

Lobster Clouds  
and  
Pieces of People

words by  
Michael Watson



to terry,  
marshall,  
blake,  
matthew,  
and emily.

love,  
david.

## zero

I am the universe. But we'll get back to that later.

I'm sitting on a beach, burying my feet in the hot sand, and I can't help but get lost in the color of the sky over me.

Cerulean blue, as smooth as the sand around my toes.

Deep in the sun.

Waves collapsing on the shore.

A lover's-breath breeze.

I couldn't begin to tell you *where* the shore is—it's just here, as long as I am. It travels forever in both directions, eventually curving far out of sight, just as it meets the horizon.

Of course I'm the only one here.

No one around for . . . Well, forever.

There's no profit, no tricks, no liars. Not a pair of eyes in sight.

Just me.

Hello.

Just me.

This sand feels good, so I'm going to sit down at the hem of the sea, right here where the wet sand meets the dry, and tell you exactly how I got here. As if you were real.

Hello, just me.

The cosmic joke.

I have this dream often—it's not a dream this time, you see—over and over and over. I'm watching life itself begin. Maybe it's more than just life beginning. I wouldn't know what either looks like, but I have a really strong imagination.

If you didn't know me, you'd say I was ending. You don't know me, though, so you're probably thinking just that. This is just the beginning.

Glorious and sounded, like a trumpet.

I'm beginning my story because that just happens to be where I am.

And what a sight it is.

## one

**I**nsomnia, noun.

The chronic inability to fall asleep or remain asleep for an adequate length of time.

Some people call two hours of sleep a midday nap; I call it an accomplishment. For most, sleep is normal. You wake up, get your day done, go to bed. Every day, it's the same thing. After twenty or thirty years, it's like a clock counting you down.

Tick.

Over the whole of your life, you'll sleep more than you'll be awake.

Tick.

That's counting the waking coma of day-to-day life, of course, because sometimes sleep is more than just the time you spend under the covers. Sometimes, it's staring into space, or a blank spot on a wall when someone's talking to you, and suddenly you're woken up and brought back into reality.

You aren't getting enough rest, you tell yourself. If only you really believed that.

An entire lifetime spent trying to catch up on rest pushed aside by—

Insert any modern convenience or productive lifestyle decision you like here. Step-aerobics classes and ready-to-eat meals filled with words like *sodium benzonate* and *polysorbate 80*.

Tick.

With all this motivation, I can't wait to see what my tombstone looks like.

Here lies what's left of David Preacher, the worm-eaten remains of a sickeningly morose human being.

It's funny, but in the same way airplane crashes are funny. And believe me, I know what that's like. I've read the stories. I know what funny is.

They don't recover half of the bodies in water landings. Funny is being at a funeral without the guest of honor, because he's tangled up in rusted debris under a half-mile of salt water.

I used to read a lot.

I once read that Leonardo Da Vinci slept for two or three hours at a time, then got up for five or six and went back to sleep. He did that up until his death at sixty-seven. I don't know how true that is, but let me tell you something.

Let me tell you something about cycles.

The long, slow spirals that kill us all.

Tick.

You go to sleep at eleven so you can get up at six to shower in your mildewed shower silo—because it isn't really a shower, just a tall box with a faucet and a place for a bar of soap—shave with your fifty-dollar goo-dispensing shaver, and eat a stale breakfast carefully so your striped power tie doesn't get covered in crumbs. All this to make sure you're in your chair at fifteen minutes to the hour, seven hours and forty-five minutes after you downed a quick muscle relaxer to *assist* you in filling the center of that pillow.

The great measure of a civilization is its drugs.

You have to be there, because that Big Project depends on your six collated pages of input. Nobody ever leaves the copy machine on, either. The fax machine stays on, but it never works. Not as well as the trash can. Toss something in there, it goes away. Never fails. If only everything else were as easy to use.

You'd never worry about crumbs on your ten-dollar power tie, would you?

Why people from other departments keep taking the pens from yours, you'll never figure out. The cabinet gets filled with more boxes, and as if everyone else were transferring them straight from the cabinet to the Trash Can Multiappliance, the new boxes are gone. Like gum on the sidewalk, eventually the empty ballpoint boxes just blend in with the clear, magnetic paper clip wells. The stapler refills. The big box of rubber bands no one can come up with a use for, but everyone must deplete. Peel-and-stick labels that end up under shelves and desks.

It's all attrition, you tell yourself. Forced losses in a battle no one's really winning.

If only those muscle relaxers were still working. This would be cake.

