time, cold that never ended and penetrated everything: his fingers and toes, his throat, his lungs, the blood flowing and carrying the cold throughout, his nose when he breathed in and when he did not, his head and neck and everything outside of the blanket, his chest and legs and arms and stomach and everything under the blanket, the outside and underside of his skin and bones too and all that was in between. And most of all his brain, his thoughts, slowed down and sore, turned useless by this pervasive envelope of misery that would not be breached, had no end, tempted madness.

Even the escape, that dream or trick or folly, even it had been consumed with the frigid atmosphere. Walking along the road, down another hill, open grassland dry and rolling in all directions, the big can on his shoulder, then on the other, then under his arm, then the other, then back to his shoulder. The whole time his exposed hand getting ravaged by the cold wind. He tried different positions, contorting himself to keep his skin covered which never really worked and caused him to drop the can. He tried rolling it with his feet except he was clumsy with his shoes — he'd found the worn out, laceless, many-sizes-too-big, prison-standard pair on the side of the road, presumably discarded from one of the buses as a declaration of freedom — and by then the can was all dented and when he pushed it hard enough to make more than a single revolution it veered off into the drainage ditch. Stuffing it into his jumpsuit didn't work either, the icy metal against his skin made him recoil and the can slipped and fell into one of the legs, tearing a hole through the fabric. He ended up leaving it behind on the side of the road, forgetting any notion of breaking it open or even that it had something of worth inside, just moving along and focusing on what lay ahead on the empty

highway. The constant breeze was rolling over the wide countryside, cutting right through the cloth of his jumpsuit, pouring in through the rip, through his too-loose shoes, through to skin that should have been protected but was getting buffeted nonetheless. His ears stung, his eyes watered, his feet so numb that it felt like he was walking on lifeless, amputated stumps. The sun burned low in the clear sky but offered no warmth, mocking him with its presence after being shrouded for so long. He continued in a stiff shuffle up another hill and over another crest, the can gone, out of sight and forgotten to the wind blowing its desolate freeze.

The cold never left, there was no freedom from it. Laze was left understanding it not as a torture inflicted upon him by the guards or warden or his presence in this dark cell, but one placed on the entire world, that could not be dulled by sun or garment or shelter. At least not for him. Everybody else was gone, disappeared off to whatever secret hideaways they'd made for themselves, dens of warmth and safety and touch and conversation and smiles and food, places he was not allowed to find let alone be, places which the unpunished hid and protected so that they would not be contaminated by this, by his, infernal chill.

At times, yesterday perhaps or maybe already today, he would attempt to generate his own heat. Flex his muscles, breathe into his hands or under the blanket, rub his skin, pace the room, pushups, jumping jacks, handstands, shadowless boxing, dancing. None of it really worked. They'd make him forget about the cold but the minute he stopped he was right back in it. Or his breath or sweat would bring a dampness that only magnified the chill. And it didn't take much for him to push too hard and collapse to the icy floor or sagging mattress, laid out and exposed, unable to do anything but gasp and feel his heart throb in his chest. Just lay there getting colder until he had recovered enough to pull himself into the corner with the blanket and settle back into his watchful vigil.

He barely had the energy anyway. Shivering took energy. Sweating too — he imagined millions of miniature muscles around his pores grabbing the water and squeezing it out. Demanding his body warm itself was probably too much to ask, yet he still did. Somewhere he had seen a show about monks who could spend night after night out on a glacier with bare feet and no fire, the only protection from the elements being a loose toga and deep meditation. It was apparently a mystery how they didn't freeze to death. Laze thought about them with their hands pressed together and serene faces — how was it possible that he was more miserable than them? At least he had socks. He believed the secret was in their chanting, though his attempts at droning intonations did little else than make him feel like a crazy man talking nonsense to himself. It was probably a special frequency passed

down through the order that he'd never discover. Laze tried to remember the sound but he hadn't really listened in the first place. Maybe it was a silent picture.

Energy required food, and Laze had lost any conception of how long it had been since he'd last eaten. At least that he could remember. He had barely any notion that he was sleeping at all but he was sure it was happening. Maybe eating was the same. Perhaps it happened while he slept, or maybe it was being wiped from his memory. They could do that. It didn't matter, though — he was still hungry, he still had to eat, the perception of foodlessness was draining him. And even though he was hungry there was a deeper craving, a need to resolve the paradox of how a man could do nothing to continue his life yet still survive. It was like he'd discovered some secret like those monks that could keep him going forever, only it was all subconscious and he couldn't turn it off even though he wanted to. Laze feared eternity. He wondered if he'd already died. When was the exact moment, where did hell begin?

He thought of his last meal. Rummaging through the kitchen which had been picked over and thrashed, about to give in and collect scraps from those scattered across the floor, when he spotted the crate. It was sitting near the door to the walk-in cooler, in a sloppy puddle of milk and broken eggs. From far away there was just a hint of color, but as he got closer he saw it was half-filled with bright red apples. Laze reached in and picked one up. His fingers sunk into its backside, oozing through the slimy skin and gelatinous flesh. He flung it away and it splattered onto the ground, leaving a cardinal hemisphere rising out of a pool of white and yolk and apple gunk. He reached down and touched it. What remained felt firm and unspoiled. From the crate he gingerly picked up another. The top appeared perfect but the back was soft and dented, the brownish plum color of a sickly bruise. Holding it carefully by its still-hard parts, Laze bent forward and poked his teeth into the skin, scraping off a test taste. It was mealy and sweet, suffused with the rustic perfume of fermentation. Delicious, not rotten at all. He took another, bigger bite, chewing far longer than necessary, gnashing all the bits and juice over and over until it had turned to a pulpy liquid which he swallowed and then let his mouth fall agape, basking in its fruity linger. His next bite went too deep and he hit a bad spot, slipped suddenly without resistance, his mouth filled with a musty essence that forced him to unbite and spit and gag. Unsure about risking another try, especially since the barrier between esculence and ruin had been breached, he tossed away the apple and selected another, this time nibbling warily, resisting the temptation to take a mouthful, paring away at the good half and avoiding the decay by leaving a safe, overthick shell of perfectly good flesh. He ate eight

more partial apples this way, clearing off most of the crate's top layer until nothing fresh-looking remained. With his food-starved belly stuffed full and fearful that there were still people about who might catch him alone, Laze did a last pass through the kitchen, stuffing a handful of dried spaghetti in his pocket and hefting a gigantic can of baked beans onto his shoulder that he would never open let alone eat (someone told him once that pasta and beans were the ultimate survival foods), then made his way out of the prison. Of course, the escape might just be some mind trick played on him by his captors or his sleeping brain. Real or not, it only served to torment him, to make his current existence even more wretched. Thinking about it was punishment, he wouldn't submit. So it shouldn't count.

No, his last meal had been a slice of bread and a slice of cheese. The same thing three times a day for weeks. Sometimes he'd get a slice of bologna. Once or twice a bowl of slop. But that last one was the standard slice-slice. A meal accompanied by the snide laughter of the guard, calling out chow time Kraklen or don't waste it, like it was a sick joke only it turned out to be just a set up for the punch line he was living now. How long could a man live eating so little? How long could he go without eating at all? Whatever number of days he'd heard before he was sure he'd exceeded it. It couldn't have been a year but months at least. Maybe a year. He was getting weaker, his body shutting down. He had stopped shitting. Rarely pissed. His organs felt clogged and collapsed and withered. He had no energy. Every day he figured it must be his last. One could not continue on nothing, yet he persisted, his body would not die. He had tried to end it, tried to give up, but it would not stop. They would bring him back. Life continued, dreadful, unceasing.

He had screamed for help, for food, for anyone to just call back to him, screamed so many times he'd lost count or at least lost the ability to distinguish the first from the last from yesterday's from today's (had he today already?) from a month ago's from last year's, though he was sure a year had not passed because it was still too cold and if there was one thing that could not change, that would have to change, it was the seasons. Laze looked up at the window, at the light behind the bars, not shining in, just existing, brighter outside than inside, bright enough to be day but offering no indication of the source, of the location or existence of the sun. He was nearly directly below the window, and with his head tilted back he could just see past the top of the wall, a thin glowing strip of now yellowish-white whose intensity and shade changed but never its opaqueness or uniformity. If he looked out either side there was nothing beyond — no matter how close he got to the bars or how far from them, pressing his face against the wall in the corner and aligning his eye with the slit between the bars and the exterior jut,

the wall extended all the way to the edge of view. The wall was only a few feet from the window, close enough that he could almost touch it by sliding his arm through the narrow gap, turning his head for maximum reach and waving his fingers blindly such that he just barely felt the air they fanned bouncing off of the smooth concrete. Below the window he could see the ground, roughly the same distance away as the wall, also concrete. He would visualize where it intersected the wall, roughly chest high, creating an image of a cell partially submerged in cement, a caisson holding out the earth and rest of the prison so that he could drown in his isolation.

Through that window he had screamed, and also through the tray slot on the door. He had screamed within the cell, too, but only made echoes whose energy directed back at him, his ears absorbing his cries, ringing with pain that no one else would hear. From the window there were echoes as well, the sound reflecting between the two walls in a vibrating fade, his own words turning unnatural and weak. There was a time when other prisoners (or guards?) would yell back — or yell first, it was impossible to know when or who started it. Nobody conversed, just words of desperation and agony and insanity — though for him not the latter, Laze's mind had not gone yet — screaming for recognition not by the fellow imprisoned but those with access to and existence in the outside, who might maybe break the cold, the hunger, the quarantine, the monotony. However, now the only voice was his own, and screaming through the window would only leave him listening to himself, his ears rattling with the hopeless sustain of his own solitude. And since he was not crazy, listening to himself was not something he could stand. So now, if or when he did cry out it was through the tray slot, lifting the flap and putting his mouth to the hole and screaming, then quickly dropping his head to look out, eyes scanning the dim hallway and identical doors opposite for movement. Or pressing his ear up under the flap, intently concentrating on hearing anything, a response or footsteps or another flap lifting.

He was not screaming now, though. He sat on the bed, in the corner, certain that any noise would be unheard (or ignored), that getting up and walking to the door would mean unbundling which would mean he'd be colder — how that was possible when his entire body was already the same temperature as the cell?, yet he knew it was possible — and his hopes raised in futility and he would end up back in this corner, colder and more hopeless than if he had just stayed here waiting for nothing to happen that he was powerless to change.

And the one time the door had opened he had not been yelling, not been making any noise at all. Just sitting in the corner, looking at the bars or the sink or the mattress because the first sign of movement was at the edge of his vision, a shift in the gloom that he did not register at first, mistaking it as a consequence of the sun's progress someplace above that he could not directly

see. Then the voice. He looked up to see the white door had turned dark and in it was a shadow of a large man, completely clad in black, pointing a gun at him. There were other voices from behind — how long had they been there? A bang. Wait fifteen minutes. Free to go. Do not arm yourself. Buses waiting. Enjoy your day. Not returning. Don't end up back here. Remember what you must do.

What he must do. Not returning. They brought him back, out of that ditch. He shouldn't be thinking of this. It was only a manifestation of his hopes, or his flawed perspective. A happenstance of his mind. They didn't need to be summoned then, but the situation had changed. He didn't know what was real, except that he was still here. Maybe the releasers were out there still, having no need to leave their warmth or slumber until someone got their attention, loud enough to wake or be noticed, proof that it was worth venturing out, descending into the block thought empty, to give a still stuck man another chance. What if this was their last day? What if his silence would truly doom him to eternity? It was too cold. There was no food. They must know. They must not forget. He was still here. He was still here.

Holding the thin blanket tight around his neck and body, Laze got up and walked the two steps to the door, where he knelt and lifted the flap and screamed.

Back and forth he paced the room. One two three turn one two three turn one two three. He stopped and stuck his head under the faucet and lapped at the water between pants. It was like ice on his lips and tongue and down his throat. It was sucking the heat out from his insides and he tensed up, quitting before he wanted, still thirsty. He'd heard that one way to get the guard's attention was to plug up the drain and flood the cell. What if nobody came? Laze couldn't stand the thought of getting stuck surrounded by that frigid water. He'd considered using it to drown, but knew that people that fell into frozen ponds could survive for an hour or more. What if he got stuck in an even colder immortality?

He began to pace again, skipping a little and then switching to hops, trying to keep his mind occupied on the physical movement and away from how much he was hurting or the cold or that he was completely alone or hadn't eaten or the vague light or that nothing ever changed. Hop forwards, hop backwards, hop on one foot — that hurts — spin around, duck walk, slide, tiptoe. Get warm. Break the tedium. He slumped onto his bed, his heart racing and tongue wagging. There was a tickle on his forehead and he touched it, wiping a bead of sweat into a streak of raw iciness, then rubbing at it in frustration. Why did it have to be like this? What did they want?

He would never confess, they knew that. They had tried and been trying and he hadn't broken because there was nothing to break.

He didn't understand how they were doing this. No food. No people. He couldn't tell when he slept. They were probably drugging him, putting something into the water or filling the cell with gas, manipulating his sense of time so that he would forget to remember or how long he'd been here or what order things happened. It was probably still his first day and most of his memories hallucinations or dreams. Maybe he was asleep right now. Where would he be if he woke? He bit down on his thumb, barely feeling anything in his numb flesh. He squeezed until he was sure he'd broken the skin and let go, but there was no blood, only the dent of his teeth, purple and crackling in pain as if he had crushed a web of frozen nerves.

He did not deserve this. He was not what they said he was. Nobody listened, nobody believed. That meant that prison wasn't enough. He deserved extra, punishment from all sides. It was everywhere. Not just from the guards but the other prisoners too. It was why he was here. You're a target and you fight back so it's for everyone's protection. Now they could turn the screws, now they could make him pay and he couldn't fight back. It was everywhere. Even in the escape — was that something he'd dreamed or actually seen? It didn't matter. The punishment was such a part of his reality that his mind administered it too. Had he actually left his cell, trailing behind everyone, following their distant hollers down the corridors to the outside, to finally see a blue sky and the crisp line between the building's shadow and the sunlight spreading across the yard past the fence? And in that light the line of buses, gleaming white, surrounded by excited, cheering inmates, pushing to get in. Laze approached carefully, looked for faces to avoid, tried to find an unfamiliar crowd to blend into. Then, from the windows of one of the buses, pointing, faces turned towards him, eyes of hatred and revenge. He turned and ran, back inside, hiding in the laundry, listening as his pursuers searched and yelled — come out come out wherever you are going to pay Kraklen you fucking sicko freak coward — before abandoning the hunt so as not to miss their ride. It was a while before he finally got out, his punishment confirmed: the buses were gone and he didn't even think to grab a clean jumpsuit or anything extra for warmth.

Laze chewed on the edge of the blanket, grinding through the rough strands. He stared the door as he did this, knew it would never open, not again — if it ever had — that his chance was already passed. Yet he still had to watch. He might be wrong, perhaps there would be a last minute reprieve. He snapped a last couple of threads then began to pull off a long strip down the blanket's length. His fingers had no feeling or strength and he had to use weak, awkward fists to get a firm enough grip. This was a new idea and

he wondered if he could even finish it. Maybe he should just quit and use the whole blanket like before. But even rolled up it was too thick and just a dull choke, too much of a chance as he drifted away for his legs to betray him, for his subconscious unconscious to lift him, to choose sleep. It left too much time, time for them to slip in and release him. Or to hit him with the drugs. So he'd forget being saved. Forget his resurrection. Back to staring at the door, pacing, freezing. Maybe it was a dream. Maybe it was a trick. Maybe the whole blanket would work. He couldn't escape his punishment. They always get you back.

He began to work on a new course. He chewed and watched the door, his chewing reminding him of chewing on a stick of spaghetti, lightly gnashing on it while it waved in the wind, turning gummy and sticking to his teeth. He ran his tongue along the pasta, concentrating on its slow dissolution, distracting his mind from the unbearable cold. The smoke was probably visible sooner but he didn't notice it until he topped the hill — was this the sixth? seventh? His numbed brain had lost count in the landscape's ambiguity. Past the short plateau, down in another small valley, he saw the trail of dark black winding down through the sky to the burnt-out bus tipped into the ditch. On the other side of the road was a gas station. It was too far to see if there was anybody inside but he had the clear impression that it was empty, both it and the bus. At first all Laze could think about was that the bus was probably warm and inside the building too, however as he hustled along down towards them, tripping in his ungainly shoes, the wind shifted and his thoughts turned from thawing out to eating. There was a smoky odor of cooked meat and he found himself salivated over images of barbecue until he realized what he was smelling and stopped cold.

He stared at the bus then the station then all around, for the first time registering that he might be in danger. He considered running out into the hills or going back the way he came, but decided that he'd rather take the risk instead of continuing to freeze to death. Crossing the road so that he wouldn't have to go near the bus, he ducked down into the ditch and made his way towards the station. The day was ending and the sky was turning a deep shade of orange, everything on the ground falling to shadow. As he approached the smell got stronger and more noxious, a mix of burning chemicals and flesh. He barely glanced at the bus when he passed it, just enough to be certain there was nothing coming after him, nothing alive. There were no lights on at the station and he crept around it in the darkness, peeking into the windows and back behind himself in case someone was sneaking up. The store looked abandoned — windows broken, shelves empty, junk dumped on the floor. He called out, looked around, listened. No sound, no response. The door was unlocked and he went inside. It was dark and surprisingly chilly. Uncomfortably familiar. He turned down an aisle, checking

the shelves. They were picked clean, barren. He turned the corner to the next one and fell backward in shock. In the blackness he could see pile of bodies on the floor, stacked up on one another, wearing prison jumpsuits. They had no heads — or rather the heads had dissolved onto the ground below their shoulders into a glistening mound with an unnatural green tinge.

Laze stumbled into the next aisle and tripped past a dumped over drink machine, distractedly scanning the shelves, barely comprehending the emptiness. He slipped and his hands slapped into something thick and sticky. As was pulling himself up he heard a rumble and then the squeal of tires. It was right outside. He scrambled on all fours across the floor to get a view outside and saw the silhouette of a man carrying a machine gun, his back to the door, pointing and saying something indistinct. Laze crawled along to the other side of the store, into a short hallway. A door was ajar and from the blackness there was a stink of urine and pine. Opposite was another door. He lightly turned the knob and pushed it open.

The hallway lit up. Someone was speaking inside the store. Laze glanced back then all over, saw that in front of him, at the end of the hall, was a door marked *EXIT*. He started towards it when something in the room he had just opened caught his eye. He reached in, grabbed the bottle, then quietly slid open the exit door's bolt and slipped outside.

He was completing his second braid, tying off the strips. His fingers felt like icicles, driving up through his hands into his wrists, digging into nerves that flared through his arms. He put the rope down next to the other and pulled the half-blanket up under his chin. There was no way he would be able to manage another, his hands were too weak, too cold. He wasn't even sure he could finish with these. It didn't matter — they were strong and tight, exactly as he'd hoped, but they were too short. He would have to wait, to let his hands recover. He had time, but how much? The light was starting to fade. How long before the drugs kicked in? They would find out, make him forget. Take away his blanket. This was his last chance. He was breaking. His hands throbbed dully against his chest. It had to stop. The punishment. The pain. He looked at the bars, dark lines against the dimming light, then at the door, and waited.

He had figured it out. Ropes tied to blanket, blanket tied to bars. Just long enough to do it right, like he'd heard they used to: big knot, big fall, quick, over. Don't give them or himself a chance to stop it. He was standing on the bed, the braided coil cinched tight against his neck, leaning over towards the window. His legs shook on the mattress and he reached out to grab the bars to steady himself but his numb hands fumbled and he almost tipped over, his feet bouncing unsteadily while he twisted to regain

his balance. When he finally got under control he rested against the wall, almost shocked that he did not fall, remembering a time that he did and what it was like to be free.

He was stumbling in his shoes, away from the station, away from the street, into the murky fields that spread beneath a dim sky fading to stars, stepping funny to keep them from flipping off. Unexpectedly the ground sloped away and he pitched forward, rolling twice before thudding to a stop in some wispy vegetation. He waited, listening. Heard nothing — no voices, no footsteps. Scrambled back up, poked his head out, saw a car hood sticking out under the lights. Slid back down and began to clamber out of the opposite slope when he noticed to his side a crescent of pinpricks against a purplish glow. Laze shook the bottle in his hand — it was almost full. He thought of the fields, saw them running forever, under the black sky, exposed, freezing. He turned and stayed low, felt his way along the trench into the culvert. Pulling himself deep into the tube, he curled up against its rough sides then opened the bottle and took a long pull. His stomach cramped up, recoiling from the strong drink. He pushed back, forcing it to stay down, enjoying the stinging warmth that radiated from his insides. He put his fist up to his mouth, sniffing at the open bottle, breathing hot fire through his fingers, feeling the numbness pull away, shift. He took another swig and leaned back, closing his eyes in the dark.

This was it. He leaned back, pulled, checking the blanket and the ropes. He was feeling warm again, finally. He unzipped his jumpsuit and, using the blanket for balance, pulled it off. Threw it backwards at the door. Peeled off his socks. He'd show them. The cold didn't bother him, it never did. The punishment didn't work. They'd achieved nothing.

Without a sound nor hesitation Laze leaped, almost straight up, just enough towards the window to clear the bed, hands crossed behind and legs bent back at the knees. He was above the window, facing the wall, looking up, then the window slipped by and through it the wall but not sky, the dim blue of moon not his nose punched and he spun to the black blank room, pressure and stretch which stopped when his knees hit something, the ground maybe he measured wrong then the ground gave way and he continued down because he had no idea how but he'd at last found the way out again.

...I've lost count...

'This is the timekeeper,' said the contact.

It was completely black under the hood, yet he still moved his head side to side as if searching for the referent.

'I'm here.' It was a weak voice. Deep and rough, but weak.

'Oh, hello.' He stuck a hand out in the direction of the voice. 'My name is—'

'No. No names. I am the timekeeper. You are the monopole.'

'Monopole. Alright. So what—'

'We can talk in the van. Come on, we have one other to collect.'

Hands touched each arm and led the monopole away. The clamor of the bar diminished so he figured they were taking him to a back entrance.

'Well, I'll be off,' said the contact. 'See you later?'

'Yeah.'

There was a pat on the monopole's shoulder. 'Pay attention. This is your one chance to understand.' The monopole turned to the contact and heard footsteps moving away. A door opened and he felt a rush of cold air.

'This way.'

The timekeeper led him outside and after a few steps held him up. There was a click and a brief, muted roar.

'Watch your step. You sit here. Quick introductions — next to you is the clapper, and behind you is the databank and the wallwalker. Everyone, this is the monopole.'

Behind him there were two almost simultaneous greetings, both male. The clapper didn't say anything. The monopole turned vaguely in everyone's direction and said hello. The door slid shut and the monopole waited for someone to speak but it was just silence until a door opened and closed up front and the engine turned on.

‘One last stop, then we can start,’ said the timekeeper.

The monopole sat in the van, staring into blackness, bouncing and leaning as they traveled over unknown roads along an indecipherable path. He tried to follow two conversations at once: Behind him the databank and the wallwalker, and in front the timekeeper and the watchman. Every once in a while he might interject into one, but was hesitant seeing how he wasn’t giving his full attention to either. For the pair behind him, he didn’t even know who was who. His chance to ask them to individually identify had passed and he didn’t want to give the impression that he was lost or forgetful. He’d tried speaking to the clapper, but the clapper never spoke. He would have suspected the clapper didn’t exist, that it was just some sort of joke played on the newly sightless, except on right turns he’d be pushed into another human body, one which pushed back with an insistent elbow.

He tuned into the conversation behind: ‘I’m moving my hand around to feel where the sun is coming in. This way I can determine which direction we’re going. I’m keeping track of all the turns, when we accelerate and decelerate. I’ll report back to my group tomorrow.’

‘Should you be saying this out loud?’ This voice sounded young and eager, as opposed to the other’s dull confidence. ‘The timekeeper might not approve. They’ve got us in masks after all.’

‘Oh, he already knows. I told him when I first got on. He just laughed and said good luck.’

‘I can’t imagine that guy laughing.’

‘Maybe it wasn’t a laugh but that was my impression. It is not always important to get the details right as long as the facts add up correctly. Redundancy helps too. If I could have seen his face that would have been an independent confirmation. Like my hand — it is another dimension of measurement along with the forces my body feels and the sensations of my inner ears and my internal clock. The key is not to forget anything.’

‘You can really remember all that?’

‘Of course. I was a memorant once.’

Up front, the timekeeper was talking. ‘...timelines have become bent to the point they connect back to themselves. We all experience this at a daily level but when you get near the site the effect is stronger and the temporal distortions noticeable even while you are awake.’

‘What does that mean?’ The watchman was female, her voice slight and uncertain. ‘Can we get stuck in a smaller loop? They told me this could be dangerous, I understand that, but I don’t know if I can handle...I’m already spinning.’