So you find your keys and watch the last fifteen minutes of the day scroll by. A runner at the starting block. You're so close, you can taste it. Salt, from cupfuls of pretzels that pretended to be lunch, in the cracks of your lips.

You're so tired when you get home, you don't even care about the moron who almost hit you on the expressway coming home. Not like he could have heard you screaming at him, what with that tiny little phone grafted to the business side of his head. Trying so hard to be important. Needed and connected.

But you're awake again, because naps never last long enough for you to catch your breath, sooner than you thought. It's just about time for bed now.

An extra hour won't hurt.

A sandwich. Well, meat and bread. It passes for a meal. Snack. Something.

Check your e-mail. Surf your daily list of porn sites. Seventy-two channels, and that's all there is?

It's after midnight, but that's okay because it'll only take a few more minutes to finish this letter.

It's after one.

By the time that muscle relaxer goes to work, it's two o'clock.

Like you're having a blast, you repeat this.

Alarm. Shower. Eat. Paper clips. Idiot drivers. Nap. Terrible diet. Three o'clock.

Every night, it gets a little later. It only takes a week or two before you're sleeping through the day, eyes red and pupils dilated from single-point sources of light at three in the morning.

Sleep therapists call it *phase shifting*.

Cold and slick eyelids. The sunrise is your cue to pin the heavy curtains to the window and fall asleep before light starts to pour through your pathetically dreary apartment in a seedy section of town. You only took that place because you're not paid anything respectable. Twenty-two thousand dollars a year, and a hundred years on your body.

Now what do you do?

I quit my job, that's what I did.

It's all downhill from here.

"Here's my two minutes notice," I said to my boss. The fat, malignant tumor. I was already

gone, he just didn't know it yet. I'd been gone for months. I had the look down like a dance recital: My eyes pushed back into my skull. My monotone speech. My love for all living things.

"Don't you mean *two weeks*?"

Did I say two weeks?

Does it look like I want to be here two more weeks?

You can't make me stay here two more weeks. I'll just stop showing up.

I took a boatload of those stupid rubber bands with me, too.

I could have been passing nuclear arms secrets to the lowest contact of my greatest enemy, or I could have been approving the machining process for the one-centimeter bevel on the front-right piston in our overseas sister company's new V-8 engine. The work would have been the same. It was the same cookie-cutter template of a job that everyone else goes to in the morning. The same type of job Starbucks makes a killing on.

Money is the solution to your lack of power.

Mildly retarded tree sloths for coworkers. The rolling, rippling, piercing ring of the constellation of telephones everywhere around you. Trash cans overflowing with tall paper cups and the stupid little brown paper collars they wear. Twice-used coffee filters thick with wet grinds like volcanic debris.

It's like some kind of surreal elephant graveyard for office supplies.

Overhead fluorescent lighting hidden above frosted glass panels.

There are no instincts in offices, just reflexes.

Ring. A half-second. Ring, somewhere next to you. A half-second. Ring, just past that. Every time a call came through our floor, the phones did that. The caller would hear two rings, and we would hear eight. When everyone would get busy, that's when there would be a caller determined to let the phone ring until the collapse of the free market system. Luckily for me, my complete breakdown was scheduled in my day planner right before that, so the two events couldn't have collided. A *mis-scheduling*, it's called.

And they rang, like dominos collapsing all around me.

Ring, my desk. I'm already on my cell. I can't take this.

Ring, next to me.

Ring, two cubicles down. It won't take long to get to the wall. Ring, near the coffee maker.

Ring, ring, ring, to the receptionist. Why couldn't it have started there?

Ring, someone pick it up. Ring, not everyone's on the phone. Ring, I can hear you talking about last night's game.

Ring, I'm holding my pen like a dagger. Ring, shut up and answer it. Ring, I'm going to kill you. Ring, my desk.

Take an order request call, route the order transit number to the predetermined transit tracking identification department, and verify order routing with the department receiving coordinator. Memo the entry, take an order request call. If there's a problem with the order transit number, the transit tracking identification department may send you e-mail notification, providing you with a checkpoint disallow code for the administrative contact for the transit order.

What I was really doing, I didn't know, and never asked. I don't think anyone knew, honestly. Take the call, process the order, move on. It had to be the departmentalized engineering of society's downfall, I thought. One day, a corporate superpower would rise from of our work, and there wouldn't even be a war fought, because every possible enemy nation and state

would already be part of the machine without realizing it until it's decades too late. The enemy defeated before the war.

People like us, we're all dead in the tomorrow of big corporations. We're recycled and replayed over and over until we can't tell what's public relations and what isn't. We're statistics, and statistics are numbers, and numbers can't be alive.