‘Don’t worry, it’s nothing like that. I can’t explain it, everyone’s perception is different. We’ll be close to the event’s boundary, there the effects shift from global to personal.’

‘I hope so.’

The databank/wallwalker: ‘...application of Kalman filtering to chain the measurements. There is error and bias but we deal with that using a series of controlled runs before and after the actual trip, through which the observational data can be compared with the ground truth. Provides a lot of practice time as well — I’ve already been driving around for weeks with a blindfold. I could probably do this in my sleep. In fact, it’s better if we keep talking as my subconscious takes over which makes me more accurate than when I try to pay my full attention.’

‘I get it — it’s like sometimes I have my best thoughts when I’m totally zoned out.’

‘To be clear, I’m not zoned out. I’m fully aware of the background mental work that is occurring while we are having this conversation. I’m merely allowing my trained mind to work automatically without interference from my doubt and ego and overfocus.’

‘OK, I see. Like a trance. So you’ll take this subconscious information and do math and you’ll be able to figure out where we’re going?’

‘Well, I have to get there first. And others, too — I am but one of many travelers working on this project. The more individual observations we integrate the tighter our error bounds, the more possibilities that our cartographic identification algorithm can prune. You see, there still remains a significant directional and range ambiguities which not only compound but may be confounded by the rumored temporal anomalies whose mathematical structure...’

Switching to the front, where the watchman was speaking: ‘...no longer reach people the way I once did. It’s distressing. I’ve lost the will, the spark. I can no longer create.’

‘Because your audience is gone?’

‘My invisible audience is gone. The ones I didn’t know, who might live the next street over or halfway around the world, but knew *me* through my works. And they still may know me, but only the me that once was. The current me is now invisible to them, and may always be.

‘It is something much worse, though. I do have an audience — my friends, those near me, some new people who I’ve started to see every day. Really, that should be enough. However they no longer believe in my talent. Or I don’t believe they can. My work is a process, not a moment. I can show them a day’s output, but it is just an imperfect segment. It needs polishing, more thought, reinterpretation. To be erased and redone. It is all mistakes and first impulses and flaws which before I could shield them from and now are all

that I produce. Whereas once I could show the best of me, now they would see the truth behind the work, the simplistic, sentimental, embarrassing fraud who'd offer them no fascination or excitement, only shame.' The watchman sniffed. 'Also, there is so much more on either side of that tiny segment — I must expect them to remember what has come before and be patient for that which has yet to be. This is not how art is meant to be consumed, at least my art. I have been made irrelevant.'

The monopole leaned forward, moving his head through the darkness to a position that seemed closer to the watchman. 'Excuse me,' he said, 'but are you famous?'

The watchman seemed taken by surprise, either by the question or the fact that he had spoke to her. She stammered for a second before answering. 'I suppose I am, at least in certain quarters. I—'

'Careful,' said the timekeeper. 'Remember, no names.'

'I wasn't trying to expose her,' said the monopole. 'I just wondered. I've never met a celebrity before.'

'Well, I'm not *that* famous. It never meant that much to me anyway, to be recognized or known.'

'It's more than most of us have.'

'Nobody has it anymore. Not like it used to be.'

From behind him there was a voice, close to the monopole's ear, almost a whisper. 'Hey, do you know who she is?'

The monopole twisted around so he could whisper back and his head hit something hard. The young voice gave a clipped cry and then quietly groaned. The monopole pushed his palm into his brow. The timekeeper called back, asking them if everything was alright, warning them to not uncover their heads. 'Do that and your trip's over.' After grunting an assurance that his hood was still on, the monopole whispered a response.

'No, I don't know her. Who is she?'

'I don't know, I was hoping you did.'

'I got a pretty good ear, she doesn't sound familiar to me.' That was the dull voice, speaking at a normal volume. 'Probably just another hack. There's enough people in the world such that anybody can have a few fans. Now, as I was saying, the road noise is another important dimension, partly for gauging speed, partly for surface quality — which offers indirect evidence of road classification — but also the potential for empirical matching...'

The watchman: '...friend of mine saw it and told me. So I went to see and sure enough, there it was. A small bit, but clearly mine. Cut out, the context lost, surrounded by whatever other trash this guy claimed was his art. I told him he was a thief, a plagiarist. He first demanded I prove it so I

showed him — I of course had a copy of the original — then he asked what the big deal was, it would be gone tomorrow anyway...’

The databank/wallwalker: ‘...took acid once and was still tripping at the restart...’

The timekeeper: ‘...everyone! We are entering an axis of distortion. It connects our site with another thousands of miles away. While we pass through it you may notice your sense of time dilate and warp. Do not be alarmed, do not remove your hoods. It is only transitory, a small preview of what is to come. We still have a ways to drive. For some of you it will be longer, for others less. Maybe we are almost there...’

The watchman: ‘...contracts no longer valid. No consequence for violation. The original work still exists, but what good is it when all anybody wants is ephemera? I’ve lost the instance of creation. I’m hoping to rediscover it today. In the meanwhile I’m somebody else’s muse. No longer a creator but raw material...’

The databank/wallwalker: ‘...can totally feel it. Like, I can’t see a thing but I’m almost positive the world outside is sitting still. Whoever talks next it’ll rush by right before they start to catch me...’

The monopole: ‘...get a little more heat back here...’

The databank/wallwalker: ‘...time this guy and me smoked a bunch of hash and we tried to make macaroni and cheese and it took all night for the water to boil. I’d go into the kitchen to check the stove and the flame would be on but the water wasn’t getting hot. It was this huge pot because that was all that was clean and the strange thing was that the water kept getting higher. Turns out his roommate was fucking with us, was throwing in ice cubes when we weren’t looking. Don’t know how neither of us noticed that shit floating on top. For a while I thought time was moving in reverse, that the water was de-evaporating, that the flame was absorbing heat. I would de-awake to sleep and de-sleep awake before the loops began...’

The timekeeper: ‘...why I do this. It is not for enlightenment. One time is enough, you’ll see. More trips are just temptation. That’s why we don’t allow repeats. Pinecone was my mentor, he taught me the ways. But he lost his patience. It broke him. I won’t do this much longer, I won’t end up like him, but for now I have a duty. People like you deserve to know. Someday enough will understand, and together we can unravel the loop, find another phase. For now here are too few...’

The databank/wallwalker: ‘...of the anomalies is impossible because of the secrecy around their locations. The government boys act like if that knowledge got out it would compromise world security, as if they’ve already been doing a good job with that. The sites used to be controlled by the naughts but now they supposedly only have one left. Used it to escape from

the missiles, even though it was a target. You know that back then two nukes hit the same spot and created a new site? Never found out which side fired...'

The watchman: '...I doing? It used to feel so important to leave something behind, a permanence, proof not only of my existence but my intellect. You could say I've already done that, but is there a point? What is there to leave when we aren't going anywhere anymore. Our legacy is created anew with each sunrise — that's too much pressure, we've lost faith in ourselves. Philosophers have it easy, their medium is ideas, the only things which are preserved. For the rest of us it's not fair to capture a spark of brilliance only to have it taken when we close our eyes. If only the thieves could steal that. An army of impostors to reproduce that spark, to defeat the transience of the world. But I must create something worth stealing first. It is said that we start each day identical to the last — if inspiration hasn't come, will it...'

The databank/wallwalker: '...and dance for days. I've been twice and it's like we all get together and bend time. One of those I don't remember, the other felt like only a few hours had passed, though I swear I saw three sunsets...'

They were outside, still hooded, walking slowly. The monopole had a hand stretched out slightly, touching the person in front of him. Someone else's was on his back, sometimes grabbing his jacket and forcing him to lean forward to maintain contact with his predecessor. His steps, deliberate and measured, were more of a shuffle, settling into an apparent synchronicity with the others, a spontaneous marching rhythm necessitated by the fact that to get out of sync was to buckle or break the chain. It wasn't that their movements were keeping to some metronomic time, but rather that they naturally followed each other's ebb and flow, maintaining space and contact so that they moved collectively to match the landscape or some instinctive gravity. When they started the ground was hard but soon it turned into something looser, like gravel. It rolled under their feet with an continuous, crunching babble from which a barely perceptible cadence arose. Perhaps this commotion kept them in harmony, perhaps it was just evidence of its occurrence.

The timekeeper was up ahead, presumably leading whoever was at the front. His talk filled the air, above the din of their footsteps, drew them forward, attempting to distract them from their disorientation with its rambling directions and observations and anecdotes. The monopole was listening yet in the darkness of his hood the words were fleeting — unlike a blind man whose aural sense is heightened by the loss of sight, instead it seemed his mind was too preoccupied with constructing a spatial representation of the unseen world to allow full comprehension of the timekeeper's prattle. He

closed his eyes to remind himself that there was nothing to see and let his focus pull back to the sound of the voice.

‘...move a little to the left. That’s right. I know you’re sick of wearing those things, but they’re for everyone’s protection. You won’t have to for very much longer. We’re following this trail to get some separation, to enter the field. Once we’re inside I won’t have to worry about you trying to escape — at that point you’ll have to stay with me because if you don’t you’ll only go nowhere. You’re not missing much anyway. It’s amazing how this site ended up someplace so unremarkable. Just brown hills and clumps of trees. We’ve passed through two fences, there will be more. People blocking off sections of land for themselves as if it’s worth something. I guess there was probably cows or sheep or something here before. If you pay attention you’ll see some of their shit along the way. But they’re all gone. It’s just land and pointless fences all doing nothing. They can’t stop time, it flows right past them, like the wind. Like us. Watch out here, there is a little dip. Just take it slow. I don’t understand why anyone would bother claiming anything out here. It’s just dry and empty, hardly anyone around, not a thing to do or see. If it wasn’t for the site all this would be more forgotten than it already was. There’s a reason why there isn’t a city or town anywhere near here, and it’s not because the fences kept one out. Maybe they’re actually marking off the worthless places, the ones to ignore. You know, I never thought of that before. That’s pretty good. I’ll have to remember that. Everyone stop. I need to undo this gate. You all just wait here for a minute.’

There was the sound of footsteps fading away. The monopole felt the hand holding his jacket release and let his own drop to his side. Immediately he had a sensation that he was alone, that those in front and behind had slipped away or were just hallucinations he could no longer grasp. He was standing by himself, stranded. Maybe the ground would fall away next. He felt an urge to pull off his hood and see, but also had an ominous fear that everything would be just as black as it was now, that the hood was clear, the world gone. He reached out more forcefully than he meant and hit the one in front. There was a grumble and the person shifted slightly. The fear dissipated, as did the desire to remove his hood. He leaned back slightly to encourage the rear hand’s touch, but there was nothing. Behind him a muffled voice began to speak and was shushed to silence. The monopole was ready to start moving again. He felt unbalanced standing still, like everything was tipping but he couldn’t tell which direction and wouldn’t until it was too late. There was a sudden rustle off to his left.

‘Hey! What do you think you’re doing?’ It was the timekeeper. It sounded like he was talking directly at the monopole. The monopole stiffened, unsure what he did. ‘You know the rules! I’m talking to you, databank. I saw you look.’

'I didn't do anything. I do— Hey!'

'You want to see so bad, there you go.'

The monopole heard a grunt behind him and then something fell onto the ground at his right.

'Ow! What are you doing? Give it back. I'll just get back and—'

The voice stopped with a deep thump. Then another.

'Don't anyone else touch your hoods!' yelled the timekeeper. 'You do that and you'll end up the same as him.'

A zipper pulled right next to the monopole and then a clatter and a big sigh.

'I'm sorry about that. Some people think they can get away with peeking. I can't allow that. Here, you move forward.'

'Is, is he dead?' said the young voice. It was right behind the monopole.

'No,' said the timekeeper, 'but we won't be seeing him again. By the time he wakes up, we'll be long gone.' He started to pace, up and down their line. 'Pinecone used to say that people who looked didn't really want to see. That they'd rather avoid the truth than face what it had to show them. I think they just can't help themselves. We've already figured out what's important, but they don't trust us. They don't understand that if you see too much you'll drown out the meaning, lose the point. Leave the unknown as it is, it has nothing to offer. There will be plenty in what's to come. They think there's some mystery or secret we're hiding, when we're actually doing the opposite. Even we have to be careful that we don't see too much ourselves. Pinecone forgot that, and now he can never return. So keep your hoods on, it's only a bit farther. I'm going to go open that gate, and then we can get going.'

'Go ahead and take them off.'

The monopole hesitated for a second, then pulled off his hood. As his eyes squinted shut in the brightness, around him he heard the others groan and murmur. After a while he was able to open his lids enough to see that they were standing on a gravel road that had dead-ended at a copse of tall pines. Though the light seemed intense they were actually in the shade, with the sun somewhere behind the trees. He looked at his fellow travelers. There was an middle-aged man with his graying hair pulled back into a ponytail. A plain looking woman blowing into her hands, her eyes darting around apprehensively. Another woman, shorter, wearing a bright white jacket with neon-colored geometric patterns, looking unimpressed. Behind them stood another man, taller than everyone, with angular features and a receding hairline. The monopole noted that they all seemed older than him, which was not the impression he had formed from their voices.

‘We’ll head around to the other side of these trees into the sun.’ The tall man was talking, the voice was the timekeeper’s. The monopole struggled to reassociate the two. ‘We have to wait a bit before we can start again.’

The ponytailed man approached the monopole and introduced himself as the wallwalker. He did the same to the taller woman who replied that she was the watchman. She didn’t look familiar at all. The short woman didn’t join in or acknowledge them, just followed the timekeeper as he headed off along the edge of the copse. On the opposite side they sat down on the ground and passed around a canteen of water. Even under the sunlight the air was cold and the monopole hoped to be moving again soon.

‘Watch the sun,’ said the timekeeper, ‘watch the clouds. Mark their positions in the sky. Perhaps you can see them moving, perhaps they are frozen. We are inside the field now, the lines of time are streaming past and through us. The sky that you see is different from mine, because we are in different positions, because time flows differently for all of us. But one thing is constant: here, time is singular, distinct from anyplace else. Can you feel it?’

He was looking at the watchman. She nodded and spoke quietly. The timekeeper asked her to repeat it so everyone could hear.

‘I feel like I used to, like I’m about to have a great inspiration.’

‘I’m sure you will,’ the timekeeper said gently. Then to the rest of them: ‘I’m sure you all have your own reasons for coming today, bringing your individual hopes, fears, excitements, skepticisms, misunderstandings, potentials. What you finally see may not be what you were looking for, but you will find it was exactly what you needed.’ He spoke smoothly and without pause, like he was well-rehearsed, like he had said these same words many, many times before. ‘Our world has become a pattern, repetitions sapping novelty, lives turned insular, the infinite shrinking the boundaries of our experience. And thus, having a unique opportunity like this is truly something special. Do yourself a favor and don’t fight it, don’t force it to be something it is not. It *will* be transformative, you cannot prevent that, but you also cannot control the path it will take. You will benefit greatly by accepting it, opening your mind and your soul, your physical being and your temporal consciousness, flowing with the waves rather than being dragged along against your intention.’

He paused and looked at each of them individually. The wallwalker was nodding his head. The watchman was gazing up at the sky. The clapper had made a circle out of pinecones and was filling the center into an uneven dome. She looked up briefly, catching the monopole’s stare, then went back to her disinterested constructing.

‘It is of utmost importance that from here on you closely adhere to a few rules. They are not difficult, but they are important. It would be a shame if your trip was cut short by a moment of distraction or defiance. The most important is that while we are traveling to the site, we must not separate. You cannot allow yourself to wander or fall behind or become isolated. If one of you sees another trailing off, grab them. It is important to at least stay in pairs.’

‘How close are you talking?’ said the wallwalker. ‘Don’t get me wrong, you all seem great but I was hoping to have an individual experience here.’

‘Close enough to touch. Don’t worry, when we’re at the site you’ll be able to spread out, but the trip there is not for the solitary. Together we coalesce the time field and draw it along, preventing it from straying us on its tangents, or stranding one alone forever.’

‘Do not be alarmed if you feel unease or anxious - this is your mind wrestling with spatiotemporality outside of that which it has become accustomed to. As I said before, do not fight it - let it flow through you, let your thoughts align with it. The worry will pass as you acclimate.’

‘I will be giving you further instructions as we go along. Pay attention, follow them carefully. This way we will avoid any undesirable obstacles or delays on our odyssey.’

‘As you may have heard, there are men who claim to own the site, who wish to prevent those like us from accessing it. We may encounter these men, we may not. If you see them, do not let them frighten you, do not panic. The field provides us protection, makes it difficult for them to pull you into their temporal lines. I am experienced in countermeasures, so if you follow my lead you will remain safe.’

‘Are they dangerous?’ asked the watchman.

The timekeeper looked up into the sky, squinted. ‘With regards to your physical safety? No. They don’t want to hurt you, and even if they tried it would mean nothing. Still, you don’t want to get caught.’

‘What happens if we do?’ The watchman seemed nervous. Her glance shifted between the timekeeper and the direction he was looking.

‘They’ll want to know how you got here, about me, about the rest of you.’

‘What should we say?’

‘That’s just it: you’ll have nothing *to* say. Their efforts are futile. In the temporal drag you’ll forget everything. This is the risk, though, this is what

you should be afraid of. If you let them get you you'll have lost your chance, the journey will be a waste, any residue of the site or your memory will be gone. You'll be no better off than the databank.'

They came over the rise as a group, not in a line but as a collective of bodies that were closer together than necessary, like they were shielding one another from a wind, drawing on each other's warmth. The watchman was talking.

'I don't believe in divine inspiration, yet something must plant ideas in our heads. It was once explained to me that quantum uncertainties hold the key to how our brains actually function. Most of it was over my head but I did come to understand that randomness was a fundamental building block of our consciousness. Then we got stuck in these loops and this randomness is being lost. It's the same things over and over again, both inside and out. I see it all around me, I see it in myself — our minds are being dismantled, we're losing the need to think. I was sure my ability to create was lost. I see now that we have to fight to retain it, that it is a matter of resisting the insidious predictability and the ennui that comes with it. Even though we start back at the same day, we have the capacity to turn it new.'

The trail split into a tee. In front of them was a long barn, its wood deeply cracked and faded to a dry gray. One end had collapsed and the roof sloped down until it was resting on the ground, as if the building had started to burrow itself into the dirt and then quit out of exhaustion. In front of it was an old tractor, unusable, flaked and frozen with rust, dried up weeds and grasses poking up from its insides. The wallwalker inched forward and stared at it, like there was something important to see in the dilapidation. The monopole looked around to see if the others saw something that he had missed. The clapper was looking sideways at the wallwaker, for once not seeming completely detached. The timekeeper stepped up next to the wallwalker and asked him what he saw.

'I'm not sure. Just seeing this is making me think. All this seems halfway complete. Like it was in the middle of a change — disintegrating, taking over, returning to the land. Now it won't ever get there. It's kinda sad.'

'Remember, we're in the field now. What you see before you might very well turn to dust, or the barn may rise back up and the rust return to iron, becoming brand new again. Not that it would be any more useful out here in this wasteland. You should be careful getting sentimental about inanimate objects like this, especially this close to the site. They'll only trick you.'

'I was actually talking about the plants.'

‘I’ve got a plant in my apartment,’ said the monopole, ‘one of those big long vine things. It got thrown out of my window once, but the next day it was back where it always was, like nothing ever happened.’

‘See, that’s exactly what I’m telling you,’ said the timekeeper. ‘Do you think there’s any less plants out here than before? Or trees? I can guarantee that in all the times I’ve been here it hasn’t changed. Have you seen plants disappearing where you’re from? I doubt it.’

‘You’re still treating the plants like they’re not alive,’ said the wallwalker. ‘It’s disrespectful. The fact that they can’t be removed might be telling us something about who the superior beings are. Who are the chosen ones?’

‘Maybe you’re right. Maybe this is just a big plan by the plant gods to wipe us all out. Doesn’t quite pass the parsimony test, though. Seems simpler to say that they just aren’t alive the same way that we are, that they aren’t removed because they don’t matter enough.’

‘Or they matter too much.’

The monopole glanced behind him. The clapper gave him a blank look. Behind her the hill they were walking down rose up, and somewhere past that was the barn and the tractor. The argument had continued since they left that spot, but it felt like it had been going on much longer.

‘Hold on a second,’ interrupted the timekeeper, coming to a stop. He went over to a twisted fencepost and leaned down to look at it, then back along the fenceline. ‘Follow me,’ he said, moving back in the direction they came from. He stopped at a different fencepost and unzipped his backpack, pulling out a large, shiny block. Everyone huddled near him, watching. He began to unwind layers of foil until he uncovered an alarm clock. Holding it up, its back facing the rest of them, he stared at it, then looked up at the sun and then back at the clock. After a satisfied nod, he reached around and wound it, then rewrapped it in the foil and put it back in his pack.

‘So what time you got?’ said the monopole, looking at his watch.

The timekeeper told him.

‘Hmph, you’re ten minutes slow.’

‘Actually, we’re ten minutes fast. Making good time. It’s nice to have a group that talks.’

The wallwalker was kneeling by the fencepost, picking at a clump of dried grass. ‘If I pulled all this out, ripped it up and spread it out all over the place, you really think it would come back?’

‘I already told you it would. Why don’t you go ahead and do it? Next time I come out I’ll check and let your contact know what happened.’

The wallwalker ran his fingers along the slender stalks. 'No, I couldn't do that. If it didn't come back... I wouldn't want that on my conscience.'

'Then I won't tell your contact. You'll never know the difference.'

'Would you be able to find this spot,' said the monopole, 'if it was gone?'

'I never noticed that stuff anyway, so it wouldn't matter.'

'It's a complete disconnect even though they're talking about the same thing.' The watchman was talking to herself. 'The facts fit together differently depending on your worldview. To convince the other is impossible, because you can just be lying to make your argument. I can use this. It's analogous to our perception of time. It's relativity, intellectual relativity.'

'Hey timekeeper, I need to go to the bathroom.'

The timekeeper stopped and turned to the monopole, who was pointing to a nearby grove of trees.

'Just go in the grass right here, nobody will look.'

'I um—' the monopole gave him a distressed look and squatted slightly.

The timekeeper sighed. 'OK, but you'll need to bring somebody with you.'

'I'll go,' said the clapper, stepping forward. Her voice was deep and affectless. It was the first time she'd spoken. 'I need to potty too.'

When they got under the trees the monopole found a big tree to lean against and the clapper took a spot on the other side. While the monopole tried to relax, he heard a stream splashing thickly onto the needle-laden ground behind him. When it stopped she spoke again.

'This is not my first time out here. That's why I'm not talking. I cut and dyed my hair, dressed different, changed my makeup. But if I speak I'm afraid he might recognize me.' The monopole hadn't even notice that she was wearing makeup. He could barely recall her haircut. 'I can tell you're not like those other two, you're barely paying attention to that timekeeper. You're not expecting magic, some sort of transcendent experience, you just want to see what the big deal is. Maybe you'll discover the secret to all this, maybe it'll just be a good story to tell your friends. I'll tell you what, if you just follow along it'll be neither of those things. There's something they don't want us to see. They're using us for some other purpose. Are you listening?'

The monopole grunted an assent while trying to moderate his body, hoping she wasn't offended by the other noises he was making.

'When we get there, he's going to give you some drugs. Tell you some bullshit about how they'll free you so that you can have the full experience.'

Whatever you do, don't take them. Don't cause a scene, don't refuse, just pretend to swallow. Otherwise that'll be the last thing you remember. There's rumors that crazy things are happening out there — experiments, human sacrifice, time travel. I don't believe any of that, but I have to know the truth. What are they hiding? We're guinea pigs for something, something important. Maybe we can look into the future. Maybe we can get super powers. Even if it's just for a night, I want to remember that.'

The monopole asked for the toilet paper and the clapper rolled it back to him. He had to waddle over to reach it. When he was done cleaning himself he walked around the trunk.

'Yeah, I see that,' said the clapper, 'the same look you give everyone else. Well, you'll see. When the time comes you can choose what you want to do. And don't even think about ratting me out. If I go down, I'm taking you with me.'

The monopole began to speak but she had already started walking away and he had to rush to catch up. He had a sense that if he had waited a second longer she would have pulled away from him and he'd become stuck, helplessly frozen as she and everyone else continued the journey without him. When he got alongside he looked down at her, her bright jacket swishing with her urgent pace. He opened his mouth to say something again and she shushed him, so he just fell behind and watched over her head at the approaching group.

'What took you so long?'' said the timekeeper with a suspicious grin when they got back. 'It's been over an hour.'

The monopole turned to the clapper and then looked around at everyone and then his watch, dumbfounded. The others seemed painfully serious.

'Ha ha, just kidding!'' said the timekeeper. Laughter broke out around them. 'Sorry about that — a little field joke we like to play from time to time.'

'Look at the sun,' said the watchman, walking up front next to the timekeeper, 'I'm not sure that it has moved. The clouds are different, at least the ones I'm looking at, though maybe I've missed a stationary one that you've spotted, or evidence of the sun's passage. I only see things through my own eyes. I can try to put myself in someone else's head, but that never really works since it's always my mind. Our viewpoint is naturally limited, we're really quite stuck. Unless you disclaim our individuality — which I think none of us would be willing to do — is there such thing as a universal or even shared experience? How can what I see, or think, or imperfectly express be relevant for anyone else? And now we appear to share even more, all of us stuck on the same treadmill, going through the same loops — but has that

brought us any closer together, do we have any better understanding of one another?

‘It would seem the best that we can do is to be honest, to say what we must truthfully and hope that another hears that truth and in this way forms a connection. But this is a false connection, another way to fool ourselves, to seek frustration. It assumes we *can* be truthful, and that we can hear what somebody else tells us the same way they do. It is an inherent disconnect and our inability to grasp this leads us to build false communities. Watch someone nod at you. Do they really understand you? Do you them?’

‘Look at us, traveling together, under the same sun, heading to the same site. For this brief moment our timelines have converged, but this is due to chance not some shared motivation. Or maybe the timekeeper is part of a conspiracy that has a reason for each of us to be selected for this trip, some shared theme which we all reinforce with our presence. He’s laughing but I’ll tell you what, it’s better that he doesn’t try to explain because we probably wouldn’t comprehend anyway, or we’d misinterpret it, each of us wrong in our own special way. Better to find our own truth, and articulate it on our own terms.’

The wallwalker noticed it first, running towards them at an incredible pace, seeming to skim across the barren landscape and trailing a thin streak that appeared to be an afterimage discharged from the beast’s dark body. There was much speculation and concern among the group — was it a bear or cougar or horse?, a time spirit or trick of the wind?, should they stand their ground or flee? When it leapt the first fence, though still far away, a small panic spread between the wallwalker and the watchman, and they would have taken off alone had the timekeeper not finally spoken up.

‘Relax, everyone, relax. It’s just the dog.’

‘The what?’ said a couple voices at once.

‘The dog. Don’t worry, she comes every time. She’s not dangerous — and we need her.’ He was squatting, holding the partially unwrapped clock and barely looking up at the rapidly approaching animal.

‘I haven’t seen a dog since...I don’t know when,’ said the watchman.

‘Me too,’ said the wallwalker, ‘I didn’t think they existed anymore.’

‘They don’t,’ said the timekeeper, folding the last flap of foil around the clock and slipping it into his pack. The others were looking out over the field warily. ‘And I already told you, she won’t hurt you. She can’t even touch us.’

The monopole was about to ask what he meant when the dog cleared the last fence and leaned into a big turn, running circles around them madly. Close up it was clear that it was quite large, and that it didn’t appear ex-

cited or particular interested in them, just compelled to make its circuits. It seemed to increase its pace and tighten its diameter, drawing the group closer together.

‘Like I said, she can’t touch you,’ said the timekeeper, stepping out in the direction they had been heading. ‘She’s from a different time, from the past.’ When their paths were about to intersect the dog peeled off and up the trail, stopping abruptly a dozen feet away. It faced them, panting, tongue wagging. Barked once, loud and insistent. The timekeeper signaled for everyone to follow him and headed towards the dog. It turned and sauntered up the path.

‘What do you mean it’s from the past?’ asked the wallwalker. ‘You mean from before the repeating?’

‘More likely an earlier loop.’

‘How do you know that?’ said the monopole.

‘See how there isn’t any dust? How the gravel isn’t disturbed? If she came at us she’d pass right through.’

‘I’d like to see that,’ said the wallwalker. He whistled and snapped his fingers. The dog stopped and turned around, tilting her head.

‘No!’ spat the timekeeper, slapping at the wallwalker. ‘Sometimes something catches and part of you will be ripped through time. It’s horrible for you and her, and then we’ll all be stuck.’

‘Stuck?’ said the monopole.

‘We need her to lead us through this section. The field lines are twisted here and without her we’d get trapped and never make it to the site. Please, just let me handle this.’ The timekeeper motioned and the dog started back up the trail.

‘So it’s in the past,’ said the wallwalker, ‘yet we can see it, and it can see us? And it’s our guide dog? Wild.’

‘It’s like a dream,’ said the watchman. ‘Though it almost feels like torture, as if we’re being teased with what we’ve lost. It’s too bad we can’t touch her, she looks so real.’

‘She *is* real, and you’ll never forget her.’ The timekeeper was out in front, ahead of everyone, keeping pace with the dog. ‘That’s not torture, that’s a gift. Treasure this.’

The dog had long since left. The sun had definitely moved closer to the horizon. They were tired and hungry but the timekeeper implored them to keep moving, saying this was no time to stop. The trail wound through a small dip between the hills and when they curved around through them something came into view, low and gray and familiar. The monopole felt queasy, like he was watching a scene from outside of his body. He had the

sensation that he would shortly see the group walking across the trail from a different direction. There was a bump at his shoulder as the wallwalker pushed his way through everyone.

‘Hey,’ he said, pointing an accusatory finger, ‘we’ve already been here before. Hours ago. You’re running us in circles. Do you even know where the hell you’re going?’

‘This is the path we must take,’ said the timekeeper. ‘What feels like a circle is actually a knot. We are tying ourselves off from where we came.’

‘I don’t believe this. It’s freezing. We don’t have any food. And we’re right back where we started!’

They were at the edge of the barn. The timekeeper stopped and pulled the foil package from his backpack. ‘We’re much further along than it looks,’ he said. ‘We’re almost there.’ He looked up at the sun while he unwrapped the clock. ‘Stay close, we need to remain together.’ The timekeeper looked at the clock and then wound it quickly. He began to wrap it back up.

‘What’s it say now?’ asked the monopole. He pointed at his watch and read off the time. The timekeeper said they were four hours ahead of the alarm clock. ‘Are you kidding?’ said the monopole. ‘Show me.’ The timekeeper pulled back the foil and showed him the clock. It was just as he said. The churning in the monopole’s stomach got stronger.

The timekeeper put the foiled clock back in his pack and stood up. ‘Come on, it’s time to go,’ he said, then headed back up the trail, in the direction they’d already come from.

The watchman was excited, gesticulating like an impassioned conductor as she spoke out into the open space in front of them. More than once the timekeeper had to give her a nudge to redirect her along the correct course. ‘I’m seeing where all this is headed,’ she said. ‘I don’t — or can’t — actually understand all or any of you, but without you, without your presence here with me today, these particular insights would not have been possible. Through our restricted views, where we only see with our two eyes, where we know each other only for this brief moment in what may be an endless life, we have been given an opportunity for the deepest meaning, an opportunity enabled specifically by these restrictions. There are an infinite number of truths and connections to discover, but to attempt to know or manifest them all is impossibility, madness. If you try and capture the whole then all that does is undermine understanding, distract and flood and contradict, obscuring your message with the overwhelming, noisy, uncurated, unstructured, trivial mess that we are already swirling in.

‘I will find a limitation, allow this limitation to dominate my work, provide a narrowing through which I can create a focus. Otherwise I and ev-

everyone else will be spending all our time consuming, cataloguing, wrangling. The focus will point here, because this is where it began, and where it must end. However, I need more, the project's context is still incomplete. Some of it will come from the site, I'm sure, some of it comes from this very journey — the dog, the barn, what lies ahead — but the rest comes from you. I'm sure I don't have enough. So I'm going to ask all of you to help me, just give me a few words, as simply as you can: Why did you come out here?"

The watchman turned around and continued to walk backwards, looking at everyone, waiting. Finally she pointed at the monopole.

'You,' she said, 'you haven't said much. What is a young guy like you doing out here?'

The monopole didn't say anything, hoping that she would just give up and move on. But the watchman's stare didn't falter — it burrowed into him, demanding a response. Everyone was waiting. The clapper glanced back expectantly. He broke the awkward silence.

'I guess I just wanted to see what the big deal was. And have a good story to tell my friends.'

'I'm not sure if he was the first to complete the path, but he was one of them. He was in here before we knew how to be safe, how to protect ourselves.' The timekeeper talked to the hills, turning to those at each side, then in front of him, then the one below his feet. 'Pinecone told me he got lost more times than he ever saw the site. You could tell it had an effect on him. He said the hardest thing was to know when to stop — it was impossible to know how long he'd been out, the middle of the night one time might have been the same as the following morning the next. And the site could have been just past the next ridge or ages away. Ran himself into exhaustion thinking that he'd always wake up perfectly fresh. Only his mind didn't. Eventually he wore himself down and almost went insane before figuring out the need to travel in a group.

'It took me a long while to realize how much he held onto all those times he went in alone. He'd talk about them like a warning, but deep inside they were a need. I think he became convinced that traveling with others, the inexperienced, was holding him back. He taught me that these trips weren't for us, at least in the immediate sense. I guess I didn't understand that he still thought they could be. All I know is that one day he went in by himself and never returned.'

The sun was falling towards the hills. It was windless, the air stilled like it was caught in time. They came upon a dusty lane. The timekeeper cut the fence and led them onto it. He walked a short ways, up and over a rise before stopping in front of a cluster of mailboxes and pointing them down

a gravel drive. The monopole looked back to make sure the timekeeper was following them and saw the word **BLEMMO** stenciled on the side of one of the boxes. The timekeeper moved up through the group, talking again, a tinge of excitement in his voice.

‘Pinecone’s still around, you know, though I don’t visit him anymore. He attacked me the last time, says he can smell the field on me. Probably always will.’

The monopole stood at the edge of a large crater. It sloped deep into the ground and spread out from its center, up and over its far lip, was a wide arc of debris: shattered wood, metal fragments, shingles, glass, beams, poles, pipes, wires, half a toilet, a bent window, a tumble of bricks, a flicker of chrome, an indiscernible confetti streak of color, char and ash, dirt and rock, ruin distinct and indistinct, everything and nothing. Standing on the opposite edge, in the middle of the spread of pulverized waste, was the clapper. She was staring at him, running her hand across her face, a gesture which the monopole didn’t understand. To his right, a quarter of the way around the crater, was the wallwalker. The timekeeper was walking the watchman to her position on his left. The sun was falling behind the horizon, pale yellow against a dull, steely sky. Shadows descended down upon them, pressing darkness and cold over the fading light. The clapper quit motioning and sat down, her jacket and the rest of her disappearing as if they’d joined the detritus. The timekeeper was kneeling next to the watchman like a buzzard. The crater seemed to be sinking into the gloom, falling away to expose the hypocenter from which the field emerged. The monopole no longer felt ill, yet his stomach still churned, his nerves prickled. He dropped to his knees and tried to catch his breath. A tear collected in the corner of his eye. This was the site.

He was back under the hood, seeing only black though outside it was not much different. The timekeeper had laid out a towel for him to sit on and the monopole could hear the guide nearby, busily rustling and rattling and pouring liquids in some mysterious preparation. He had worked his way around the crater to this last stop. The monopole had watched him attend to the other three travelers but in the fading light had been unable to make out anything coherent. Now all he had to form the scene were his ears, apparently just as useless as eyes blinded by a sunless sky.

The noises stopped and the monopole’s hand was lifted and his glove pulled off. He gasped at the sharp shock of the cold. Something small was placed in his palm, his fingers guided to curl around it.

‘Here, take this. You can use this to wash it down.’ His other hand was given a cylinder which he gripped instinctively. ‘There is a straw which you can slip under your hood. This is the last step of the journey. In a short time you will fall asleep, but it will be a sleep unlike that which you’ve encountered before. You will undergo a bifurcation, and soon after will wake up, twice. Once back where you start every day and once right here, to witness the full magnificence of the site. Those awakenings will be in parallel, and though each manifestation of yourself may seem unaware of the other, they will be connected through the power of the field, the experiences shared at the deepest continuities of your being. Now, go ahead, you are almost there.’

His hand was pushed upwards and he wiggled it under the hood and pressed it up to his face, grabbing the pill with his teeth. Then he pulled at the drape of the hood and worked the straw up to his lips and took a pull. The drink was cold and sweet, vaguely fruity. The pill floated around awkwardly and while he tried to get it to settle something caught his eye and he looked up, catching the briefest glimpse of the white coat off in the distance before the absolute blackness returned. The monopole leaned forward and brought his hand up to adjust the straw, and while pretending to take another sip he let the liquid flow back into the container, then opened his mouth and dropped the pill into his hand.

‘Put your hand out.’

The monopole froze. Maybe if he flicked the pill away it would stick in the hood, or maybe he could drop it in the drink. He hesitated.

‘Come on, I’m going to put your glove back on.’

Unable to commit to an exit plan, the monopole just reached his hand out and opened it wide, hoping the pill would drop unnoticed. Instead it clung to his skin, and as the glove was tugged back on, he could feel it roll around down to his wrist. A hand touched his shoulder.

‘Drink as much as you can, then when you are ready you can lie down.’

The timekeeper began to speak in that measured, well-practiced voice, almost a whisper. It seemed to not be coming from a specific direction but surrounded the monopole in a hypnotic atmosphere.

‘Relax — your moment is near. The path that we traveled has prepared you for this. You are deep in the field, near its greatest density. Time moves through and around you, I’m sure you can feel it. The past and present and future, what was and wasn’t, what will and won’t, the lies of our existence and the truth of our dreams, the reality of memory and the fraudulence of another’s. Before. After. Now. The lines of time have melded and what once seemed linear has been exposed as a confluence, a network, a weave where causality and incongruence is indistinguishable, where simultaneity is

actually intersection. The loops of time are a crystal which the field has melted, their structure dissolved, phase changed to a new order. You have access to all time at once. Relax. Immerse yourself in its infinities. You cannot choose now, and when you return, you won't have to...'

...He curled up on his side, staring into nothingness, waiting. His head was resting on his arms but he did not, could not, sleep. Down in front of him were obscure noises: dragging, clanging, slapping, snapping, grunting, tumbling, cracking. He imagined the site reconfiguring itself, time slipping backwards to reform whatever structure had existed here, the earth lifting the depression out of existence. Or an unfelt wind, silently turning a vortex that burrowed deeper and threw the wreckage up into the stars. He had no urge to remove his hood. There was a slight warmth, he was becoming comfortable in his patient anxiety. He felt like an explorer in uncharted territory, soon to make a discovery unknown to mankind...

...Eyes opened, eyes shut. The view was the same. He may have slept. It was impossible to tell. An unknown time passed...

...The hood came off. Before the monopole stood a huge bonfire, its flames more white than anything, so bright that it was all he could see. He wanted to turn away, to look around him, to see the others, who had pulled off his hood, darkness again. But he was transfixed. Heat radiated across his face, down through the air into his lungs. His eyes hurt. It was getting brighter, higher, out of his view. The monopole did not look up. He did not turn away. He stared at the white hot core of the fire and wondered if it would burn forever...

...The wallwalker was inside the crater, his hands raised and shaking, spinning round and round, stumbling amid the rubble up and down the slope like an unstable top. He had no shirt or shoes on and his pantlegs were rolled halfway up to his knees. He was yelling something, yet it sounded far away, too far to understand. Suddenly he fell to the ground and rocked back and forth, holding his foot. His head was still spinning, screaming out into the night...

...Down at the center, the timekeeper paced around the fire. He watched it constantly, reaching a hand out and pulling away. He vanished behind it and the monopole looked up to see the clapper descending into the crater. She appeared to be looking right back at him. She waved and lifted her hands up, but he heard only murmurs lost in the sound of the fire. He stepped down over the rim and waved back...

...The watchman was near the bottom of the crater, on her knees, face buried in her hands...

...A beating sound, like drums pounding a too-fast rhythm from the heavens. It pulsed, unwelcome, through the crater. His heart seemed to try to catch up with it, to draw him into a quicker passage of time. The timekeeper was looking up past the monopole. He turned around and saw the moon — no, a second moon — drifting across the sky...

...'Come closer! Don't be afraid! They can't enter, the field will protect us!'

The timekeeper was running around in a big circle, yelling up at everyone. He went out and grabbed the watchman, lifting her up and yanking her closer to the fire. The monopole looked across at the clapper. She pointed above him and then turned around and scrambled up the side of the crater. At the top she glanced back before disappearing into the darkness...

...The thumping of the helicopter spread out across the night. The monopole felt a breeze across the back of his neck. There was the sound of different engines, indistinct in multiple directions, closer to the ground, slipping and revving. A beam moved across the crater and stopped on the wallwalker. He backed away, up towards the edge. Above him, still far away, an array of lights burst on, twisting and bouncing in the deep blackness. The timekeeper was yelling wildly, both at him and the monopole, his voice swallowed by the surrounding din...

...The spotlight swung into view and next to it a flicker and then dust kicked up in front of the wallwalker. He stumbled backwards and started

rolling down the slope. The monopole backed away, along a high circumferential line. He glanced down at the fire, saw the watchman huddling at the ground, then turned to see back behind. Another array of lights was bobbing in his direction. The helicopter slid over the crater, facing away, between him and the others. Its dark hull gleamed in the firelight. He looked across at the opposite side one last time, then turned and scrambled up and over the lip...

...Cracking and thumping, below and above and behind. He could see nothing. He stumbled and rolled and came to his feet and kept going...

...Cracking and thumping, louder, closer. The monopole looked back and the fire was almost gone, a low, deep red glow of embers. A light flashed across, blinding him momentarily. He started running again, in a different direction...

...Cracking and thumping and then thump thump the monopole was thrown to the ground. He had no breath. Pain radiated up his body and through his arm. He rolled to his back and his head flopped to the side and off in the distance the fire was raging, orange and yellow and higher than ever before...

‘...Why did you run? How did you get here? Who brought you? Fuck! Should we try to bring him in? Forget it, he’s a waste...’

‘...I’m not doing it! We didn’t hit him! Call them back! Let them finish it!’

The argument turned to noise, a beating screaming shouting thumping the monopole couldn’t follow. He couldn’t move. His breath was a wisp. Everything was black, blacker than any black he’d known. He searched it for a shift, a different timeline to move to. The thumping was louder and his heart desperately tried to match it. Air blew into his mouth uselessly. Suddenly, a circle of bright appeared, gliding across the black. And below it, a white coat, also glowing in the dark, arm raised in glory as it sailed up into the sky, following the second moon...

...portae aeternales...

After a few minutes in the cold a slime was building up thick and pointless in Weeble's mouth and nose. He sniffed and snorted and hawked and spat at the railing of a stoop. A nice, hefty loogie flew towards the banister but didn't completely release, its trail breaking and leaving a phlegmy appendage which retracted back at him like elastic, so that when the expectoration nailed the black metal and flung a full loop around to create an elongating pendulum that swung in short, jittering satisfaction of his aim, a similar marker was hanging in wet embarrassment from his chin. He wiped it away and fought the urge to look around and see if anybody noticed, since though he knew he could easily tear down any stupid schmo who wanted to point and snicker it was a better look to keep acknowledgment of his shame to himself. Plus he was still pissed off at Greco and Nits, and it would feel too good to lose his head and take it out on some unexpecting fool who wanted to join in on having a laugh at his expense. Knowing his luck it would probably be the beloved owner of the mayor's favorite takeout joint or the asshole wimp son of a fat-cat suit and before he had time to enjoy even an hour of his day off he'd be sitting in jail hoping they didn't check warrants across state lines.

What was with those two chumps anyway? They tell him to stick around and ask him about what he did yesterday and then act like he was performing some kind of comedy act. After a minute of that Weeble was certain he must have had a raging zit on his face or they'd stuck a note on his back, but when he went to the bathroom there was nothing funny with his looks. Then they started to get goofy, asking him weird stuff like didn't he have different clothes or what was it like going night after night not getting laid?

'Because of the requirements of this job, I get my action during the daytime. In fact, while you faggots are in here jerking each other off I'm

going to be out there having myself a nice time with an actual lady — or *ladies*.’

Nits looked like he had the DTs he was giggling so hard. Greco spoke through a huge, ridiculing smile.

‘Sure you are. Tell me, how was the sunrise today?’

‘What about it? Same as every other fucking day.’

Which sent them into fits.

‘If you’re going to have your jollies off me the least you can do is tell me what’s so hilarious. It’s very rude. You know, once in a while I could use a good laugh too.’

‘Trust us, Weeb, you didn’t believe us even when we told you.’

‘Told me what?’

Then Greco proceeded to give him a bullshit story about aliens infecting his brain and that he was actually a clone sent back in time. Ha ha, real fucking funny. That was when Weeble left. ‘Cover your ears so they can’t get in!’ was the last thing he heard from those nitwits. Wasting his time as a joke when they should be thankful. He really should call up Felantex and try to get them put on the grave shift. But he wasn’t going to piss away any more of his day off on those two. He didn’t have to work until the following evening — he was going to put ape and ancient out of his mind and enjoy himself. Weeble wiped at his chin again, finding it difficult to distinguish cold from wet. He glanced around to see if anyone was looking at him, finding only a couple people walking along the empty sidewalks, oblivious as he stared them down.

Weeble punched the buzzer with his pinky and stuffed his hand back in his pocket. He bounced in place, bobbing his head, feeling good and ready to feel better. Finally a voice cracked through the speaker. It was a woman.

‘Who is it?’

‘Is Lear there?’

‘Who is it?’

‘I’m looking for Lear.’

Something garbled and then silence and then after a bit a deep, nearly infrasonic voice.

‘What?’

‘Lear, it’s Weeble. Let me up.’

‘Uh uh. I told you before, I got nothing for you.’

‘Come on, I’m flush.’

‘Goodbye.’

Weeble began to plead his case but the speaker had cut out so he hit the buzzer again. And again. Then held it down.

‘Don’t make me come down there and bust your ass.’

As he loped around the corner onto Upside's street, Weeble was still grumbling about Lear. Calls himself a dealer — dumbass probably used all the shit himself. If he wanted to smoke himself out of business that was his problem. There were plenty more where he came from. Weeble took the stairs two at a time. The intercom was still a mess of wires poking out of a hole in the plate. The door was still taped open. He slipped inside and went up to the apartment. The hall was dark, like dusk. He knocked on the door. Weeble heard movement, maybe voices, then nothing. He knocked again.

'Hey, Sonny! I can hear you in there. Open up, it's Weeble.' More movement, but not by the door. He kicked it. 'Hello? Can you hear me? Open the fucking door!'

There was a sound and he saw an old man stick his head into the hall from a different apartment. Weeble opened his mouth to curse him back inside, then shut it, having said nothing. The man's face showed neither irritation nor confrontation nor interest. Just deep familiarity. They stared at each other in silence.

Weeble went down the street to the phone at the corner. There was nobody hanging around it. He looked around suspiciously, searching for a cop or a lookout. On the opposite sidewalk a man and a woman were walking, bundled up and huddled against one other, his arm around her. The man took a cigarette from his mouth and passed it to his partner, then exhaled a big cloud of vapor and smoke. It flowed and hung strangely, seemingly similar particles dissipating at different rates, creating a separation within itself which approached a clarity that was quickly lost to the cold's transparency. Weeble looked back up the street. There was nobody else out. In the distance a car turned onto the road. He watched it approach him slowly, an ominous creep, he frozen in anticipation or resignation. Then it turned away.

He cleared his nose onto the ground and pulled his book out of his jacket. When he found the number he slid a coin into the slot and dialed and before a complete ring the line picked up.

'Hello?'

'Sonny, it's Weeble.'

'The fuck?'

'Hey, I was just up at your place.'

'Yeah, no shit.'

'Why didn't you answer?'

'You never take a hint, do you?'

'Listen, you're se—' Weeble caught himself, remembering where he was. 'Can you fix me up?'

There was a distant mumbling and then a muffled voice. ‘It’s fucking Weeble Wobble, who do you think it is?’ Back into the receiver: ‘Why don’t you just go?’

‘I have money.’

‘You got escrow?’

‘What’s that?’

‘Exactly, you ignorant bitch.’

‘Come on, I’m right outside. I’ll—’

‘I know where you are. Same thing every time. Time to finish this fucking dance.’

The line clicked. Weeble stared at the receiver.

‘Weeble!’

He turned around. The voice yelled again and he looked up. In the next building down, Upside was leaning out of a window, pointing a fist at him. Weeble moved towards him.

‘Sonny, I—’

‘Time to bug someone else, Weeble.’

The hand moved and there was a flash and a bang and a crack in the street. The gun pointed back at Weeble. He put his hands up and backed away, past the phone and around the corner.

‘Get lost.’

No answer.

‘Nothing for you.’

Two steps in and Svelstar Chrenk caught him, sending him back through the door without a word.

‘Leave, troll.’

‘But Jellica, I have mo—’

‘Don’t call again.’

He was at his edge. What the fuck was going on? Nobody was selling. Nobody wanted to talk to him. People weren’t answering. It was like he had a disease and everyone knew but him. The few bars that were open — even the ones he’d never been too — wouldn’t let him in. He couldn’t even find a street dealer. Weeble never imagined he’d be unable to get *anything*, so the last few hours of gradually building expectation and its denial and his own denial that he might get nothing had left him twitchy and angry

and desperate. He wanted to grab one of those assholes and shake them into dust. He wanted to scream. He had screamed. At the O'Deli he had laid into the pipsqueak at the bar until a bearded giant in a bloody apron had come at him from behind the meat counter with a cleaver. Now he was running through his dregs. Connections nearly forgotten, those who had cheated him or he cheated, hippies selling the wrong shit, swindlers peddling poison, creeps looking for a friend, indiscreet idiots that might be pinched at any minute. If he had anything in his place he'd just go back there, but there was nothing left. The day was turning to shit and for no apparent reason. At this point he'd have been happy to just lay down and go to sleep, except he knew he'd never knock out unless he had something to bring him down.

He was coming up to the lodge. It was a crumbling row house that looked uninhabited and uninhabitable on an uninhabited and uninhabitable block. Its lower windows were boarded up, roof holes visible from the street, the brick front a dark, brownish color of neglectful decay overlaid with even darker, competing scribbles of illegible graffiti and punctuated, on the upper floor, by broken windows which held a deep void of blackness that made the surrounding facade seem almost radiant in contrast. The door was ajar and when pushed it opened easily and without a creak. He could barely see in. A shadow of a wall, hint of a stairway, the floor almost invisible. Inside there was a draft, it felt colder than outdoors. There was a smell too, strong yet unisistent: mold, dust, urine, unwashed clothes, burnt plastic. Just as Weeble remembered.

He searched in the gloom but the bottom floor was empty except for what appeared to be little piles of clothes or blankets. He crept up the stairs to where it was brighter and found the front room similarly abandoned. Strewn about were a few pipes and syringes and a single spoon, its handle bent around. He checked but knew there wouldn't be anything left. The door to the back room was closed and he opened it slowly, half-expecting a teeming horde to rush out at him. Instead he was hit with a slight warmth and a dull, bitter odor. A sheet had been hung over the window and a thin frame of light spread out from its perimeter. There were more piles here. He knelt down at one, then looked at the others. Ratty, greasy blankets heaped on and tucked around clothes spread out like they were mimicking people at rest. Shirts and jackets with the arms held close or stretched behind an empty beanie or hood or scarf. Pantlegs pulled up in a fetal curl or extended and crossed in a strangely natural repose. Shoes with socks running out of them and up into the pants. It was like ghosts had tried to put on one of those performances art pieces, turning the stupid freakish. He searched through the pockets, finding lighters and pipes and wallets and other useless crap — scraps of paper, a broken pen, half-eaten candy, a pair of marbles. In one of the arms he found a thick metal pin. He noticed that the clothes were even

more layered than he originally realized, shirts over thermals over tank tops and bras and boxers and briefs.

Finally, in the inside pocket of a zipped-up jacket whose nonexistent owner was scrunched up by itself, he found something. A little baggie with a few small rocks. Weeble got a pipe and a lighter and plopped himself down on a pile, nestling comfortably onto the stinky but soft laundry. He packed the pipe and struck the lighter but sensed movement and froze, letting the flame go out, staring across at the opposite corner of the room. In the shadows another pile was moving, slightly, rising and falling, breathing. As Weeble watched he began to make out a shape of substantiality, though the form was obscure, twisted. Slowly his eyes began to understand, to untangle a torso and legs, thin but intact, holding in an embrace one of the deflated forms that surrounded him. An arm wrapped around a coat, the coat arm dangling over the body. Jeans twined with another. All moving together with the slight rhythms of sleep.

Weeble's first instinct was to leave, to take the drugs to the other room or back to his apartment to be alone and free from possible interruption. Then a feeling of comfort took over, an ease brought on equally by the covert familiarity of his surroundings and his hunger to taste that which lay tantalizingly close to his lips. Anyway, he'd been waiting too long to keep putting it off, he deserved at least one hit right now. So he struck the flame and ran it across the pipe, watching nervously at the two objects near and far in front of him as the light flicked tendrils across the room and crepitations challenged the silence. Then he pulled in the acrid smoke and his concern lifted away for the first time in what felt like forever.

Now was not the time to be alone. The rush had long passed and residue of urgency was fading yet Weeble still flew and before he landed he needed somebody. *touch feel hold* He skittered along, looking around for someone, a girl, any girl. There was nobody. A few times he'd seen people far off, but they turned or disappeared before he got close. He rubbed himself, feeling pent-up. Skipped a few steps. *eyes lips tongue* The streets were empty. Even the normal spots, where there was always a girl working. It felt like somebody had put the word out that he was coming and everyone had scrambled. Another joke. Real funny. *talk speak laugh* 'Ha!' he yelled out, but sure as shit nobody was around to hear it. It was like he hadn't even made a sound. Once Again was open and there were even people inside. A woman at the bar. Older, but alone. *taste lick* He went up and before he had time to offer her a drink she'd called out for Bront and moved away. *skin legs tits* Outside Bront told him not to hang out at the door either. What's the matter? He had money. Just wanted a drink. Bront said he didn't belong. He was annoying. 'You make everybody uncomfortable.' Not

everyone. Plenty of people liked to be around him. *close breath* Plus, he had money. Should've kept a rock though. He could go back to the Red Hot. There were girls there. *rub suck fuck* But Greco and Nits too. Fuck them. Never hear the end of it. They'd probably try to stick him with Fredi. *hair* Fuck them. He'd find someone on his own. *release* This city wasn't empty. He was coming down. *fuck* It fucking sucked.

Weeble was at his building. He didn't even need or want to go there but there he was. He felt like shit. Backed-up and drained. Wired and wiped. Cold and dirty. Had enough of an edge remaining that he considered just passing by. He could make the trek out to Miss Tea's. Or suck it up and do the Red Hot. He felt stupid. He was lonely. He didn't want to go up by himself. But he was right here. Clean up and warm up and take a piss. Grab a cab. Go to Miss Tea's. She'd have a girl. She'd have a drink. He pulled his key out and opened the outer door. When he stepped inside he felt a lump in his throat and choked it back. There was a toy truck on the landing. He kicked it and it bounced off of the wall, rattling echoes all around. He was pathetic.

He took the stairs to his floor and headed down the hall. It was cold and drafty like a window was open, only there were no windows. The walls and floor were colorless, the ceiling a shadow. It was more miserable here than outside. Weeble stopped before he got to his door and stared at it — there was still time to go back. Despite his reasoning for coming up, he felt at the edge of defeat. It was a confirmation of his repulsiveness. He was untouchable, defined by the cavity that surrounded him. To enter his room was to admit to his solitude, shut out a world that had already closed him off, accept that nobody would have him but himself. He turned away.

A different door was in front of him, down the hall. An unknown neighbor. Or, rather, known only through sound. The vague beats of indecipherable music. The rushing waste of a toilet flush. Thumps and scratches. A voice, voices, laughter. Weeble wasn't even sure if it was man or woman. The door was partially outlined by a thin light, a glowing ribbon which faded in along its top, ran down the side and across the bottom before trailing off again. It hinted a connection to within. Sometimes he thought he heard a female speak, maybe she was lonely too. He stepped towards it, reaching up to knock when he realized it was actually ajar. He started to speak but stopped himself and instead just gently slid the door open. His eyes squeezed at the rush of brightness. Holding his hand up in front of his face, he crept into the apartment. It was still and silent. His breath seemed like a thundering gale and he held it, waiting. The sun had split the buildings and sent a beam right through the window directly at him. His hand wavered. He eased the door shut and moved further in.

The room was roughly a mirror of his own, stove and sink and fridge and bathroom cubby on the shared wall. And on the opposite side the bed. A rumple of blankets, a stretched body. A pillow? A head? The glare was too strong. Weeble moved towards it, the sunlight following him until stymied by the parallactic shadow of the window's edge. He'd braced himself for someone — a man or woman, most definitely a woman — to be laying there, not asleep yet just as frozen, eyes wide with fear or anticipation or intrigue, watching as a slight figure brought forward its forbidden zone that nobody else had today braved. But the bed was empty, or at least did not hold a person. The comforter was wrapped up and tucked into itself, a narrow mass resembling a flattened, faded green burrito. At one end was a clump of pillows with a ghostly depression pressed into them. Weeble stood over it and ran a forlorn hand along his crotch. He smelled something faintly familiar. To the side was a nightstand with a cheap lamp and plastic alarm clock, its white case undulated and tinged with brown streaks as if it had been through a fire. Its hands had stopped at the wrong time. There was also an empty glass and behind it a glass tube like a straw. Weeble moved the tube and saw that the end near the clock was flared into a bulb that was darkened with a sooty haze. He picked it up and smelled it.

Then a thought and without thinking he put it down and pulled open the drawer and started digging around. He found it before he had time to consider where it might be hidden, a wrapped-up bag inside a cigarette box inside a long tube sock. Translucent crystal shards. Weeble whipped his head back at the bed with the impression that somebody *was* laying there, invisible, watching him. He struck at the pillows and threw back the blanket, uncovering a large shirt and a pair of panties with a bloody nub poking out, its sticky redness leaking into the lacy blue fabric. He retreated, stuffing the bag into his coat pocket, grabbing the pipe, turning his back to the bed and the sun and running away from the vacant apartment and its ghosts to get to his own.

off to miss teas or if he found someone before hed take her but there was still nobody out and nobody who he could get near there were no taxis though that would be easier than walking and he wasnt going to go out of his way or call and wait when he could just keep walking and be there before one showed up so if he saw one hed hail it but it wasnt going to happen just like there wouldnt be any chick before miss teas he had a raging boner had it since his apartment he shouldve rubbed it out up there except he wanted to keep it for real and now he was regretting it because it was so hard it hurt it felt like it was pulling all the blood from his head and legs and heart and he was moving fast even though he was drying out and no gas was getting to

his muscles his heart might explode he was going so fast now hed get there in no time

there was someone he moved towards them two ladies actually they crossed the street and were running away and he chased but stopped because there was a sound from one real loud his pants unzipped he put them back together and then forgot about those snobs and going back in the right direction feet counting one two three towards miss teas

what was that looked like a dog he ran up to where it turned and looked down the street there were actually some people but no dog then he saw a bushy tail flip up between them and it was gone it looked more like a fox how hed know that he wasnt sure but was sure hey can i pet your fox excuse me the big one says the fox youre hiding behind you he walks towards them holding himself and they move apart and away and the fox is gone fuck off go back in the hole you crawled out of creep

Weeble rang the bell and an old fat man answered — screw you Weeb and shut the door — rang and rang and banged on the door and it finally opened and there was Miss Tea hands on her hips glowering not saying anything — can I come in — there's nothing for you here — he had money and pulled out his wad of cash and she shook her head — she was damn pretty with her big hair and fat lips and tight tits and tight dress made Weeble wish she could be bought — someone Grins probably told him that Miss Tea was packing but he looked down between her legs and there was no way — touched her hair and she slapped his hand — you need to leave — I don't know why you're here you're basically jerking yourself off right now — go finish someplace else — come on I got money — ain't your girls selling — he tried to look around her but she blocked his way — you don't have escrow — you're totally wasted — don't give a shit if you know Felante — none of my girls will touch you — pointed back to the street — do us all a favor — just go — everyone here hates you

What was going on? He was fucking bursting and she's telling him the girls won't have him when they haven't even seen him and he definitely hasn't seen all of them especially paying for it which he could and would. What kind of business is she running? Doesn't she know the customer's always right? Maybe she's backed up herself. Maybe she wanted him to push. Maybe she didn't see how much money he had. It was too bunched up. Weeble pulled it out and started to smooth it then realized that someone could be watching so he went over to a wall and faced it to get everything organized. He put the big bills on the bottom then the small ones but when he folded it the big

ones were hidden so he reversed it then had a better idea and put the little ones in the center and the big ones on the outside so he could flap it like it was a real fat stack.

He rang again and there was a shadow behind the blurry window the fat guy he was right at the door then walked away and Weeble reached for the bell but saw someone else coming. Red swinging Miss Tea so he pulled out his money and fanned it back and forth at the door and when it opened Miss Tea jerked back. 'Hey, what the fuck are you doing?' He stuck his hand towards her face. 'I got real money, see?' 'Ugh. Same money every time. We're not selling.' She pushed the door closed on his wrist and he cried out and pulled it free. Bitch it really hurt. 'This is your last warning. Go, or I send out Mondo again.' 'Listen, I'll give it to you, is that what you want?' He leaned forward and licked his lips sexy. There was only a small crack now and he couldn't get his foot in to stop it. 'Leave Weeble. You ought be tired of getting your ass whupped. Bug someone else.' The door clicked shut and he could hear Miss Tea behind it yelling angry while he clenched his jaw and fists and paced on the tiny landing until he heard a giant thumping and saw a giant shadow through the window and turned and sprinted an escape quick.

He turned into the alley rubbing his legs to be discrete but there was no one around so there was no need. He looked back to be sure and sure enough he wasn't being followed. He should've stayed, could've taken him, he probably wasn't that big just a trick of the window and Miss Tea's big talk. No matter, if she didn't want his money she could kiss his balls. He leaned against a dumpster and pulled it out. It hadn't had a rest since he left his place and though it was cold and dry and not what it wanted it was relieved to finally be touched and get moving. So stiff it was almost numb, or maybe that was the cold, it had all his blood and now he was trying to squeeze it back because he needed it. Moving but still so far to go. He needed to forget this alley, garbage, brick wall. There was Miss Tea. Sorry about that, I didn't want the others to get jealous. Put your money away I should pay you. She hiked her dress up and down, slid over him. That was better, now it was getting somewhere. Though not fast enough, his arm was getting tired and needed its blood back.

Weeble was not exactly satisfied. Although the pressure had popped his cock was sore and his arm too. He should be someplace warm, with a woman. He deserved that. Miss Tea could kiss his balls. The flame circled beneath the bulb and a thick vapor filled it. He sucked it in and let his head fall back and exhaled up towards the dumpster. He took another hit and his nerves

were being grabbed and shook all the way out to his arms and legs and back into his heart and what do we have here he hopped up and ran off from the bum yelling why you hoarding ill catch you next time

across the street diagonal into a park the grass crunches he looks down and counts his steps one two three four counts the grass cracks onetwothree-fourfivetentwelve up ahead is a jungle gym and there are kids he runs after and around flips around pole giggle scream jumps and hangs from metal hoop back forth back forth look theyre going down slide he rushes up and leaps after them head first out onto sand hey get away from parents running out where did they come from grab kids wanna go again left turns and somersaults jumps grabs hoop swings on pole up ladder to top of slide

more people about nobody talks or looks or whoah hey babe he follows after her cross street faster glances back around corner into bar dont think so bud im with her sure take a drink if i can want me to throw you out hey huh a huge man bigger than this guy waving glare eyes stumbling huge yelling licked dog he backed away not gonna get beat for some tramp around onto street ignore that yelling get away faster

he hustled down the sidewalk — he jogged down the sidewalk — there were definitely more people out but they're not ignoring him now they're looking pointing — he kept his head down counted his steps one two three four five long step over crack side step another — watch it — excuse me — more stares — Weeble turned the corner and crossed the street to avoid them — why did they watch — he wished they'd mind their own so he could count steps and try to get to a hundred without hitting a crack if they would just stop it with the eyes

Weeble had no clue where he was but he wasn't about to go back and be around all those staring creeps so he just kept moving forward or taking a turn but never looping back always out. Out through run down crumble dirt chain link shithole where the hell was he?

The lights were sharp in the black and there were people all over now though he never caught anyone looking at him it was probably the darkness. When had the night come? He could see his breath and the others' shoot out and vanish like the streetlamps caught and then burned it off. It was a new place but at least it was familiar, restaurants and bars and shops though many of them were still dark and he could see his reflection in their windows, though he didn't care about himself it was the others he was trying to catch stealing a glance when he was turned. He whipped around and searched for

eyes before they noticed. A group loud and chattering flowed around him hiding their eyes, two four six eight 'Boo!' Weeble's heart exploded as the tall man rotated around him, eyes locked and a big laugh. 'Fuck you.' He went after him but he'd already turned and caught the group, arms around everyone and waving at the honking cars while they crossed the road. Lots of people, all groups or pairs all around him, where did they come from and where were they going? He looked around for someone alone, all by herself like himself who'd be cold wanting to be held, get a room and have a good night. Here's two he could follow, round butts swaying legs crossing heels clicking one two three four one two three four. Who wears a dress like that when it's freezing out? Oh, oh. 'Hey, hey. You ladies looking for a little fun?' 'Eww, get away.' 'I got money. Pay for you both. Got something else too...' 'Hey don't touch me!' 'Is he bothering you? Why don't you take a walk?' Tough guy: slicked hair, trench coat, arm back blocking his girl. 'Mind your own.' He pushed, swung. Weeble's head spun and he was on all fours, his heart drum rolling. He lunged up and was back on his ass against a car. The trench coat hovered above him. He saw them now, eyes all around pointed at him. He rolled off and ran off, dodging groups and pairs and pairs of eyes glinting under the streetlights.

one two three four three two one two three stay in the shadows nobody sees nobody to see hes the black heading off who knows where the moon isnt the sun cant be used for directions head towards it stay out of its light no one around someones watching in the windows cars bushes mailbox phonebox pole step wide if the moonlight dont catch they wont cant see

The sky was a lavender glow, the shadows gone but everything still bathed in a dim haze. He was in a real neighborhood, houses with yards and trees and driveways, no shops or bars, no stoplights or people, empty sidewalks and quiet streets and houses only. The air seemed to drop even colder into his lungs, as if he were in a cemetery. He was really lost now and his legs were like glue yet he had to keep moving, one foot in front of the next two three four find a way to someplace he could stop. Up ahead a man was standing in his yard, wearing a robe and a furry hat. He looked side to side to side and when Weeble got close he followed him, his mouth tight and eyes huge, saying nothing just standing and staring like he was expecting a response. Weeble kept moving matching his gaze and right before turning away he caught what seemed to be a glimmer of wet on his face.

it was a maze — houses forever streets turned around and twisted — he was stuck and couldn't escape — the sun was up not full high it was never full high but up into the sky and no matter what direction he went it kept

moving across while he circled — maybe the exit was secret hidden in the back — he slunk low between the cars he moved up the driveway through the gate along the side of the house — what a yard — hot tub gazebo garden beds big tree tree house dog house patio — who knew people lived like this — corner of his eye turned and through the window a man and woman hugging and kissing — she's short and chubby and holds his head and he has her ass and is grabbing on her boob — a hand slipped down and kneaded — it was too cold out here so he got closer to the window and could feel the heat pouring off of them — the man fell back into the couch and she straddled him and pulled off her nightgown — big saucer tits squeezed and sucked and she rolled her hips and Weeble couldn't get close enough his breath was fogging his view — she leaned forward and he ran his hands down her body over her soft fleshy curves and hooked her underwear — she looked up right into Weeble's eyes with perfect lust before covering up and falling back pointing and yelling — the man's head popped up and that was the last thing Weeble saw — dick swinging free — he ran through the back to the fence - hey hey — no stopping — get back — he leapt and clambered over protecting himself hoping this was the way out

The city loomed up before him, tall and returned yet he barely even noticed because below the street was busy busy, people smiling and hooting, rushing or not to get someplace, grouped together with shaking heads and mouths turned in disbelieving smirks, a car rolling through honking like mad, not impatient but with the rhythms of joy, someone ran by wearing nothing but sneakers and Weeble tried to get a look but only saw a brief glimpse of ass, a man slapping backs and shaking hands, a family bundled together in the middle of the scene with stiff smiles waiting for the passersby to notice the stranger ready to take their picture, music blasted from a boom box held high, a child on shoulders, someone cried out and from far away an echoed response. Weeble felt the energy but not the pleasure, his neck ached as well as his back and jaw and his balls. His legs were stiff, his nerves twitchy. He was an alien in the hubbub, moving through unnoticed and confused, seeing eyes that gazed around with wonder but passed right by him because whatever he wasn't feeling made him invisible.

The sky burned peach and lava, a narrow band between the tall black of the buildings below which Weeble could see a constant stream of people rolling past on the street, a parade of unremarkables who served as their own audience and purpose. Nobody looked down between the buildings and even if they did there was nothing to see, only shadows and smoke and someone apart, outside of their world, but they were too busy looking at each other or up ahead or at that still blazing light above them. Weeble turned his eyes

to the sky to watch his own little patch of the static fire and wait for it to ignite inside of him too so that they could both get moving again.

going with the flow faster actually weaving through past the people interested in where this was headed he tried talking asking but they back off like he just appeared unwanted freak fly on up the curb looked behind between two perfect legs the fox tail and he walked back and it was gone then another glimpse a snout maybe it was a dog he was against flow and dodged collided saw the tail pass behind a woman stumbling from one man to another leaning big kiss right on the lips open on to the next he stepped over to intersect her weight on him and he leaned pulled his arm around her just himself shes kissing the dude right next to him hey but its only the dude shes gone off and the smiling dude and everyone else with her and theres the tail he goes after it into against the crowd

he pushed out into the stream and it pulled him along he had no choice there were so many people where did they come from jostle madness touches fleeting he shifted or was shifted across the mass lifted pushed stepped one two followed led it was dark he could barely see yet hed been by this corner this building that one many times the big loop was getting denser with every turn he couldnt wouldnt leave from the pressure that held and which he had to keep up through to the end and all the while he counted six seven eight whether he floated or not a nonstep was a step the movement important even if not necessary

Weeble stumbled over a leg and caught himself on someone in front who turned around with a big smile that looked more a like a sneer tired and pained and struck with exhilaration — he was not smiling nor sneering just moving with the last remnants which was still a good number but nothing like before — it was light out now and everywhere was strewn with bodies — the sidewalks piled high and the street dotted with the exhausted collapsed

what the fuck — were those bodies — he was stomping forward with a crowd of others and why — he couldn't slow down he kept moving and his heart and his muscles and everything inside him felt like it wanted to tear right outside of him and his legs wouldn't stop one two three fuck he felt good — fuck — he aimed himself off the street to the sidewalk and someone grabbed him and tried to pull him along but wouldn't look at him and wouldn't let go and finally Weeble shook off and made it to the curb and through the bodies — he stepped on an arm and almost rolled his ankle and fell into another which grunted — at least it wasn't dead — off into a side

street which emptied out after a bit and — fuck — felt a tightening in his chest and the ache of dread deep in his belly and he couldn't get his lungs to work right and had to sit down — his body shook and fought the sudden stop of movement while he tried to get everything to calm down

Weeble paced the length of the car. It felt good to pace. It felt too good. The panic was returning, he needed to call Big Felled. He could help. Weeble didn't turn at the end of the car but kept going, away from the procession and the bodies because he wasn't about to see that again. Three blocks to the next big street and it didn't take long to find a phone and he fished out a coin and took a moment to remember Big Felled's number and his mind blanked with fear. What would he say? How would Big Felled ever look at him the same? He was ashamed and frustrated. How did this happen? He tried to rub the coin into nonexistence. A voice behind him: 'Hey bud, are you gonna use that?' He waved it away and a hand pulled his shoulder 'I need this' and he turned swinging finding air and he was thrown back into the phone and a foot to his gut and he hung and with a rip fell to the ground. The foot pushed him over 'Get lost scuzzball' and he crawled away.

Weeble was sitting on the curb legs shaking fingers tapping watching the traffic go by. One two three he really just four five wanted it to six be still. Seven eight. He closed his eyes and his teeth tapped out a one and two and three and one and two and three. The lights of the cars shined through his lids two four six keeping faraway sleep at its distance. What the hell did he even get and why when he was doing so good? His body was worn out but wouldn't quit. He rubbed his hands and breathed into them and rubbed one two three and held up his coat it was all ripped up the side and the cold pushed through it over his body and the hanging flap knocked against him one two one two and he stuck his hand into the pocket. Pulled out the pipe and baggie and there was a twinge of urge before he threw them away in disgust. The pipe shattered into the gutter and the baggie skidded into the shadows under a car and he immediately wondered what he was thinking what if a kid found that but though he didn't know when it was surely it was late enough that anyone who found it kid or whoever would be coming back anyway and wouldn't even know about it. At least they wouldn't come back like this he was sick and would never get better now that he'd touched that shit again he couldn't even remember where he just was he was so fucked up his brain was fried what was the fucking point. The cars go by: two four six eight, two four six. Weeble stood up and put his arms up and out and head back looking at the night sky and then with his eyes closed and jacket flapping let his legs move like they wanted two one two one two stepping out

into traffic not even trying to stop or jump or move side to side just straight out waiting for someone to mow him down.

The stain was a huge yellow dinge that bubbled and faded to a deep brown out at its edges, the smooth continuum of blight broken by two other stains, one completely within the large one and the other at its edge, themselves appearing to maintain their own isolated existences until the details of the underlying (or overlying) giant were noticed within their extent, an additional dimension of gradation that was most conspicuous in the furthest one where the dark boundary formed a horizon that cut through like a shadow within a cloud. The image was desperately familiar yet Weeble had the sense that it was twisted, that his eyes were observing something warped to match a recollection that itself was bent into an allusion unmoored from the vague certainty of its origin. He was staring at the ceiling, his eyelids effortlessly open, not pressing to close again, the day's light filling the room with bright clarity. Though he was uncovered he felt quite warm, almost hot, his bare fingers and toes comfortable, unnoticed, invisible to the air, an antithesis to the consuming numbness that is brought by freezing cold. He turned his head to look out the window, recognized the sheer curtains, their frayed ends and the elongated, S-shaped tear in the upper corner. The usual sun was somewhere up there, sending its rays through the chill that existed at once in theory and in fact, a presence foreign and disconnected from his surrounding atmosphere that nonetheless established its present. He was back in the Hotel Manifold, same room. He understood now.

His head was at the foot of the bed, an unexperienced configuration. He looked back up and the stains settled into their proper positions, the displacement undone, locking his memory and current surroundings into alignment. The color, the smell, the intermittent, unlocatable murmurs — it was all known, nearly routine. He hadn't been here for days, but had known many here before. Weeble remained lying on the dense and sagging mattress, felt all over his body and legs for pain, for damage. His jaw was a little sore and his ribs, and there was the inveterate stiffness, however he seemed in pretty good shape. And no cravings. Maybe a hint of something, but nothing he couldn't handle. Mostly just an overwhelming desire to get things going. Who knew how deep he was, and they were waiting, they and him both. First step: get the room ready.

He liked things to be presentable for Big Felled. And more than that it was incredibly satisfying to see what a little focused work could accomplish. It was a grubby room, and no matter what he did the grime wasn't going to wash away, the stink would still hang, the wallpaper wouldn't uncurl nor

the wall cracks heal, the overall weariness couldn't be lifted. But he saw (knew) what it looked like now, and could see (knew) all the things he *could* do, and imagined (knew) how much better it would be, that even though it would still be a shithole he'd prove that his seemingly minute bits of focused labor still summed to a noticeable improvement. Weeble had snuck downstairs (leaving the door unlocked since he couldn't, on a quick first pass, find the key) and grabbed an armload of sprays and brushes and towels from the supply room. Once, he had gotten caught vacuuming which led to an uncomfortable situation with a glowering maid who was both concerned that his cleaning implied a threat to her job — which she needed now that she believed time had straightened out — and angry that he'd touched her machine, certain that he'd used it on something ruinous like moist vomit or aerosol string. So he wouldn't bother with the carpet, but there was plenty else to do.

He lit a cigarette — thankful to still have some — and took a drag. An unnoticed tension dissipated, carrying with it a sense that it had been a very long time since he had last smoked. He really wished he could have a cup of coffee, however that meant going down through the lobby out to the corner store and he knew the purity of these first moments would be broken by any contact with another person. At some point he'd probably just get some hot water from the sink. A shit substitute but what else could he do? Remind himself to remember to snag a coffee maker for the room before he knocked out?

Weeble started in the bathroom, which was a bit messier around the toilet than normal, surely something he could only blame himself for. He began high in the corner of the shower and moved his way across and down and throughout, touching every surface, often multiple times, spraying and scrubbing and wiping and wetting and scraping and drying, attacking scum and mildew and stains and streaks, brown and black and yellow and white and smudge and smear and splatter and crust and spot, polishing porcelain and metal and glass and plastic not to a shine but rather the well-used's dull luster of hygiene. As he worked he focused down into each individual infinitesimal task and simultaneously let his mind wander out, considered the number of times he had removed this particular blemish or the uncleanable stains above him, or that maid and her vacuum, or the intersections he would make again, or the ignorants filling the world outside of this, feeling a mixture of ease and superiority, knowing that this wasn't where things ended, under one more incessant rub or back to the old grind's concerns and traps and slow wear down to death. That they were still free, that they would still return, or rather already had. That they were being carried along this spur for the benefit of the few stragglers that remained, that perhaps he was the last and they would finally be released when he went to sleep. That he was

actually providing them a gift, a chance to explore an alternate path without the consequence of death or memory, pure experience that some were astute enough to recognize, to let go their past obligations and jobs and worries and take the opportunity to become one with time and space and nature and each other. But too many just settled into the same habits, convinced that everything was back to normal and deluding themselves that the same-old was exciting compared to the apparent tedium they had just lived through, unaware that the cycle never ended and though they had been offered liberty instead were thoughtlessly moving the chains from one limb to another.

Back in the room he shook the curtains, releasing clouds of dust which mixed with his cigarette smoke, seeming to diffuse into a homogeneous miasma that was actually a transitory obscurity from which it would precipitate. While he waited for it to settle, he moved the lamp and ashtray and television off the dresser. There were residues and layers of dust that took multiple passes to remove, even inside the drawers which he never understood. The white book looked clean but was stiff and warped and most of its pages stuck together like it had been through a flood. As always, Weeble tried to press it flat but it just cracked and returned to its twisted form.

He continued working, through the lamp and ashtray and TV and telephone and nightstand. This room had no clock and he'd forgotten to check the time downstairs. He looked out the window and tried to find the sun. Midday something. Halfway through another day, another day clean. It felt great. They really added up, made him feel more confident that he could do this forever. He was close to a round number, but kept it deep inside, afraid to jinx himself, risk his streak. There was always the lingering comedown, taunting him, pushing him edgy. But that was a residue from before the loops, there was nothing he could do about it. He just needed to keep his routine. Every day it seemed easier. Get up, clean the room, go to the meeting. That was where the real magic happened, with his people, those who understood what they were going through, who were open to the possibilities of expanding their lives beyond the track they'd been given. Weeble backed away from the window, not wanting to look down and accidentally see someone, but thinking about all those fools who thought they had finally got out but were still stuck. They were wittingly close-minded, shrugging off an uncomfortable past without the thought that it might still be present, happily looking towards a trick future without realizing that you can't just forget and move on like it was a mote washed away with a tear, as if your resiliency and supposed suffering has prevented you from blindness. They refused to believe you when you told them, often getting angry at the mere suggestion, as if you were attacking their integrity, threatening their existence. Which you were, but you were also offering an escape, a true purpose. If they would only listen.

But few wanted to hear that. At least he had found his group. Together they were supporting one another's search for an understanding of themselves, a way to fathom this life they'd been handed. He went to work on the headboard and bedframe. Every little bit mattered. He made the bed then folded his clothes neatly. When he picked up his jacket he saw that it was horribly ripped and in the pocket found the room key attached to a plastic keychain, a large blue rhombus emblazoned in flaking silver with the details of the hotel. Weeble put the jacket over the phone to remind himself to ask Big Felled to bring him some fresh clothes and a toothbrush. Then he moved on to the window and walls and baseboard and doors and doorknobs and peephole and locks.

'So, where we headed?'

Big Felled was indeed big, a mass of body and limbs that crowded and overflowed from the seat: two legs that seemed to have swelled to fill the space around the pedals, a belly that, despite the recline of the seatback, pressed up tightly against the steering wheel, arms held out like they were untiringly holding up a massive, invisible stone ball, and on top of it all a wide neck upon which rested a proportionally-sized head that leaned forward to fit underneath the low roof. He understood that Big Felled's economic situation would have made obtaining a new ride difficult, but he didn't understand how he'd ever thought this was an appropriate vehicle for himself. In the past he'd variously found it distressing or funny or sad yet now it mostly evoked an empathetic exhaustion for the giant, a feeling that he was witnessing an unfairly doled portion of the little tortures they all had to suffer.

'We're picking up Cinnabar.'

'You serious? How do *you* know her?'

'From you, of course.' He winked and Big Felled nodded, impressed and self-satisfied. 'You remember where she lives?'

Big Felled said that he did and steered the car out into the street.

'So she knows about the group?'

'Nope. I have to explain it to her every time. Spread Preserves is removed so—'

'She's gone? That's why we haven't seen her yet.' Big Felled glanced over, a wave of thoughtful concern passing across his face.

'Yeah. Means we don't have a connection back from me anymore. So, every time now, Cinnabar has to wait until I show up.'

'Damn. But she has a name, though?'

'Oh yeah, but you know I can't tell you — even though you helped pick it.'

Big Felled gave another proud nod. He continued to drive through streets that seemed unchanged, as before, as always. Traffic, honking, jaywalkers,

indifference. Everyone going about their own business. It may have been the same as some of the loops too, but everyone told him it wasn't. He tried to imagine it, a couple days of craziness that went on forever, but he still didn't feel it was a part of his reality. They were getting closer, though. He could tell Big Felled kept staring at him, and for a while he tried to ignore it and see if he would just speak up on his own. Finally he relented and asked the big man what was on his mind.

'I'm just happy to see you. You're special to me, to all of us. I honestly thought you weren't going to show up. It's been days. I wanted to check all of your regular rooms, but was afraid that if I found out, we'd all disappear.'

Licked Dog looked out of the window. They were coming up on Cinnabar's building. He hoped this would go OK. He'd been here before, but it sounded like they were pretty deep. Big Felled drove past and found a spot to park.

'You want me to come up?'

'No, it's better when you don't.'

A dark-puffed eye peered out from behind the door chain, the upper corner covered by an accidental fall of auburn-hinted hair that nonetheless looked perfectly placed. The eye moved about, searching for an accomplice or hidden shadow or some other secret that it was damn well not going to be surprised by.

'Who the fuck are you?' Her voice was tired and hoarse. The extra time had already left its mark.

'Only a friend. We've met before, you just don't remember.'

'Piss off, wierdo.'

'Hey—' Weeble stopped the door with his shoe. 'Hear me out. We've got a mutual friend — Roffy Barbase. We're going to take you to a meeting. You never miss it.'

'We who? Are you part of some perv gang? Better move your foot or I'm gonna scream.'

'Don't do that, please. We're here to help. We know you've been hurting, that you're scared, scared of the future, that there's a future. We'll show you there's nothing to be afraid of.'

'I—I don't do that...' She backed away from the door.

'I know, we know. No drugs, no drink. Completely straight. Just talk, special talk. You're not alone anymore, Cinnabar, we're all struggling just like you. You need us, and we need you. None of us can make it alone.' She looked like she was going to speak and Weeble gave her a second before continuing. 'You know Roffy. You know he's a good guy. Look out your window, you can see his piddly shit car.'

She walked across the room and pulled the curtain aside. She looked down for a long time, the light creating an ethereal border along the side of her head and shoulder. At last she turned and spoke, the glow shifting to her profile, through the distance and Weeble's limited view more of a blurry halo than anything distinct, though he knew the exact line.

'Why didn't he come up?'

'Bi— Roffy?' This was the part he hated the most, even though it didn't exactly function as lie because it once was true — and still was, just shifted. He mustered wide eyes, doubtful she could see them but knowing they helped him hit the right tone. Then repeated the exact line. 'He was afraid you would say no, say no to *him*. He's feeling deeply vulnerable right now and the meeting is the only thing he's got. He really wants you to come.' Weeble paused, giving her time to contemplate the car again, leaning, windows steamed, a troubled slouch of insecurity and apprehension. 'He needs you to do this, for him. If you do, though, I can guarantee you'll find it was really for yourself.'

Cinnabar came back to the door slowly and glanced downward. Weeble moved his foot and she closed it and slipped the chain and opened it wide. 'You'll have to give me some time to get put together.'

'There's no need.'

'Look at me, I'm a mess.' Her head slumped down, inspecting her dumpy sweatshirt and sweatpants, the unmatched socks in deeply-faded blue and red (or maybe barely-faded pastels), the unsteady hands tipped in bold, chipped polish.

'Look at me,' he said, holding out his arms. Big Felled had brought the smallest clothes he could find, probably from his pre-adolescence. They were still gigantic, and to fit on Weeble's diminutive frame sleeves and pantlegs had been rolled into bulging cuffs, shirt and waistband stuffed and folded and drawn up into crowded pleats with Weeble's own belt. He hoped she couldn't tell that they smelled like a stale wine cask.

She giggled slightly then her nervousness returned. She was still close to convincing herself to not go, he could tell. He went over and gently led her to sit on one of the kitchen barstools.

'Let me make us some coffee.' He held up his hand, 'I know where everything is. I'd like to tell you a story.' First he got out his cigarettes and lit one for each of them. Then as he filled the kettle and pulled down the jar of instant granules he recited a tale of a young girl who was away from home attending her first summer camp. The camp was large — hundreds of other children attended during the two weeks she was there — and far away from the city, nestled deep in the woods at the edge of a pristine lake. The young girl had had a difficult time in school the prior year, experiencing bullying and isolation because of her looks and her name and the pubertal

changes that only she seemed to be going through. For this reason she had been reluctant about camp, nervous to be stuck surrounded by a fresh crop of tormentors with not even the possibility of her own room to escape to, inventing multiple elaborate plots to escape having to attend.

However, it turned out that her worries were completely misplaced. She and her cabin-mates quickly developed a tight bond that lasted the entire duration of their stay. Together they had day after day of fun and adventure. Swimming, hiking, making lanyard keychains, suffering the awful food, sneaking marshmallows to their cabin for late-night snacks, avoiding the freaky pit toilets until they could hold it no longer. Watching boys, talking about boys, flirting with boys. Cracking silly jokes, raunchy jokes, in-jokes, told for fun and to pass the time and make each other break during morning flag raising. Told in pairs and groups, in whispers and excessive volume, under the hot midday sun and laying in their cots shrouded by the blackest of nights. She had never laughed so hard as when a group of them had taken a sailboat out and could not figure out how to return, having to be rescued by the two cutest counselors, one of whom tacked them back to dock with great annoyance, at first leaving her and the others in dreamy awe and then, at some point for some reason, one of them developing an uncontrollable fit of giggles which infected them all and self-reinforced into a joyous abandon which persisted well into the evening. With more than one of her new girlfriends she had deep, passionate conversations where they exposed their innermost selves: loves and secrets and troubles and fears. During those two weeks she had her first conversation about sex with somebody who'd done it, her first taste of weed, her first dance, her first kiss.

Then came the last day of camp. She and her friends exchanged addresses and phone numbers and promised to stay in touch. They packed and joked and avoided their final chores. As parents began to arrive they banded and tittered, at this point their exchanges almost entirely an exclusive, private language of allusions and gags and invented phrases. One by one her friends' rides arrived, moms and/or dads and sometimes siblings and/or dogs, briefly giving an embarrassed introduction before piling into the car and pulling around the gravel loop off and away until the next summer. In the afternoon the last of her group left and she was shuffled around to join the few remaining stragglers. They too eventually departed until it was just her and a waif of a boy with huge glasses who barely reached her waist. The staff moved about, ignoring them, preparing for the next round of campers. The boy's mother arrived, apologizing about a flat tire or a break down. The young girl was left alone, watching everyone as they kept busy and avoided her gaze. She wondered if maybe she would be allowed to stay on for a couple more weeks, perhaps even becoming a counselor herself. Her anxiety was distracted to nervous expectation. It could all turn out OK, she could belong here. There

would be many more friends, though she was sure nothing would compare to the group she'd already made.

Instead, finally, calls were made, looks exchanged. It was explained that her mother had mistaken the day and was on her way. One of the cooks needed to make a supply run and would take her halfway to the city to meet her mom. On the way the old man talked constantly but she barely said a word. She felt ashamed. She was not staying, she didn't belong. She stared out the window at the setting sun while her hands, hidden under a sweater in her lap, slowly tore up all of the slips of paper with everyone's contact information. When they got to the service station for the hand-off, she went straight to the bathroom and flushed the shreds. Back at home she disappeared to her bedroom for the rest of the summer. Despite her impulsive disposal of her only mementos of them she could not stop thinking about the group from camp, what they looked like and the sound of their voices and their humor, mumbling to herself with their shared jargon for hours while she piddled around alone. Every day she'd wait for calls that never came, would watch for the mailman and run out in hopes that one of those promised letters had arrived. Only once did she get something, a spare note which said hi and not much else, from one of the lesser girls from the cabin, about as personal as a Valentine's Day card mass-produced to meet the requirement that everyone in class receive one and one alike. She understood what it meant and did not reply but nonetheless slipped it into her box of precious keepsakes. And continued to reminisce in private over those two weeks, smiling at a remembered joke or a failed boat ride or falling back in dreamy disbelief over the soft touch of another's lips, continued to watch the phone and mailbox and talk to herself and count down the days until summer ended and she would have to return to the misery of school. She had no idea, couldn't even imagine the possibility, that she would never get to go back, that those two weeks at camp were it, that the friends she'd made and thought of constantly were truly gone forever.

Cinnabar was staring into her empty mug, dabbing her eyes with her sleeves. 'How did you know?' she asked unsteadily.

'You told me,' said Weeble. 'Before, in another future. It's like time travel.'

'I don't understand.'

'Everything you do now, from here on, you won't remember in the next loop.'

'I thought the loops were over.'

'Afraid not.' Weeble took a sip of his coffee. 'They're never over. This current little jut, this is just bookkeeping — or, that's what we think. You won't remember, but I will. Next time around I'll come back and tell you, tell everyone, what happened.'

‘I— I’m confused. If the loops are still going, then when do I go back? How much will I forget?’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Weeble, leaning forward and putting his hand next to hers, grazing fingers. ‘What’s important is that we were here last time, and we’ll be here the next. I want you to know you have nothing to be afraid of. You’ve been straight for months. I know you don’t feel confident right now, but let me be a testament to your strength. You’ll do great today and tomorrow and however long this goes. And when we finally loop back around I’ll be able to tell you, just like I am now, how strong you’ve been, how strong you are.’

She looked at him perplexed and fearful, unconsciously let her hand fall from her mug to her stomach. Weeble could see her swirling in implications.

‘It *could* end at any time,’ he said, ‘maybe it already has — the consequences are the same either way. You shouldn’t lose your hope, what it means.’ She looked up and he glanced down, a knowing dance of eyes. ‘We have to stay clean for ourselves this time, and for ourselves the next time, and for ourselves that have been good so many times before. And not just for ourselves but those around us, those closest to us, who we are helping, just as they are helping us.’

‘There’s more to explain but I’m not good at it.’ How do you articulate a feeling which is constructed from moments, from an evocation of experience that is so personal? ‘Roffy can tell you, he knows how to put those words together. You are coming to the meeting, right?’

She nodded and hummed an assent.

Though he knew it was coming, her confirmation relaxed him. Weeble chuckled. ‘Now there is one last thing you need to understand. Those in the group adopt new names, chosen by the rest of the group, and we use them exclusively. Our old ones we keep to ourselves. This provides a break, a separation of mind and spirit when we are with the group. For example, my name is Licked Dog.’

Cinnabar snorted. ‘Is that supposed to mean something?’

‘I suppose so, but we make a rule not to explain the name to the recipient — helps remind us that our full truth cannot be contained within the individual. I’d like to think it has to do with how I looked when I first showed up, but more likely it’s referring to a poor choice in romantic partners which I don’t remember.’

‘I assumed you remembered everything.’

‘Yeah, not everything. Just now.’ She was lost again. ‘Don’t worry, you’ll see.’

‘So will I get a name later, at the meeting?’

‘No, no. You already have one — I know it’s hard to understand but you’ve been part of the group for a long time.’ He paused again, trying to drum up a little suspense. ‘It’s good to have you back, Rose Phoenix.’

‘Rose Phoenix.’ She looked away, satisfied as she always was. It really was a perfect fit. ‘And what’s Roffy’s?’

‘Uh uh, I can only tell you my name or yours. You’ll have to hear it from him. Whenever you’re ready...’

‘If there’s time I’d at least like to fix my hair, do my face,’ she said, touching at her head uncertainly.

He preferred it when she stayed just like this, natural and intimate. But it complicated things later when it was time to go out. They’d have to come back here or make an extended shopping diversion which might disrupt the mood. ‘Take your time,’ he said. ‘But nothing too fancy. I’ll go and let Roffy know that you’re coming. Then when you’re ready you can head down and exchange names.’

They both stood up and he reached for her hand. ‘It’s going to be a good day,’ he said and pulled her close, wrapping her in a heartfelt embrace. Caught unawares, she froze briefly before returning the hug. He pressed his cavitated belly outwards so that, through layers of clothes, it would touch hers, would confirm the closeness with which they would carry each other again. Rose Phoenix buried her face into his shoulder, exhaled deeply, settled into his support as he did hers.

Packed into the back, Licked Dog wedged himself between the front seats to hear the conversation better. They were on their way to get a bite before heading to the meeting. Big Felled had already arranged for a short-notice use of the church room — ‘They think we’re one of those anonymous get togethers, which I guess we kind of are...’ — and had sent word around for the group to gather. Licked Dog had suggested they grab something to eat on the way and Big Felled said he knew just the place. While he drove, Big Felled was giving Rose Phoenix a deeper understanding of what the group was about. Licked Dog had heard this many times before but never tired of seeing her reaction to it. He gave her an encouraging wink.

‘...it is for those of us who still see, who understand the magic nature contains.’

‘Nature?’ said Rose Phoenix.

‘What is the world around us but nature? Everyone seems eager to push off the loops and our reawakenings and our broken memories as something unnatural, but that is just denial: It is strange and uncomfortable, so it has to be artificial. These surely must be alien forces intruding on and polluting our existence. If we could only return to our original, more natural state, everything would be better. Except it’s not going away. The paradigm has

shifted. And when you stop resisting, when you embrace what it is offering, you realize it is not a punishment, it is not a restriction. It is an opportunity. We have been given new ways to see, to see more deeply than ever before. When it happens it seems impossible. It seems like magic. Yet it *is* happening, it *is* real. And it *is* magic.

‘For those of us who have discovered this, who aren’t fighting against or distracting ourselves from everything, we are getting closer to grasping what this all might mean. What are our capabilities as a group. Together, how far can we bend the rules? How much wider of a view are we actually capable of? It’s bigger than it ever was. We see more of the puzzle than ever before. We are closer to piecing it together.’

‘Like, what is happening, why did everything start turning?’

‘Not exactly. The truth which we seek, which is available to us, it is a personal one, for each of us alone, explaining how we interact with this skewed-up world. Knowing how the earth turns, or air exists, or even what time is — these barely ever mattered to us before, and now even less. We trust that the day will turn to night will turn to day, that we go to sleep and wake up as we always do, that the season won’t change, that the sunlight will never, ever fade, that this hour was already and will be again. What is going on in the world around us is background, noise. All that matters anymore — all that can matter — is our local bubble. But we can’t figure even that out alone, which is why we need each other, the group. Right now, all around, outside, everyone is busy working and partying and carrying on and trying to forget something which is still happening, the prospect that it is finally over too alluring to consider it might be false. It’s an infection — spreading not in its conception which has happened in many places previously and simultaneously, but in its effect, in the optimism that must be sustained for fear of its alternative. So everyone finds ways of supporting each other’s hopes until it becomes endemic and irrefutable, and when those of us who understand the truth, who are immune to the delusion, when we confront them it only leaves us ostracized and them more resolute.

‘However, this merely means they’ve become part of the noise, busying themselves in the wrong directions. And as they fade away into irrelevance, the validity of our group’s path is even more clear. As is, most importantly, that we cannot remain on this path without one another. Most of us have seen a time far enough in to remember. Some,’ Big Felled pointed to himself, ‘made it alone, while others we had to bring along. Those like you, the stranded, you are our anchors, approaching closest to the source and also innocent from foreknowledge. Together we create a continuum, stitching a chain as far as we can go, all the way to our leading edge. It is the only reason we are here right now.’ He raised his hand and Licked Dog reached out and squeezed it. ‘We talk to each other, passing on our experience, passing it

forwards and back. We each know merely a slice, one which contains little bits of not only ourselves but everyone else. We remember parts of another that they cannot. (You too, you just don't realize it.) Yet when we bring them together, when we share and are shared with, a complete shape begins to form. And every loop we can only get closer to comprehending — this shape, and us, and, especially, me.'

Rose Phoenix started to laugh. 'It sounds like you are just making fancy excuses to hear stories about yourselves.'

Big Felled chortled, glancing over at her with a smile and then back at Licked Dog, which meant leaning forward and dropping his head so that it was almost upside down. The maneuver had caused them to drift out of their lane but before Licked Dog had a chance to point this out the large man turned back and straightened their trajectory. 'Maybe so, but when the meeting finishes, you tell me if you haven't been transformed.'

'But I'm not going to remember any of this. What good is a transformation if it doesn't last?'

'But you do remember, right now, and it is and will be more special because now is all that you have. Though what happens today will also carry forward, next time just as this time built on those from before. This is what we offer each other, the opportunity to reach beyond the narrow boundaries of our individual — oh, here we go.'

He pulled off the street and around a simple fauxdobe building, up to a giant, glowing menu adorned with a speaker. After an exchange with an onslaught of static, meaning somehow discernible despite the complete absence of intelligible language, they exchanged money for food and pulled off into a parking space. While Licked Dog hungrily tore into his pasty but tasty white taco and Rose Phoenix picked at some plastic-cheesed nachos, Big Felled meticulously unrolled a burrito, turning the innumerable layers of tortilla into a surprisingly small-diametered circle centered with a smear of brown, which he then painted with a thick layer of red sauce squeezed from and brushed by a fistful of crinkly packets. After refolding the burrito to its previous, phyllo-esque state, the edges oozing burgundy, he slipped it back into its wrapper and proceeded to perform the same operation on the other four he had ordered.

By the time they pulled back out onto the road, Licked Dog had finished his meal and was sucking citrus soda while he watched Big Felled deftly hold a burrito and the steering wheel with one hand and work the gearshift and a drink with the other, tilting his already slouched head over to take a juicy bite or in the opposite direction to pull a draw, and before the first burrito was polished having impressed a clown lips circle of sauce around his mouth. Licked Dog had seen this before and watched with amusement and expectation, knowing that eventually Big Felled would notice his chuckling

and shrug and then offer a bite, which Licked Dog would take, not from a fresh burrito but the one already half-eaten because that's what was done, smearing his own set of clown lips, unlicked and smiling, now fully laughing at the zesty, acidic mess which filled his mouth and burned his skin, laughing with Big Felled and Rose Phoenix too, abandoned to a moment whose ritual was latent but for one.

'At least half a million.'

'They said it was so packed that the crowd was picking up parked cars and depositing them on side streets.'

'That's impossible.'

'Most certainly is not. How many people do you think it takes to roll a car?'

'Someone was worried it would veer off onto the bridge. Had the police block it off. Who knows if it could hold all them people.'

'It has before. It'd just bend, not break. Not that it matters.'

'I'm just glad I don't live around there. I'm miles away and I could hear the noise from my porch. Sounded like a swarm.'

'Did any of you see it? First hand, I mean.'

'Nah, just the pictures on the tube.'

'There was a copycat one that went along my street, but by the time I ate and got dressed it fell apart.'

'I used to work in the center of the loop. Haven't been there in years, though. It already felt like we were trapped, so it probably wasn't a whole lot different.'

'Do you know anyone who still works there? They might have some unreported details...'

'The next day outside my building I ran across this girl with a huge black eye. She was really amped-up, attempting to convince anyone she saw that a revolution had already begun, that we'd never go back to the way it was before. Naturally I asked her if that meant we were still in the time trap. She just cussed me out, saying I was trying to "delegitimize" her.' (nods, sympathetic mm-hmms) 'I'm not sure why, but I honestly thought she might be interested in the group. So I tried compassion, asked her if she was all right, if she'd been in the parade. Because of the black eye. She accused me of focusing on her looks, on the negatives, that if people like us didn't start paying attention to the right things we'd get left behind. I started to tell her about looking forward but she wasn't listening and just stuffed a flyer at me and took off, finding somebody else to rant at.'

'What did it say?'

‘Who knows? I was so irritated that I crumpled it up and threw it after her. Went back inside to warm up, but not before yelling: “See ya next time!”’ (chuckles all around)

‘Tearing down the system, over and over again.’

The group was gathered and rolling. They were in a big circle of chairs, facing one another. Knocked Knees and Had Hair and Blackened, Grinned Once sitting mostly silent with his arms crossed, Left Shoe and Socked Blue nuzzling as much as participating, Rose Phoenix and Big Felled on either side of Licked Dog. Off against the wall was a table with a box of doughnuts and a percolator partially filled with stale, over-brewed coffee. The air swirled thick with cigarette smoke. They were filling Licked Dog in on what had happened this time through, providing the details of the previous days, the parts of their collective memory that he didn’t share. He put down his styrofoam plate with the frosted old-fashioned, its protrusions nibbled at lightly but the circular core intact, then rerolled his jacket sleeve, all the while listening intently, attempting to sort the various accounts into a coherent picture that he could add to the many others they’d provided before. The similarities and differences caused meldings and separations, the repeated elements as well as novel ones embedding into his memory with seemingly identical import.

Big Felled spoke up: ‘Don’t forget these marches have happened before.’ He took a bite of a chocolate-glazed bar. Flecks of brown icing spilled onto his lap, joining crumbs and sprinkles.

‘But this big?’ asked Had Hair. He and everyone looked at Licked Dog.

‘Uh, it’s hard to say. This might be the biggest, at least one of them.’ They expected a better understanding than he possibly could have.

‘But not the most extraordinary,’ said Big Felled. ‘Many of you know what I’m talking about, but for the benefit of the uninitiated...’ He turned to Rose Phoenix and related the story of an early procession, where he and Licked Dog somehow met up, both completely fucked-up, how it had descended into a riot and he saw Licked Dog get knifed, held him in his arms while he bled out, the crowd carrying on without compunction, unaware of the consequence of their pointless violence. ‘You returned, and that miracle was the beginning of this journey.’

Licked Dog shifted uncomfortably, avoiding the shocked and tender stare of Rose Phoenix. His eyes fell on Grinned Once, who seemed to be challenging him, waiting. The room had turned silent and awkward. Licked Dog put a hand over Big Felled’s shoulder, just barely reaching to his neck, while the large man wiped his face.

‘Well,’ Licked Dog said, ‘not to spoil the somber mood or anything, but do you all want to hear about your last time?’ A mutual sigh and everyone leaned in. Licked Dog thought back to the previous loop and searched for an appropriate starting point. He didn’t like to plan ahead, to have his

recollection sound rehearsed. He lit a cigarette and closed his eyes and as his memory settled in, the words began to flow.

‘It was still early afternoon when the meeting finished. Some wanted to eat, some didn’t. There was actually a bit of an argument about it, with some of you,’ he looked over at Left Shoe who was rubbing his partner’s knee, ‘suggesting we split up. Which I and the others resisted because it would mean an incomplete memory. So finally a compromise was agreed on and we decided to go bowling and defer any possible splitting for later. Headed to this place — Orbit Lanes — which was new to me.’ He went on to describe their trip to the bowling alley, avoiding every little detail (which he couldn’t possibly remember anyway) but offering anecdotes which touched on everyone currently present. How Big Felled got a ball with too small a thumb hole and launched it across into a neighboring lane. How Had Hair happened to be a secret pro, hooking shots and more than doubling the score of the next best in the group. How Rose Phoenix didn’t like her shoes and tried just socks, leading to a spectacular and painful butt-first pratfall. How Grinned Once found a curly hair in his curly fries and—

‘—and went back to demand a free sausage with his pube,’ Grinned Once interjected. He had stood up, all blue in his uniform, head tilted, arms still crossed.

‘Yeah, that’s right,’ said Licked Dog. ‘Old standard?’

‘Want me to go on? How about you, Blackened, and Knocked Knees rearranging balls, or Left Shoe’s pinball match, or how we spent hours driving out of the city to look for shooting stars or that comet we never found?’

Licked Dog felt like a ghost, like Grinned Once was looking through him. ‘What’s going on?’ he said. ‘You remember?’

‘Twice I stayed up, twice I heard you tell the same story. Did that bowling trip actually happen, or did you make it up to give everyone a bit of what they need? Who are you protecting — them or you?’

Licked Dog was squeezing Rose Phoenix’s hand, confirmation that he hadn’t disappeared. Big Felled was looking back and forth between him and Grinned Once.

‘How can you look at them so plain, as if they’re nothing special? Let Big Felled talk up your miracle like you’re the only one. Why don’t you tell them what actually happened last time?’

‘What’s he talking about?’ said Big Felled, practically leaning over Licked Dog.

Everyone was staring. Licked Dog didn’t understand. The bowling alley *was* the last time. ‘What do you want?’ he asked.

‘The same as the rest of us. The truth.’ As he talked Grinned Once knelt behind his chair and pulled his bag over. ‘I thought this group was about cutting out the bullshit, telling it straight. I’m sick of all this fiction.’ He

came up holding an assault rifle. Scooted chairs and a couple cries quickly stopped when he swung the gun back and forth, telling everyone to be still.

‘Whoa whoa whoa, what are you doing?’ said Licked Dog. ‘I don’t know— I’m not—’ His voice caught, couldn’t put words together.

‘Not gonna talk? Let me help you out, storyteller. Last time I shot everyone. They all died. We both saw it. Why don’t you tell them?’

Licked Dog’s hand clamped down on itself and Rose Phoenix was running off towards the exit. Flashes and bangs, indistinguishable. He turned away quickly, to keep the image out of his mind, to not pollute his memory. But it was too late. A head no longer a head, body laying like nothing alive.

‘Don’t worry, Licked Dog, she’ll come back. All of us will.’ He was smiling. ‘Next time you’ll say it.’

Licked Dog glowered at Grinned Once, shaking, his heart aburst. Gun-smoke trailed upwards, seemed to envelope the assailant’s face. And off to the side, in his peripheral vision or maybe beyond, was Rose Phoenix. Cinnabar. Gone. Weeble lunged out of his chair, eyes yawning, reaching forward through the circle and past the gun barrel and right for that fucking smirk.

...resurrection time...

‘...not here. I invited him but he’s probably not coming.’

A voice with no face. Is it behind, around a corner? Such an easy vigor. Sounds like Falasum, who never would have seen this place. O’Oness lists.

‘...maybe he was already here and we missed him...’

Fairlook? Did those two ever meet? What a conversation to hear! Two cads, could charm a lemon sweet.

‘...fall too far from the tree. It’s like it was him, gone back in time. Or repeated.’

‘I see what you’re doing, trying to mess with me. You probably don’t even understand what’s going on yourself.’

Falasum laughing: *‘Just because you make something up doesn’t mean anyone has to believe it.’*

That doesn’t sound right. They’d never be so straight. Maybe because there’s no one else around, nobody to wheedle. But would they not work each other?:

‘That’s a fine looking suit. Must have cost you.’

‘Oh, I do all right. Speaking of fine looking — your family looks great. Those kids must keep you busy, though. Is the wife stuck at home all day?’

‘We have a part-time maid. She stops by and the old lady can step out and take the bus where she must. Usually to spend something.’

‘Pretty woman like that, taking the bus? That’ll make some fella’s day.’

‘Fella’s gotta make a buck. Interested?’

‘Must be tough for her.’

‘Got a pal down at the docks, has an inside line on a shipment of slickers. Gonna be a real wet year coming up, everyone’ll need one.’

‘Say, I pass near your place every day doing my deliveries. Be happy to give the missus a ride someplace.’

‘What do you say, you in?’
‘There’s a lot of loonies out there.’
‘You can’t lose.’
‘It’d be my honor to help out.’
‘Consider it a favor to someone in the family.’
‘Consider it a favor to someone in the family.’
‘...out getting loaded. Did you really ask him to come?’
‘Didn’t have a choice. He was over scrounging a meal and heard us talking about it and I couldn’t exactly say no, you know? He’s not *my* brother.’
‘At least they got rid of his punk son. Bringing trash like that to a family get-together. If either one of them shows up I’ll help you throw them back out. Such a fucking way— oh shh, sorry.’
‘Don’t worry, can’t even here.’ Click click click. ‘Look, see? Nothing.’
Wait, it’s Rewff?
‘Hey there, everything OK?’ Sounds just like Falasum. Never noticed that. ‘Do you need anything? Drink? Diaper? Dingleberry?’
‘What’re you doing?’ And Geyarc?
‘I told you. See? Doesn’t even understand.’
‘*Think you’re cute?* What if somebody hears?’
‘You did. And I saw that smile.’
‘But I— It’s me. *Nobody else will understand what you’re doing.*’
‘Bah, nobody else is listening.’
‘Including...’
‘Couldn’t happen if it was just us too.’
‘Maybe...come on, let’s go. This is making me feel guilty.’
‘I don’t know why. At that age probably been dozing all day. No memories, nothing permanent.’
‘I’m talking about me, right now.’
‘Ahh, that’s it.’
‘Yeah, that’s it.’
‘*Really? That’s it?*’
‘Quit it, I know what you’re doing. Come on, we can man the front door.’
Eyes following Rewff and Geyarc as they move around couch.
‘Smell you later.’
‘Shhhh’
‘I’m not the one laughing.’
They disappear and for a moment the voices are Fairlook and Falasum again then they are gone as well. O’Oness feels the fabric of the couch. It is splitting at the corner of the armrest. Looks at the sidetable, stacked haphazardly with art books. A thin line rings them, proof that they haven’t been removed since the surface was dusted. A finger extended to run across a jutting cover. Light color darkens where the line of gray has been wiped

away. It is a lot of work to keep things clean. At least there are no spiders. Kids should be help—

‘There you are. Who left you alone in here?’

It is Lonarit, and her Suelain.

‘Dinnertime. We’ve come to get you seated.’

‘Do you need to potty?’

‘Suell!’

‘What? We have to ask. Otherwise Grams’ll just hold it.’

‘Well, I’m not helping with that.’

It’s alright, O’Oness is ready to eat. Lonarit is big like a truck, her daughter at least the same size.

‘What’s this?’

‘What?’

‘Look.’ Holding out the sleeve. ‘You might hurt yourself with this.’

No, leave it.

‘Just leave it, why does it matter?’

‘Alright, alright.’ A sigh like a hiss. ‘Let’s go.’

They each take a side and an arm and lift. Rising, shaking, uncertain.

‘We got you.’

O’Oness grips tight, looks straight ahead. Hates needing the help but cannot do it alone. The two large women shuffle patiently at each side, unseen for the focus but looming, like shadows. Lonarit speaks encouragement, unexpectedly seems to become another lady, from a long time ago. Barbar, who was never seen out of her throne-like rocking chair yet now is walking besides. The shadow grows, because to a kid everything huge is huger. The voice remains unchanged, as if it is a function of body shape, not scale. The encouragement continues however the inflation is making things uneven and O’Oness must pause and squeeze hard to keep from falling over.

‘Ouch, gawwd!’

Looking at Suelain in surprise and apology, waiting for the reprimand. That sounded like...

From the other side: ‘It’s OK Grams. Just relax, take your time.’

That’s not right. It would be: ‘*Don’t take the lord’s name in vain.*’

Suelain remains silent, as though she heard the rebuke. Her other hand is placed over the one still grabbing her arm, rubbing it into ease. O’Oness looks across to Barbar. The giant shrinks back to Lonarit, imposing but no longer imbalancing. Calmness returns, steps continue. Down the hallway towards the dining room, glancing at Lonarit to keep her present, wobbling, fully supported. A slight turn and a moment’s hesitation.

‘We’re going to put you at the kids’ table, Grams.’

There is a sigh from Suelain and a shush from her mother. Two tables are set up and it is getting less steady and O’Oness tries to aim for the nearest

corner. The trajectory is resisted and there is little choice but to go farther than necessary and wait for a chair to be pulled out before finally sitting and resting these precarious limbs. And catching breath.

‘Why don’t we ask Grams?’

‘Because there’s no choice to make. We don’t have any room at the big table. Unless you want to...’

‘Wait, don’t put this on me. Neither of us should have to sit here.’

‘*I get it — kids are dumb. Big deal.*’

‘That’s not what I’m saying. It’s just going to be weird for everyone.’

‘Kids love Grams, and Grams loves kids — don’t you?’

Of course.

‘Why are you like that?’

‘Like what?’

‘*Still treating them like victims, like they must be punished.*’

‘I don’t even understand what you’re talking about. *Is that supposed to be meaningful?*’

‘We can scrunch in.’

‘The places are already set.’

A hand on Suelain’s rump. Turn and attempt to scooch the chair in. Waiting to be served. There is a satisfied grunt which might have been Barbar’s. A chair is pulled out of sight and a touch to O’Oness’ shoulder.

‘I’m sorry Grams. You know how she is.’

Nodding, the voice placed: Oplo. A man, boy really. Barely more than a child when he left for good. Kind, too kind to realize the sharpness of his words.

‘She treats you like you’re crazy, *like she knows crazy. True insanity is impossible to live with, but there’s nothing you can do about it.* She’s the one that’s nuts.’

A hand goes to its own shoulder, is the only thing left touching it.

‘I guess it’s time to eat. I’ll come back and visit you later.’

Tapping is a wave to one who is already gone.

A short or long delay passes and then the door is heard sliding and food is called from more than one and in no time it is bustling behind. Smells waft, dishes clink. There is talking all at once. At the smaller table children sit down and get up and are brought back. Paper plates of food are set out which holds the attention of some. Others begin to follow, as though intrigued by their kin’s behavior. A bassinet is placed beside with barely an acknowledgment. O’Oness touches the baby’s nose and slips its grasp. A little laugh and a squint. Across from it a small boy watches and does not turn away. He is given a wink and has no reaction. A few have started eating and a girl with ribbons in her hair stretches across the table and tells them to stop. Suelain brings a paper and a cup and smiles, perhaps at the baby.

The last meal placed. The children are antsy. The grown-ups lull themselves and silence gradually spreads. Heads bow, blackness descends. The baby calls out for the first time, as if to prove sound still exists. Grace commences before the laughter fades.

Now everyone digs in. Looking down the plate has a section of beans and one of potato salad and a bigger one holding a hotdog in a bun striped with ketchup and mustard. There is a din all around. In front the kids are chewing and talking to each other or themselves, an impenetrable babble, disinterested in the end of the table. Only the baby seems aware. And the boy across, though he neither eats nor speaks. Behind is an overlap of conversation, voices competing to be heard, some meant to carry, others not, further confused by sounds of eating and stirring and mirth. Occasionally an individual's speech pushes to the fore, and a quick scan finds a child whose mouth is moving in unison. One or both leads to an identification, an impossible attendee whose likeness is undeniable. What specifically is alike is indecipherable — tones or phrases, features or affects — yet in and for a moment recognition brings them present.

Farcta: 'Why am I sitting here? My husband's over there.' Bossy kid, as much ordering as eating. 'If I switch I'll be farther from my son. *There is no structure or logic to this.* Don't bother — I'm just going to try to enjoy my food.' Never any stomach for a real fight.

Pushing away a tickling finger, whimpering. Here is a pacifier.

Dint: 'Does anyone care anymore? Just look at what's on TV. *It's easy to wave your hands and talk fancy — but what ever happened to substance?*'

A girl wearing a red plaid dress is staring intently off at nothing while her neighbor, a boy in an ill-fitting collared t-shirt, speaks at her gravely.

'Never. I can't stand it...Because it's indisputable! I'm not going to waste my time watching to prove what I already know. Are you saying I'm wrong? Well, there you go, we're both coming out ahead.'

It sucks away with distracted eyes. The small boy looks on with curiosity, his plate untouched.

Kloklok: '*Oh, isn't that nice!*' Uncontrolled giggling. 'Of course she'd be able to find this.' The fit spreads to others, how are the words even getting out? 'I wonder about her, though. She shows up, *gives us just a touch of grace, then leaves us hanging.* What, we're not good enough for her?'

Lonarit appears carrying a tray of watermelon slices. Kids start grabbing before she has set them down. Some of them have still lost it. She looks at the chaos, then the end of the table. Is that a smirk peeking behind her sternness? She brings a wedge over and lays it on the plate. Her eyes are fixed on the baby. O'Oness waits, but she turns and leaves before acknowledgment and thanks can be given.

‘...an excuse. She’s hiding something. It’s probably...you know... Good that she keeps it out of here, especially around the children. Wow, this is delicious.’

It is. A knuckle catches the rolling juice. The pacifier is worked out, releasing a sneer. The finger nub given in its stead and the sweetness surprises and it wants more. A small chunk offered. The baby’s mouth gnashes the course flesh with delight then has second thoughts and the intent reverses, pinkish pulp oozing over its face. It is displeased with being wiped down.

The napkin is dropped onto the table with resignation. A black seed lands on it. A glance up to see the kids are eating and fooling with each other and not paying attention to the end. Only the small boy is watching. His mouth is closed. A crescent is missing from the edge of the watermelon in front of him. His gaze is fixed on the bassinet from which there are sounds of distress. Something new: rotating plastic spoons as a makeshift mobile. The babe watches, unsure which to follow. Drop one low and then pull away. It kicks and titters with amusement. Again — now it doesn’t like that. Here, of course you can have it.

Jurgle: ‘...don’t care how cold it is, I want barbecue. I want to cook over fire, I want to smell smoke and outdoors. I’m sick of letting this dumb weather keep me shut up inside. Why should it have to only be during the summer? So I decide I’m just going to do it and let her know and before I could even say briquette she’s calling around to the family who of course want in and suddenly there’s too many people for our place and next thing you know, here we are. Just think, if it wasn’t for that crazy obsession and grilled meat we probably would have never all gotten together. Yeah, yeah — you say that, but without this half of you wouldn’t even be here. It’s true! Thank you. He knows what he’s talking about. *I like this too, huhuhuh.*’

A slim child with unruly hair leans back and extends a curled tongue. Across the table a hand swipes at a neck as if flicking away a bug or an itch. The first child nonchalantly takes a bite of napkin.

‘Now I’m thinking to myself, *why don’t you keep it up?* I could live having this every day.’

O’Oness bites. The baby stares at it, holds the spoon out for affirmation. Then flings it. Grabs at the air. Sure. Wipe off the condiments. One cut to clean the end then another to make the slice. Stabs the perfect cylinder to a fork and now a new mobile with a roseate planet in orbit. Eyes cycle along.

Hotew: ‘Pass me a left wing. *Um, I think you got that mixed up.*’ The neck swiper is grousing at the spitballer. Always appealing to decency. ‘It doesn’t depend on how you look at it. When I hold from the tip the good stuff should be pointing at me.’ A flinch. A tattle call for mom. ‘You touched it too. Take it back and give me the right one.’ A man’s voice booms and not just the two settle down.

A quiet falls over the room. Something more distant emerges:

Juand: ‘...*would you still be sticking around?* If I had that kind of — oh, um...’

The children seem to be speaking with their minds, are at a moment of vacancy. It is followed by a gradual return of the chatter, including Juand, quieter now and being subsumed but fleetingly held like a radio left tuned to some transient, faraway station.

‘...mind goes then you have no awareness of how miserable it’s gotten. Actually sounds pretty nice.’

The planet swoops in and away and in again. Rests on a pair of teeth which pull and the hotdog disappears down a black hole. The mouth closes and the baby freezes, appears to struggle. Opens wide but no sound is released.

‘I can almost imagine it. “*If they don’t like me they should leave. I’m not the one with the problem.*” There may be something brilliant...’

The baby jerks and laughs and wants the fork. The spoon is given instead. At the other end there is a call for dessert and others join in. The rejection is uniform if uncoordinated (have some more fruit, plenty to eat if you’re still hungry, what dessert?, not everyone is finished, don’t be rude) and met with a request to be excused.

Someone grants it and that intended for one is accepted by all and the table rapidly clears. The little boy is staring at his remaining food however when he sees the others he immediately follows. O’Oness reaches, fails to get a touch. The dash to freedom is a fabulous sight. The trailing boy turns a corner and is the last one gone, leaving only a receding rumpus. A dropped head passes from an empty hand to the baby lying on its back, still twiddling the spoon. Its concentration meets the downward gaze. There is a search for identity and recognition, but it is elusive. There is no name for it, not now. The face suggests connections that are certain if unarticulable. All babies look the same and also like a germinal form of the person they will grow into. They are at once generic and specific, the uniqueness moderated by a universal adorability and the incertitude of presaging what is to become. Yet in hindsight there exists no other line for them to have followed, and once an endpoint is witnessed the similitude — even of this current form — wanes. The same could be said of the elderly, only with the orientation reversed. Their features obscured in wrinkles, hair volume and color approaching a selfsame vanishing point, frailty subduing particularities of physicality. Perhaps due to unawareness of an antecedent existence, perhaps due to disregard, identity is lost to a common indistinguishability. Who perceives this? One searching for a precursor or one oblivious to it? Contemplations are reflected, the source and subject conflate. Thoughts can be followed, unwound, but are left stranded and without attachment neither

end reaches the other. Perspective, however, is not mutual, and also not a choice, so there is no use expecting a difference, nor that there might be one.

Jurgle: 'Hello lonesome.'

They follow each other's look and see Lashly towering above them. A grin spreads below his thick mustache.

'We're going to move you over to the big kids' table.'

He extends his arm, showing a greasy smudge on the inside of the sleeve. O'Oness holds on. They turn around and take a few shuffle steps to the nearest corner of the large table where people have parted in each direction to make space for another chair. Suelain appears, helps to get things situated, offers to take the baby. Halfway to her seat it is wailing and in a fluster she backtracks the way she came to hand it off to its mother. As they pass behind the crying halts then resumes. The baby is grasping. More shifting and the bassinet is brought over. The baby is returned beside, plastic spoons are handed, it is as it was. Sulain watches, tickles at the nose, gives a shoulder squeeze, then goes back to her place. The others briefly look on with enchantment, muttering affections — 'isn't that something?', 'in their own world', 'mmmmmm', 'look, even has a diaper pin handy' — before falling back to their conversations. The voices have faces now and are difficult to again ascribe to another. Seeing so many mouths moving at once is overwhelming and leaves individual threads unable to pull free from the knot of discourse. Instead, the prattle is enjoyed as it is: a braided network of engagement and sharing, new links and reconnections and intersections, laughter and disagreement and interest, recollection and discovery, celebration, hope, love. From both sides of the corner, two are talking past O'Oness and the bassinet. A group of teenagers is huddled together, snickering. Someone stands and says he has a joke but is waved down. Far across the table Lonarit stares while she speaks. A smile and a nod is reciprocated, then she turns away to her interlocutor.

There is a shift in the cacophony. It begins to lean in one direction, draw the discord nearer. People quiet as one discussion is pulled to prominence.

'...always the contrarian,' says Irbyd. 'You dismiss it just because it's popular, but you're missing out. It really is great.'

'I don't care what others think,' Gnawvs responds. 'If nobody liked it I'd say the same thing. And, actually, I'd say you're the one who's got it wrong. I believe a lot of people feel the same way as me, only they *never had the guts to just say it.*'

'If you don't care what they think why should that matter?'

'Well it doesn't to me, I'm just saying—'

'You don't even watch it, though. If you don't actually know what's going on how can you claim to know how others feel about it?'

‘Wait a second,’ says Purble, from the other side of the table, ‘I agree he’s being argumentative, but that doesn’t mean he couldn’t know about it or what others’ opinions are. It’s everywhere. People talk. It would actually be harder to believe that he knew nothing.’

The baby stretches back to see, letting out a small groan. It has tossed the spoons aside. Pick them up, get its attention. Eyes lock. The conversation slips back.

‘I find it hypocritical to judge something you refuse to watch,’ says Farcta.

‘How is that hypocritical?’ says Dint.

Slipping the spoons over one another, to form one.

‘Because you’re claiming a position of knowledge when you don’t have any.’

The baby is amazed.

‘So you mean I’m a sophist. I still don’t agree. I’m coming from a place of disrespect, not deceit.’

Split them apart. Bewilderment.

‘Now you’re being rude.’

‘Don’t worry, not to you.’

The baby wants to try, takes the spoons back.

‘Do you hear that? They’re not on your side. When it’s everyone against you by yourself you might want to consider that you’re the one who’s wrong.’

There are murmurs of support. The baby is occupied again. The utensils won’t cooperate.

‘Hold on,’ says Hotew, ‘he could certainly be a little more civil but he’s got a point.’ Looking up, searching for who is talking. ‘I watched it early on. It was pretty good but then people started dying for no reason,’ says Beemricks. ‘I’ve seen plenty of that for real, thank you very much. I’m wondering about whoever made this: *What are you even trying to do here? This is sick!* Haven’t bothered with it since.’

‘Ha!’ says Gnawvs. ‘If it really was sick I might become a buff.’

‘If you had waited a little longer you would have seen they come back,’ says Irbyd. ‘That’s the best part.’

‘It’s also the most confusing, because they’re in different bodies,’ says Purble.

The voice is particular, exceedingly sweet-sounding. Eyes close to observe the relation.

‘The trick is that the same person always wears the same color clothes,’ says Farcta.

‘Of course, that’s pretty obvious,’ says Klokklok. ‘But if you don’t know all of the past steps then some of the interactions can seem odd.’

‘Trust me, it’s completely consistent,’ says Irbyd. ‘Obviously they’re making it up as they go along, so it’s totally impressive how they manage to do that while it is winding back on itself.’

‘My problem,’ says Purble, ‘is that I only started a little while ago. I picked up the story fine but *at this point it’s too late for me to be affected. Any emotional resonance feels like coincidence.*’

‘I wouldn’t expect anything more,’ says Gnawvs. ‘I’m sure it’s all coincidence and convenient connections. A comforting semblance of order.’

‘You say that *connection and complications don’t equal structure,*’ says Irbyd. ‘But they do! Think about what Lashly was talking about earlier, about us all being here.’

‘I must have missed that piece of wisdom.’

The baby is still unable to perform magic. Showing it can be done without looking.

‘Do we need to separate you two?’ says Lashly.

‘It’s OK,’ says Irbyd. ‘He’s just wants attention and I understand I’m *easy pickings*. I promise to give him the silent treatment from here on out.’

She looks at Gnawvs stoically, her lips tight. Gnawvs returns the stare, takes a red onion ring from her plate and folds it into his mouth. Lashly watches them with amusement, brushing his mustache with a thumb. Then he points at Purble.

‘You know, I think she’s on to something. I’m a big fan, but occasionally I have to skip an episode or two and when that happens some of the drama seems off. It’s not like anything is missing, but that things got mixed up, aren’t as effective as they could be. You get the climax, then afterwards have to infer the buildup. *You lose the tragedy when it’s presented out of order.*’

‘*Um, I think you got that mixed up.*’ says Sisco. ‘It’s actually the manipulation of order that allows tragedy to become profound.’ She catches a glance and looks away quickly as if something else caught her attention.

There’s a noise at the front door, somebody’s coming in. Why wouldn’t they knock? Conversation’s stopped, a couple guys stepping forward, not too fast. Rewff holding a steak knife and an upturned wine bottle. The door is cracked. Dragging. A head pops inside — Feebadria! Of course. He calls out:

‘You just going to stare or is someone going to give a hand?’

The voice booms through the house and before it fades cheers of recognition and welcome arise with sustained exuberance. Many are up and rushing the door. Clamor and smiles and the baby aiming its eyes up and back in that direction though it cannot see, looking just as jazzed as the others. The crowd is swarming around the door. Feebadria is nowhere to be found. All seem to be talking, laughing, lost in their own hubbub, except for the

new arrival who, though unseen, occasionally penetrates with that expansive bass.

‘... would’ve missed this ... think I’m late ... born in a barn ...’

There once was another who could similarly project, once similarly surrounded by a throng of family. A moment of insanity that henceforth wasn’t to be mentioned yet which clouded thoughts whenever Domane was present or discussed:

‘*She wouldn’t act that way — I don’t believe it!* Lemme through! I just wanna talk to her!’

Only the mass does not drag him away, instead splits and releases he with the powerful voice, who strides forward tall and boisterous, pointing the way for Rewff and Purple who are each carrying large cardboard boxes half-closed and spilling with toy-like bright colors. A few of the kids have come in from wherever they were playing and are following along, running ahead, hopping up to catch a peek.

‘Watch it, give ’em some room.’ Feebadria opens the sliding door and steps to the side. ‘Put them right there by the railing. Go on, you can look but be careful what you touch. Your mothers will have my head if you set something off and lose a finger or an eye or...worse.’

Feebadria starts to close the door but more kids and adults are heading to the porch or back in to get jackets and gloves before rushing out again. A handful are bunched up talking at him. His eye for the first time settles on the table and he hollers and steps the long way around to avoid those vying for his attention. A few straggle along anyway.

‘O’Oness!’ A hand is held out for an awkward shake with a glove. Feebadria removes it to try again. Still awkward. ‘Whoo you’re cold. Hey! Can we get that door closed? Do you have something else to put on?’

There’s a coat, by the door. A black-and-colored crocheted blanket is fetched instead.

‘And who do we have here? You haven’t grown a bit since the last time I saw you. Goochie goochie.’ Feebadria is holding his finger just out of reach. Tiny digits grasp at nothing. ‘Didja see what I brought? We’re going to have our own show right here in the backyard. I better get out there, before somebody accidentally drops a cigarette.’ His focus remains before him but his volume increases to a roar. ‘You all ready? Let’s go, let’s go, everyone outside. Let’s fire it up!’

He begins to corral all of those still indoors. Some protest, he’s having none of it. What about the baby?

‘It’s too cold. Grams’ll watch.’

‘Is that safe?’

‘It was fine during dinner.’

‘We can see them right through the window.’

‘Come on, everyone’s waiting,’ says Feebadria. ‘Quit being such a spoilsport.’

‘Don’t be a jerk.’

‘I’m not a jerk, I’m an asshole. And *all assholes are control freaks, right?*’

Feebadria leans down and whispers into an ear.

‘Otherwise we’d be covered in shit.’

O’Oness smiles, not for the first time. The last stragglers are pushed outside and the door closed. A second later it opens momentarily and the chandelier dims to a low dusk. Outside it is shadows. Feebadria is resonating through the glass slider, though his words are unclear. Forms of children milling about, bouncing, pulling at an adult who has them back away. It digs around and comes up holding a long tube. It dissolves into the far gloom and then there is a small flame followed by a slight flicker which also disappears. Waiting. Is it a dud?

Flash flash sparkle pop it’s red and blue bursts spraying up some high some lower people around strobing it’s still going then slows and settles into a tight flame sitting deep purple in the middle of the dark. The baby calls ‘heeeee’ and in the dingy light its eyes are searching madly. Lifting it up to see but the flame has gone and it sounds a lament, as if it has discovered blindness. Suddenly a sparkler lights up and then more follow, kids waving them around and at each other and being pushed away from where the boxes are. Taller people are holding them too, some held stiffly out and stared at by dully twinkling faces as if mesmerized, others swung like the children’s, only with bigger arcs and greater intention that is perhaps a consequence of ability, perhaps of a need to be noticed. The baby seems awestruck at first but quickly acts frustrated, maybe jealous. It reaches and squirms fusses and is laid back down. Whines and pants like it is about to cry. Tickle the nose, the belly. Still fidgeting uncomfortably. O’Oness searches for a distraction. The pacifier is gone. Sparklers are still spraying. Deep at the edge of the deck a blur of red hops around then turns to green then yellow. There is a bowl of candy. Grabs one and unwraps it. Looks amber under the faint light.

The face pauses, twitches uncertainly. Looks like something familiar — not the everybaby but its specific destination. A future unrealized yet reminiscent somehow. The candy is placed between the lips. (Mmmm, definitely butterscotch.) Open the eyes, as wide as possible. The baby pulls away from the edge. That look. Can’t place the name but the attitude is clear. It is calm but resentful of having its attention stolen. *Jerk*. Hand raises flat in front of the mouth, then drops. The candy is gone, replaced by a tongue. Intrigued. Hand up-down, candy’s back. Again: the tongue. A grin spreading. Other hand passes over eyes and they are crossed, then sideways, then straight. The face is pure joy, starts to giggle exactly like it should which

is so exact and unexpected O'Oness is startled, laughs pushing out breaths. The candy falls through the smile. Air sucked in panic. Where did it go?

The baby's mouth is agape, its eyes shock. Oh no. Reaching in. Can't breathe. Don't panic. Someone will help. Looking up there is another fountain running, all eyes turned on the shower of silver and balls of color bounding off. The light's too dim, how can they see? The baby is clearly upset. Shaking its head, a denial. Refusing the fade. Someone, anyone. Is that Forssters at the window? Is he facing in? Is he inside? Reaching out, look of concern...

'Whoa Grams, you alright?'

There is a delicately legged spider walking sideways across the wall. At the sound of his voice or maybe pushed by the breeze from the door it scampers around the corner behind some books. Listen while keeping an eye at it — still the news, no use for that. Is the reader done for the day?

'Hoo, you scared me. Did you fall asleep? You want one of these?'

Wouldn't put your hand back there. No, not going to touch that.

'No? OK. Well. I got the brittle. Convenient, you living so close to the Cyclomall.'

He is holding out a box. It has a ribbon crossed in the middle, not a gold band over the corners. Feels light. There is sliding inside.

'I know, sounds tasty. Better not open it here, or there might not be enough left over for everyone else.'

Too late for that. That's why he was supposed to get more. Oh well, must've been a good reason. Maybe the shop was out.

'Ready to go? Here, why don't you let me take that. Let's put on your coat. Something wrong?'

If you keep watching, the spider won't come out. If you keep listening, the news won't end.

'You sure you don't want one of these? Oh, you're ready to get up. Easy. Alright, alright...'

Hurry, so that thing can't sneak up a leg.

'...no rush. There's plenty of time. Everyone's excited too. They all can't wait to see you.'

Keep moving, don't look back, should've got it with a broom. (Don't forget the box) he gets the box (and the radio) and turns off the radio and opens the door (don't forget to lock it) and locks it and down the path (the ramp) he takes the ramp and back up to his car (where are the keys?) opens the unlocked door all with one hand. Meanwhile O'Oness using two just to stand up and now can't even work the seatbelt.

'All set, Grams? Here, get some heat.'

Forssters pushes some buttons. He's a good kid. There's a warm wind, pushing at the hair, so move the vent down. A tickle inside the pants. Creepy crawly. Press down on it, keep pressing just in case.

'So when I was coming over here, at an intersection there was this guy with a sign: WILL WORK FOR FOOD. I don't really have a job for him but I do have some breath mints which I figure is better than nothing. So I roll my window down but out of nowhere this other dude runs up and pushes the first one out of the way and says, "Wait, mister! I can give you a better deal." Then he holds up a sign which says WILL WORK THREE FOOD.'

Forssters looks over expectantly.

'Get it? Three, four.'

No, but a smile anyway. Good kid.

'I'm still working on it. How about this: There's a boxer...'

They are driving by the mall. There are hardly any cars in the parking lot. Without any obstructions it looks like it is melting into the ground, or bubbling up from it. Where is everybody? What time is it? O'Oness pulls back a sleeve. Not early. Must be closed for some reason. That's why he didn't go, and didn't want to hurt any feelings. Reminds one of Kieb, who even sounded the same. Couldn't hold down a job or a girl but always around when you needed a hand. Also couldn't tell a joke. *Are we doomed to perpetuate jackassery?* Of horse we are, because we muletipliy. Ugh. Why must the worst things be remembered? The still-pressing arm is tapped.

'...listening Grams? She punches him *right on the nose!* He's shocked, doesn't know what hit him. She's rubbing her fist, glaring at it. Suddenly she looks up. There's a sparkle in the center of his face. Is it a tear? She reaches out, longingly, full of understanding. "You bastard," she says, "give me back that diamond."

He keeps at it, which is good. His perseverance is commendable. Laughs to encourage it, at least the grin is genuine. He still hasn't found it, but he might yet...

A little later they are coming up the steps to the front. O'Oness watches the feet, making sure every step is on a step.

'There you are! We were starting to wonder.'

Plique! Looking up — oh! Leaning...

'Careful!'

A blur of white and an armpit is grabbed and lifted. Not falling anymore but that hurts.

'Geez Forssters, what are you doing? You should have called for help.'

'We were just fine, until you came out.'

'Hey! *You should show more respect.*'

Glancing over to see — oh, sure. It's Louxane. Same sweet voice as her mother, none of her grace.

‘You alright, Grams? We’re almost there. Aunt Loux, it’s better if you hold your arm out...’

‘You just worry about your side.’

‘But I think you’re hurting—’

It’s alright, she means well.

One more step and they are inside. There is a bench next to the door and O’Oness slumps into it. A crowd is drawing in, saying welcomes and jostling for hugs and kisses. It is great to see everyone, but also too much. *There are so many faces, so many names, how to keep track of them all?* Forssters backs through the people then without a wave or acknowledgment turns and disappears down the hall. Louxane, her dress taut and satiny and bright, is stirring the attention, talking ceaselessly: ‘are you tired want something to drink looks good I was worried too come say hi it’s Grams don’t know who sent him over here now.’ Too bad it isn’t her mother. She’d clear them back. ‘*This is completely unnecessary. Y’all’ll have plenty of time to see her. What use is this smidge of sympathy?*’ Don’t be cynical, Plique. It feels good that they care, it’s just...

Spike teeth and claws are rushing forward. A child is pulled back and holds out a plastic dinosaur for inspection. Reaching out to touch but another hand grabs at it and a struggle erupts. The little tiff is amusing and so is the adult’s exasperation until Louxane takes the toy and begins to scold the pair. There’s no need for that. O’Oness turns away with shame and the mood seems to sag and somebody steps forward and starts to disperse the congregation.

‘Stay here J’Card — and bring your sister too.’

Looking over to see the two teenagers approaching, not watching where they’re walking, arguing.

‘...just another example where we play the victim,’ says Iciem. ‘*Of course she’s not allowed to succeed.*’

‘Yeah, of course,’ says J’Card. ‘*Of course things have to be overdramatic.* Couldn’t possibly just be an accurate representation of the way it actually is.’

‘Easy to say that when you’re not the one with the foot on your back. If we had it your way nothing would ever change.’

‘Oh please, you want a fantasy. Those like you think you never make any progress because your expectations are unrealistic.’

‘False. We demand fairness and have a right to be upset when it isn’t even considered a possibility. If just once we could get a case where the balance was shifted...’

‘Well, *it never actually ends so easy.*’

Staring downwards, away from the oblivious children. O’Oness has been here before. Iciem’s fervor in Tridge:

'Are we doomed to perpetuate subservience?'

Ztect sharing the rational superiority of J'Card:

'Anyone who gets misty eyed or mysterious is just lying to themselves.'

'Quit acting like you know what you're talking about.'

Ah yes, older sister Britsel putting them both in their place. Wait— Looking up to see the kids' mother watching them with annoyance. Her arms are crossed, her foot tapping as if challenging them to respond. There is nobody else left around.

'Whatever, mom,' says J'Card, 'look who's talking.'

'Don't whatever her. You're afraid she'll be on my side.'

'Oh, so are you going to tell her?'

'Kids, *I don't care about your silly games. (And the "secrets" are anything but.)*' J'Card and Iciem exchange brief looks. Dacon continues: 'Come on, let's help Grams get settled.'

The siblings help O'Oness up and patiently follow their mother through the house, into the living room. Because of their paired support, it makes sense to sit in the middle of the couch. The teenagers smile and back away but Dacon tells them to take a seat in the plush chairs. She glances around, there are more chairs in the other room. There is plenty of room on either side, though. O'Oness scoots and Dacon stops insisting and comes over to help, then sags into the opposite end of the couch. Everyone looks at each other, then not. Polite smiles. They are nice kids, sharp too. Dacon drops her head back, exhales. She's obviously had a busy day, deserves a rest. Across the room, between the chairs, a brightly lit window flickers with indistinct shadows. Shrubs or people? Trying to remember the backyard, where that would be. Unsure. It is awfully cold to be outside. Looking around again, smiling again. There is a coffee table in front of the couch and on it sits a box, tied with ribbon. Why is that in here? Well, maybe they would like some brittle—

There is a ding-dong and in an instant the three are up and excusing themselves, saying they need to check the door. They are gone and everything is still. Staring after them yields no hint of their just presence. Somewhere in that direction there is a commotion, but all that is seen is stagnant space. O'Oness searches for a signal to go with the sound, finds nothing. The room seems fixed, composed. A landscape on the wall, and a group portrait. The two seats appear unsat in. Against the window the shadows have stopped fluttering, as if their mysteries have been abandoned. Three tall bookshelves lined up. A few books, some turned outward to show off their covers. Carefully arranged curios. A crude, child-made clay figurine. A number of framed photographs. It is a fine room, a beautiful family.

'Grams.'

Turning slowly then looking up. Grace! Reaching out she takes the hand and sits down right next to O'Oness, their bodies tightly pressed. She leans in and gives a long kiss on the forehead.

'Why did they leave you here all alone?'

It's only been a minute.

'Well, I'll say something...it's all right, I won't make a scene. We're all family, right? They should be paying attention.' She turns to the window. There is movement again. 'At least I get to have you to myself.'

A hand raises to touch Grace's face. Hers does the same. She is a gem, really wonderful. Must've been a special mold when she was made, then broke right after. Otherwise how else did she end up part of this? No, they are good too. She is just outside of them — seeing her, hearing her, it only recalls her. It is like a glimpsing an exception to the normal flows of time. She is apologizing, saying that she only has a few minutes. But she just arrived...

'I know, something important's come up. I have to be there. I wanted to make sure I came by, though, to see you.'

She's too kind.

'I'm serious. I wouldn't have made the effort for them. And this is exactly why. They don't know what they're missing.'

It was only a minute.

'Speaking of which, I've got something for you. Two things, actually.' Grace glances around, gives a look as only she can, like she is confirming that there is nobody else in the world. She puts her lips to an ear and speaks softly.

'What's big and...'

The voice is smooth and pure. It loops back on itself, reminding O'Oness of moments exactly like this. Always with Grace. Always Grace. It has never been heard before, yet it is the same. Laughter, always. It doesn't exactly make sense, but still laughing. Then another...

'...in the hole.'

Laughing for real now. Grace has pulled back, her face still close. The odor of freshly smoked cigarettes hangs in the air.

'You like?'

It was bad.

'Thought you would. You know that's the real reason I came, just to say that.'

Both continue to laugh. Grace stands up. Already?

'I really have to go. I'll see you again soon, I promise. Within the week. At your place.'

Hands linger together, then she slips away. Behind her, in another room, there is the sound of agitation, an argument. Grace's face relaxes into solemn-

nity. She cocks her head and appears deep in thought, then her eyes lock with O'Oness one last time.

'Don't let them walk all over you.'

And with that she leaves. There is a wavering in the light of the hallway where she exited, like a wake. It continues well after she's disappeared. The argument is growing more heated, though still indistinct, then becomes muffled. Ripples persist in the hallway, as if she still hasn't left...

A young woman backs into the room. Glittering, colorful, she seems uncomfortable, at once eager and hesitant to be moving. The sides of her head are shaved, and the remaining hair is a flamed wave, rising red then flowing back through orange and yellow and white hot trails. There is metal everywhere, clinking and dangling, pins and spikes and chains and jewelry hanging from clothes and skin. An entire buttcheek is showing through a hole in her jeans. O'Oness stares. Suddenly she turns and realizes she is not alone. Wait, don't go. She hesitates differently, doesn't want to leave the way she came. Who is she? There's something familiar... Waving her over she still seems unsure, her attitude clashing with her look. She makes her way to the other end of the couch. 'Sorry,' she says, as polite as could be.

It's Vidiva. Big smile at the realization. She smiles too, looks away. Probably the same age when she ran off. Look at that getup. The top leaves nothing to the imagination. Just like being covered in tattoos. (Somewhere around here there must be a photograph, probably hidden in the attic.) Radiating desire — no, absorbing it, flesh run through with the heat of want. Yet underneath all that the kindest person. Her eyes watch you, probing, as if to see whether you notice, as if to say: *This is really contrived*. Though the contrivance runs both ways, for that kind girl was also a real carouser. She'd show up at home, be delightful for a few days and then disappear again after a night of raising hell. You'd hear stories that didn't seem possible from someone so young. Those eyes are no longer a confession, but a challenge. *Do you even understand kids?* Might as well be: *Do you even understand science?* It is equally inscrutable. The truth fits together in ways few can comprehend.

She extends a hand. 'I'm Newc.' Her grip is surprisingly firm, her gaze a provocation. Enticement, need, she's fire and can't understand she will burn out, that everyone does. Oh, to have that once again. To burn.

Does she want a treat? Can't quite reach. Newc moves to the center of the couch and picks up the box and doesn't move back. She removes the ribbon and makes sure she's allowed and lifts the top. It is half-full (definitely the same one from the kitchen, not new). She pulls out a thick piece, tan and gnarled, and takes a bite.

'Not bad. You made this?'

No, no. See — from a store.

‘Sure, I’ll take some more. I love homemade.’

It is just as good.

‘Neat trick, putting it in here. Hide it where nobody will suspect.’

Well, actually...

‘You ought to be careful, though. By now the place’ll be picked clean. If they know this is here they might come over and riot.’

Forssters tried to get another one.

‘And then when they find out what’s really inside...madness!’

Her eyes cross and then one seems to revolve around by itself. Vidiva could make them roll to white. Newc chews and begins to giggle. She scratches her chest indiscreetly.

‘Maybe I ought to take some extra, to distract them. You know we’re going there next. The mall, I mean.’

There is a thump on the wall and a shrill screech rises from the same place.

‘Ugh.’ Newc sucks at the air. ‘We should’ve just gone straight there. We’d barely made it inside and that nut was freaking out. Not that my relatives are any better.’

Must be Ununcla.

‘We just want some barbecue. Sermer said we’d be welcome. We’re not bothering anyone, who cares what we look like?’

She continues to stuff peanut brittle into her jacket pockets.

‘They’re all a bunch of prudes. If they stopped and thought about it they’d realize they’re the ones that dress like freaks.’

A breathless glance. Such youthful pep. She looks across and then down and then unhooks a safety pin and slips it through a shirtsleeve. O’Oness flicks it back and forth. Newc turns silent, faces the room. The argument is still rumbling within the walls. She taps her fingers against her thumbs, licks them, wipes them downward on her jeans. The skin of her hip is pressing out to the side, almost touching. She starts to nod her head from side to side and hum and then mumble under her breath. A song?

‘Yeah, it’s called “*If You Really Had Two You’d Have Used One Sentence.*” By The Sleepoversleeps. They’re supposed to play tonight at the Little Eternity. It’s about people who talk too much because they’re afraid to actually take a stand.’ She swallows, faces towards nothing, bobs. Then, softly:

‘I don’t have the time have the time no no no
To listen to you take all sides no no no
You’re in my face all day all day hey hey hey
You don’t know no no-thing go away way way way
Wasting my life
You’re wasting my—’

The yelling opens into clarity, getting louder. A high-pitched shriek and a rougher bark. Like a man and woman who've lost it. Like Yurnyl and Lamenta, unconcerned with battling throughout the stairwell, for all to hear.

'...big talk,' she says. '*You gonna back it up, or are you wimping out?*'

'Take a look at yourself! *You put on all this crap but that doesn't make it mean anything.* Don't you dare touch me!'

Sermer storms in, shrilling. 'Don't worry, you're not even worth it.' A moment passes for O'Oness to reconcile the sexes. Sermer reaches the couch and holds a hand out. His hair is pointed in all directions and his shirt is torn badly. A blood-crust-ed fishhook is stuck through his nose. 'We're going,' he says, his voice returned to its expected timbre.

Newc stands up and squeezes close into Sermer. She puts a piece of brittle in her mouth and chews, then leans in and kisses him with a wide-open mouth. Behind them Ununcla is standing by the hallway with her arms crossed under her bosom and her big hips cocked beneath her dress. The uproar has attracted a few other people. When Newc and Sermer separate a golden strand stretches between them. It is like an inverted rainbow whose terminal treasures have melted along its length. She moves away, the imprint of his hand remaining on her rump, stands close to Ununcla. Two different energies refuse to acknowledge their similar spirit. O'Oness is joyous, cherishing both.

'*You're just an excuse to be antagonistic,*' Ununcla says. 'You must be real proud of yourself.'

Newc continues staring, chewing, wipes a smear of saliva across her cheek which leaves a streak of red. Sermer comes up to her, wraps an arm limply over her shoulder.

'*It's easy to criticize,*' he says, '*but someone who bitches without sticking their neck out deserves no respect.*'

Contempt swells and they walk past. Newc looks back. 'See ya Grams,' she says. 'Don't let them turn you sane.' Everyone else follows them out, grumbling. It fades to silence. O'Oness waits. Words swirl out of hearing. If only there was a radio, though it's probably all news and music by now, the book reader done for the day. Someone will be by. Across the way the edge of the window darkens, or did it? Time passes, its extent untraceable. The air seems to have seized, as if holding itself in anticipation. From behind there is the rub of a tight door opening and a breath of chill.

'...had come to minutes later so I wouldn't have to see that. What about his—'

'Don't worry...'

The baby pulls out of the murk, writhing. The day continues. There is no reason to look away anymore, the only one aware is right here. Who is watching? Which end is this? *Is perception a ruse? After all this time?* The

face of so many others, all others. And only one. But who will it grow into, or come from? A name can settle it, but it still eludes. The fog pushes in. A grimace — no, not like that, not now. Closer, there it is. Ease returns. That moment, though, it became: Oyst. Unsure in his innocence. Always seemed much older and younger than he was. Here, *wipe that drool from your chin*. You too? His comfort arises from the concern. The balance tips, blanket slides. Fall forward and lay, nose to nose. Too close, everything is blurred. Then brightens. It smells like crap. Dimming to a whomp. You two? As the features disintegrate the name is clear. Merkimpedel speaks with her future voice, obscure and familiar. *‘Doesn’t everyone die?’* Doubt at both ends, the center content. Nodding. *‘Way to be dismissive, jerk.’* The darkness shrouds in agreement. Graceless fingers gently press against lips, as if waiting for breath. They feel smiles. The day continues.

...far beyond all space and time...

Off the porch the clearing looked perfect, as it had for weeks, months, long enough that the smooth and depthless field of white, the pines looming all around, branches weighed down and dark speckled behind thick masses of snow, the cloudless blue sky lying beyond the frame of trees and mountains, that all of this faultless view had become common and expected, yet still the sight would stop breath so as not to spoil it with sodden clouds of an imperfect, intruding existence.

Wally exhaled, finally, closing his eyes to imagine the scene as if he were not there. Freed from observing the residues of his presence, he let the cold-warm-cold air waft through his mouth and nose, a mélange of atmospheres unique and special and comforting: the crisp, hopeful taste of the morning tinged with ominous tendrils of the just departed night, the faint yet ubiquitous organics found only in nature far removed from civilization, the lung-filling sensation of emptiness that drew within the exuberant distance and freedom of a vast space. He gripped the railing and let the snow's refreshing iciness penetrate his skin. Though he had begun to be wearied by this seemingly endless winter, the start of every day, on the porch, frigid and isolated, unvarying in its beauty, was an auspicious and calming experience. Wally was pleased. This was where he belonged.

He swayed his head, listening. No jets or helicopters or motors or sounds of others. Just silence. Or, at least, the silence of the forest. An unfelt breeze running through the trees or off the distant mountain slopes. The directionless crackles and fumps as the snow melted and shifted and tumbled in the warmth of the sun. Something moving in the woods, maybe a bird. But no signs of man. Perhaps Jek was wrong. Or perhaps he had never been here. Over a week had passed, or maybe less. Wally couldn't tell anymore. Every day was made up of the same elements: you get up, you eat, you work

out, you hunt. Sometimes you drink. Sometimes you nap. Sometimes you feel good. Sometimes down. He would let them mix around and arrange themselves in whatever order happened to make sense. Sometimes it seemed that entire parts of days would be lost. Sometimes he felt he was repeating a day already passed. Even when he followed a sequence that seemed different he had the overwhelming sense that it did not matter, that the world around him did not or could not or would not change.

He walked across to the side of the porch and looked across the way, at his log. It stood out, the largest tree along the rim of the clearing, not much taller than the others but giant in girth. On the opposite side, hidden from his current perspective, were the marks of his time. Rows of knife-carved cuts, four vertical lines then a diagonal slash. Blocks of five. Hundreds of them, some dry, some bubbling with sap, ragged at first then settling into a tighter pattern. Like a prisoner counting the personal calendar of his incarceration. Only he was no prisoner. This he refused. It was why he stopped tallying his days on the tree — time no longer needed to matter. He had realized he moved out here to escape it, to not feel its passage or be pressured or patterned or impressed by it.

It had been around the time he'd finished his preparations for the winter. Wood chopped, piled, covered. Cabin tightened up and organized and swept. Crib packed and battened. Winterizing the beds. He'd been through this before but for the first time felt confident that he knew everything that needed to be done. Confident and energized. And eventually there was nothing left to do but wait for spring. So, rather than find busy work, rather than search for ways to keep his mind and body occupied, he decided to step back and enjoy the enclave of paradise he'd created for himself. Counting days would mean counting how long until his period of rest would end, would place boundaries on an environment that to him, at that moment, felt boundless. Of course, infinity does not exist for man, at least on earth, but he could still try to fool himself into believing he'd found it.

Now Wally wondered if he'd actually succeeded. All of his days melted and separated and flowed and became indistinct. Time had become a fiction, a structure whose existence was proven by itself. He only doubted this when something extraordinary occurred — such as when Jek showed up — but even then such an event seemed a dream, as if he'd merely imagined it, as if his mind was trying to trick him into once again affirming time. He searched the clearing for signs of Jek's presence, as he'd done those first days after. The fresh snow, fallen secretly between cloudless days, had covered over his tracks. There were no divots or undulations, no bootmarks on the ground. Their cups were put away. Not even a hangover to mark their meeting. The longer it went, the less certain Wally was that he'd been here. Nobody else

had come, his warnings were false. Wally had no memory of him leaving. Neither did the clearing.

He stepped down off the porch and looked up into the sky. He blocked the sun with his hand then turned his back to it and felt a barely perceptible warmth on his neck. The only human sound out here was that of his breath. He picked up a handful of snow and rubbed it across his face and into his mouth, letting it melt on his tongue. There was no Jek or anybody else, only him. It was time to go inside. He waited, his body and thoughts lingering for one moment more.

Wally pushed up another rep and paused, letting his arms rest, his lungs pumping, deciding if he could do one more. 'Fuck it,' he said, and let the bar drop down to his chest, then, almost as if it had bounced, immediately pressed it up again. Two-thirds of the way the momentum seized and he was left straining, his arms at once refusing to straighten and refusing to relent. Nothing was moving and he began to shake and then with a mighty roar willed his triceps and chest and all his muscles to move the weight and once again it rose, up and back onto the rests with a giant, satisfying clatter. He lay there, spent, his arms first dangling from the bar then fallen out to the sides. Steam was pouring off of his bare chest. He could feel his heart pulsing beneath it. He looked up at the sky, blue and unbroken, indifferent to his exhaustion. Out there were stars, starlight was falling into his eyes but he could not see it for the brightness. Light that was millions, billions of years old, lost in the mundane noise of another day's passing sun.

He sat up and rubbed his arms, still breathing hard. From the chimney the air tasted like smoke, comforting but also vaguely irritating, a tinge in his eyes and deep in his throat. For so much of his life he'd been focused on goals: complete the mission, lead the team, run this much faster, lift this much more, fix the cabin, prove your independence. Finish another workout. Ten more reps. Eleven. Twelve. No matter how hard you pushed, how much you did, the goals kept coming, changing. Achievement was ephemeral. Was he getting stronger? Did the cabin need any more work? The day you stopped to rest was the day everything began to revert. Could he really wait for spring?

The pressure of the present surrounded him. The urge to break the monotony was as strong as that to maintain routine. Whatever he chose seemed destined to be incongruous with what would feel right. The future was vague and untouchable, never matching expectations, never achieving its promise for change or stability. Yet the past was just as unknowable. Moments mundane and novel jumbled together to create a story whose meaning or order was elusive, where the vagaries of memory and bias, environment and experience, warped what was once now into something that never really

was. The vision was limited, be it by chance or rule or intention, and yet from this incomplete and untrustworthy view purpose and significance were constructed. Fidelity was likely trivial, useful only when some other fool's recounting (or recording) attempted contradiction — and who does not hold in primacy oneself? He could look to the past, to experience its pleasures and anxieties, to learn from it, to lose and regain it, to transform it. But the same could be said for the future. Looking forward had begun to feel no different than looking back. It seemed to Wally that the sense of progress, the logic of time, was a deceit accepted by inborn faith. Everyone was wired to witness it so, everyone following the example of everyone else. It made sense thus it must be true. This collective acceptance preserved an interpretation of the world which was as consequential as it was illusory. Everything felt wrong but it was too late for him to right it. And thus the present became a responsibility, to mediate these potentials, to capture the instant of veracity, to not waste another second perpetuating a falsity, though what the lie was he probably would never know.

The chilly air prickled his skin, the heat radiating from his body's exertion no longer able to resist it. He got up and went over to the chin-up bar. Looked up past the roofline, listened. He thought Jek was the start of something, but even he was being subsumed. Nobody else was coming, it was no use waiting for them. It would all change soon, anew, not anew. Winter would run out and the monotony would break. Wally hopped and grabbed and flipped himself over, holding the bar with his legs and letting his body hang, arms stretched towards the ground. He relaxed and looked at the landscape, the sky like a massive, surfaceless ocean in a brightly lit cave, the trees calcareous stalactites descending from its bleached roof. Structures formed over far longer than a man's lifetime. Then he closed his eyes and crossed his arms and began to do inverted sit-ups, just as he had countless times before. Fifty, rest, forty, rest, ...

When Wally was finished his abs were tense and burning, barely able to lift him high enough to reach the bar and swing himself free. He plopped back on the bench to catch his breath. While exercising it was like his mind blanked and time lost as he focused on the repetitions, holding his form, keeping the count, forcing his muscles to continue through pain and exhaustion. Now, sitting and rubbing his aching stomach, his thoughts returned and he felt a rush of insignificance. As if thinking blocked accomplishment. Perhaps insignificance was not a burden but a goal.

Out here, everything seemed like noise. Perfect, clean noise. Within it there were underfrequencies, signals of distraction and impurity, but it was best if those remained drowned by the pervasive, ceaseless static they were part of. Wally felt his brain beginning to roil again and he stood and picked up a pair of barbells. He did a curl with one arm, then the other. His biceps

swelled, veins bulging under the skin. Right, left, right, left. His body started to heat again, his breathing deepened, gravity resisted. It was only him and the weight as the world and his mind and everything else dissolved.

The tracks were fresh, two marks side by side trailed by two in a line. They loped off into the forest, those farther away blurring into dashes of simply drawn cock-and-balls. With a smile Wally followed the trail into the trees, excited to have found something different from squirrel. Lately he'd been having to go deeper into the woods to find game, some days coming up empty after hours of effort. Fresh rabbit was a rare treat.

Wally moved alongside the rabbit's path, through knee-deep snow and up a slight incline. It curved underneath a fallen tree which was still attached to its jagged trunk, forming an acute angle with the hillside. He ducked under and immediately beyond was a rocky outcropping into which the tracks continued. The snow was patchier here and he could see a few bounds before the trail disappeared. He climbed up to the last mark to look around. There was nothing anyplace above or to the sides. A handful of crevices were within leaping distance but showed no obvious indication which way the rabbit went. He peered into them, found a stick and poked at the darkness, all with no luck. Following around the edge of the outcropping he searched for a possible exit, a new set of prints. He only saw undisturbed powder and the pile of boulders and rocks extending far up the slope. He imagined a large warren underneath the mass, a maze which would provide plenty of niches and passages to hunker down in safety.

There was no way he was going to flush his prey out today. He'd been to this place a few times before, never noticed anything living here. That and the fact that there weren't more tracks indicated there likely wasn't a colony, which didn't bode well for this being a good hunting spot. It might, however, be worth holding off for a few months to give the little fella some time. Maybe it had a mate, would multiply his chances. 'Well, you're safe for now,' Wally said to the rocks. He brushed snow off of a flat spot and sat down. Looking out over the outcropping, he searched for movement that he had no intention of reacting to. There was no need to hunt anymore, observing was enough. Maybe not only for today — at least here. He had plenty of food back at the cabin, and this would give him something to watch as the seasons changed. He didn't feel like returning just yet. It was quiet, peaceful. There didn't seem any need to do anything at all.

He considered his past: the places he'd been, his team, the victories, the loss, the times glorious and horrific and singular. The betrayals. He'd come out here not as an escape but to show he could follow a separate path, that his existence could continue defined by itself and not by outsiders, by society or bureaucracy or all those others who manipulate and pull you into their

own fictions without ever allowing you to thrive in a reality which is yours and yours alone. Those things which had variously filled him with pride and honor and shame he now wanted nothing to do with. A past forgotten so that it was no longer a past. Now his significance was to prove that he could disappear for everyone but himself. It did not matter that he was the only one who would know it was possible, that it happens would be enough.

Yes, Jek must have been a test. A temptation. At another time he would not have waited, he'd have driven back to confirm, confront, attack. Even those first couple days there was a part of him expecting to fight. They now seemed a haze of misplaced worry, anxious preparations, uncertain despair. He remembered feeling angry, wishing they would just get it over with, and other times wanting to give up, to drink and sleep and be done with it all. He wasn't sure how much was dreamed, was vivid fears come alive from his imagination. He remembered doing things which he could now see never happened — defenses, perimeter signals, plans. Whether Jek too was a dream or not was immaterial, the only thing of consequence was that Wally had survived the trial.

When he'd showed up, swaggering in from across the clearing, Wally had known immediately from his gait who it was. To go out and greet him never crossed his mind, nor was he worried. A welcome break in the rhythm, an underfrequency rising up from the noise. He turned back inside, not to get a gun or watch through the window, not wondering how he was found, but rather to throw a couple more logs on the fire and start brewing a pot. Was this really how he'd react? Like he was a housewife preparing for a guest? Not even thinking about the cask? This was Jek, after all. Maybe he did think about the spirits, was worried Jek and him would drink through the whole barrel. Whatever it was, when he came in Wally got an extra cup and poured them both warm cups of coffee.

He didn't remember any small talk, hugging, welcomes. Just Jek sitting on the thick section of trunk that was normally the side table because Wally had only one chair, sitting there across from him still bundled up and drinking with two hands and smiling that glaring, toothy grin of his. It was a while like this before they spoke, when Wally finally asked:

'How did you find me?'

'Come on, Tensor, you didn't think you actually disappeared, did you?' (From the beginning, a test.) 'Yeah, well it gives me a chance to see your place — cozy, real cozy.'

'You hungry? I don't have anything fancy but I can make a decent meal. Want some jerky?'

Jek began to laugh.

‘You know, I was worried that I’d find you passed out, thought you’d come up here to spend the rest of your life alone getting pissed. Now I’m surprised you’re not wearing slippers and an apron.’

That hurt, pointing that out. He always knew how to do that. Then he turned serious, troubled, wild. Seething contempt and doom. Half of what he said seemed nonsense. Exactly like the Jek he remembered.

‘You picked a helluva time to leave, Wally. Everything’s gone to shit... they’re coming after us, taking us out...the ones in charge. We thought we were fighting for them and they turned on us...the team’s gone: Spag, Ikiwar, Buzzi, Noogs...but those of us left are still fighting. We’re finally cleaning this place up. Remember talking about that? We need your help, Tensor. You were always the best.’

Wally told him he wasn’t in the game, didn’t want any part of it. ‘It isn’t my war, hasn’t been for a long time.’

‘The war’s different now.’

‘The answer’s still no. Though I guess this is the part where you tell me you’ve got someone I care about locked up, ready to be killed if I don’t help.’

‘That wouldn’t really work now, would it?’ He knew him well. ‘I figured this would be the way you felt, still thought the least I could do was warn you. They’re coming.’

‘Why me? I’ve been out...’

‘They don’t care, they think we’re all a threat. Join us, and we can stay ahead of them, fight back together, Tensor and Notet, just like the old days.’

‘Sorry Jek, I’m not running. I’ll just tell them what I’m telling you.’

‘They won’t give you the chance.’

The conversation continued. Maybe about the past — fun times, savage times, times Wally still preferred to forget. Maybe Wally told him about his life now. More coffee, maybe some of that jerky. Maybe they joked around. Maybe Jek started up on the crazy talk again, crap from deep in Wally’s psyche. The kind of stuff that flits away or embeds itself way down beyond recollection. Wally remembered being distracted, eyeing the cask, eventually giving in.

‘So, you want a drink?’

‘Thought you’d never ask.’

A chill rippled through Wally and he drew his legs up with his arms, pulling them close to his chest. He rested his chin on his hands and watched the steam of his breath spread out and dissipate. He listened, not to the skies but along the ground, for movement in the snow, something beneath him, a sign of life. He was no longer interested in seeing or even hearing the rabbit, instead wanted surety that it was gone from his awareness, that their fleeting intersection was over until another day. As he waited ignored sounds came to the fore once again: a sibilant, a crack, a thump. Was the

rabbit under him, or had it made an escape? Running for cover, leaping, shivering? Wally held his breath for the creature, remained completely still. Surely those sounds had other sources. Surely they were both alone, if for no other reason than that was what they wished.

The knife gleamed in the firelight as Wally ran it across the whetstone. He felt the edge and looked up in the direction of the log. He was staring at the cabin wall, imagining the tree behind it and the markings which wouldn't be visible. Like an apparition, like the residue of phantom labor. Like replenishing the woodpile. He wasn't supposed to be working, there wasn't any need. But it seemed some days he let himself go...

He picked up the cup in front of him and took a sip but spit back the lukewarm, bitter drink. In the corner was the cask and in there was something to make the coffee go down. To let go. Wally tapped the cup on the table, tapped the cup with the knife, poked the knife at the table. He didn't feel like drinking, but he also didn't feel like doing much anything else. The blade tip dug into the wood, scoring a thin line. He took a bite of jerky and chewed it indifferently.

With a sigh, he stuck the knife in the table and got up to put on his outside clothes. When he was done he grabbed the knife and walked out of the cabin, down off the porch and through the snow towards the forest. He walked around the tree and looked at the marks, ran his gloved hand across them, feeling their shape and texture. Five, ten, fifteen — he started to count then stopped himself, instead kneeling down at the end of the bottom row where he began to carve a new line, the third of the group. The blade cut into the bark at an angle, then from the complementary direction to form a V-shaped channel which he picked at with the knifetip. At the bottom the last bit popped out but didn't fall, instead hung there, wobbling, still connected by a sliver. When Wally grabbed it a long shred of wood pulled down off of the side of the tree before it separated.

He held up the tiny cut of wood. Dark strands curled from it, wavering in the air. He stroked them between his fingers and a few pulled off even though he was trying to exert the lightest of pressure. Rubbing his gloved fingers released the strands and they floated away. He followed one with his eyes, wondering if it was fresh, a few years or maybe even days old, or if it had been part of the tree since it was a sprout. Did new wood grow over the old, or from within pushing outward its predecessors? Once, many years ago, before this tree was even a seed in a cone, a child was born. And then from that child another, then another, and another. Endless generations streaming out and interweaving and throwing off new threads which warped and twined and split and twisted until finally a lone, trailing filament exited the fray and rested, limp and unbound, in these woods, in this cabin, next to

this tree. Along the way this fiber writhed and stretched and looped too, also cut many other threads short, but never allowed itself to be split or pulled back into the mass. It is no wonder, then, that the fabric here is unraveling, its ragged edge flailing behind this solitary strand which can do little else other than curl and waver around pointlessly and tie knots unto itself. It is not merely a dead end, though, but also a disentangler, threatening to pull everything apart if not just let be.

Wally stood up and began to strike at the tree with the knife. Strike and gouge and scrape. With two hands, digging new lines across the old, connecting them and breaking them apart. He reared back and stabbed it as high as possible, leaving the knife sticking out from the trunk, the blade glinting in the sun. He turned and hurried back to the cabin, snow flinging in front of him as he kicked through his previous path. Inside he grabbed the axe and headed back out to the tree.

His first cuts went right through the middle rows of log marks. With a few swings they had been made one, a deep, horizontal groove of freshly exposed wood that split his time. He stepped back briefly to admire his work, then realized its measliness compared to the immense trunk. He threw off his gloves and started to tear into the tree, swinging from over his head and up from under, knocking out thick hunks of the sappy flesh as he opened the wound deeper and wider. He moved not with a rhythm but a fury, no thought wasted on technique or pace or outcome, only on this strike, this impact, this instant...

He had been working for some time. His jacket and shirts and pants and hat were sitting in a pile on top of his gloves. He had moved to the side of the trunk now, afraid that a back cut opposite the side he started on might fell the tree into the cabin. His skin was gleaming with sweat, muscles swollen and sore, hands raw with blisters. He stood in boots and underwear, steaming, surrounded by wood chips, whacking at the tree, over and over, under and under, over and over again. Swinging the axe was like moving it through mud, was like holding onto fire, each stroke requiring a scream to will the body to continue and the wood from the tree.

Every few minutes he would need to stop, resting against the tree or his knees as he caught his breath and let the pain run through and out of him. Sometimes he would grab some snow and suck on it then rub it over his head and across his back, let its cool sting soothe his chafed hands. He would not kneel or sit, though, for fear of not being able — or willing — to rise again. Rest just long enough and no more and then start again at his attack. Despite his efforts he was still only perhaps a third of the way into the tree. Because he had rotated the direction of his strikes, the cut spanned an entire diameter but was more crescent than wedge. The giant

was severely damaged, its wound certainly fatal, yet it remained standing. If he thought to consider his progress and the current toll on his body, he might have concluded that bringing down the tree in one day was not possible, but he did not bother with such contemplations, even when at pause.

So he continued: cutting, resting, cutting, resting. He was slowing but did not notice, for the pain and effort was greater than ever. At one point, after a session of only a few swings, he walked back and leaned on the axe, letting his head droop as he took in large, icy breaths. A glimmer caught his eye and he looked up listlessly, thinking it was the knife, except that it was over in the sky, a roiling flash that did not fade. His first instinct was to run, to get the truck and his guns and haul away, but before he could move he understood what it was, that there was no point.

‘I’ll be damned.’

He watched as the second sun burned up in the clear sky, glowing, silent, turning the blue yellow and black. He braced himself on the axe and watched, seeing nothing else, the trees and the cabin and the snow gone. No smoke from the chimney. No ignored sounds. No incomplete cut. His muscles twitched, hot with overuse. He either breathed or did not, his consciousness focused someplace else, on a falling star, blinding his narrowed sight. He leaned and rested, agape, unblinking, present for those few moments to a vision that may never be known again.