In the future, our bodies will be made of seventy percent Pepsi-Cola.

Maybe there's nothing that can save us but ourselves, I thought.

Ring, my desk.

You're always expendable, even if you're the only one who can do your job. The words *job security* don't mean anything anymore.

And I didn't care.

The sun made the sea of cars in the parking lot shine like diamonds on the asphalt. I dropped my briefcase right there on the sidewalk. Useless. Briefcases are there to hold the things that make someone important. If you remove all the things in your briefcase, and you're no longer important, what does that say about you?

Still and surrounded, warm and open, the Sun held me in place. I could ignore the smog. The smell of the baking Tarmac. Everything was water.

I was reborn. David's gone, welcome the new owner. He wants to open your eyes. He wants to show you the sport utility vehicle you never take out of the suburbs and city, that gets two miles to the gallon, doesn't make you any smarter or more valuable than you already were. He wants to show you everything by showing you nothing at all.

It's not enough just to evolve anymore.

Rebirth is constant. A flower falls dead to the ground, just to become someone's mulch for an unborn bed of petunias in three months. Let me tell you something about cycles.

I left my levelheaded, mid-sized sedan in the lot with the others and walked until night fell, until I was home again.

This didn't happen all at once, now. This had been a long time coming. I'd developed a few habits which led up to my *Exodus*, and not just my rotating sleep schedule. One month it was during the day, one month it was a few hours at night. There was my dictionary collection, for example. Stacks and stacks of every reference book and magazine you could imagine, from wall to wall. Then, there was Maura.

SWF, 33, ISO LTR. NS, D&DF. BOX10235.

SBM, 40, BI ISO LMBM. NS, D&DF. BOX31290.

They just leave their personals box number for you. You're a message. You're a piece of voice mail. I read these for fun. Those people put their entire romantic goals and dreams into a three-line, forty-five-character non-paragraph. A by-line of love. Millions of people so lonely, so desperately lonely, that they turn themselves into advertisements at thirty cents a word. Newsprint is the new Cupid's arrow; a love potion made of press ink.

What's the difference, then, between that and reading the phone book?

I can't tell you now, and I couldn't have told you then when I started reading the White Pages one night at two o'clock. My fingers did the walking, randomly selecting numbers to dial.

"Hello?" they'd say in that been-asleep-for-hours voice.

My name's David, I'd tell them. If I got lucky, there wouldn't be a dial tone in response. If I got really lucky, there would be the threat of the police. I'm always up for something new.

But no one ever called the police. They just hung up or yelled a half-asleep, confused string of profanities and *then* hung up.

My name is David, and hello. Did you do anything interesting today?

"Fucking creep!" one girl said.

Hello, my name is David. Do you think it means anything that your name is under my fingertip, or do you believe in chaos?

"I have Caller I.D. you know," they'd inevitably say. Star-sixty-nine.

Do you believe in destiny? Is fate only for the dying, or does it use everyone?

No one likes a conversation at one-thirty-three in the morning.

I was dead, and this was my way of feeling alive again. I knew I existed every time some creeped-out woman slammed her phone down on me. I knew I was somewhere, and someone else knew it. So it had to be true.

I was dead, and then I was alive. A rebirth at the right side of the first column on page one hundred fifty-two.

No one lets their answering machine pick up at this time of night.

No message boxes, no voice mail features. No sound of the beep. Living tissue on both ends of the line. It didn't matter that conversations lasted only a few seconds. I was real for those few seconds.

Nothing could stop that feeling.

I was totally, completely satisfied. Content. My belly was full and my throat was wet.

Fate uses the dying for amusement. It uses us all. It's anticipation, all of it. The salivation when you see that slice of birthday cake making its way toward you, that's the same anticipation fate gets hard off of. The cake is never as good as you *think* it's going to be, no matter how good it is. If it were, you'd salivate after it and crave it that much more, and then, it's no longer as good as the moment right before the plate hits your hand. That's why fate keeps pulling carrot after carrot in front of you.

Things can only be as good as the anticipation that precedes them.

But surprises hide around every corner. My surprise's name happened to be Maura A. Spring. To this day, I still don't know what the A stood for. Alice, maybe.

I did everything I normally did in preparation for a night of searching, as I'd come to call it. Phone, check. Phone book, check. Genesis, check.

Sometimes, I'd use a phone book from another city somewhere far off. I had quite the collection.

It seems rebirth can be an addiction, too. God must know how this feels.

I had my own little method for picking numbers. I would take the entire phone book and toss it to the floor. Whatever page it opened to, I'd drop a finger down blindly on it. Whatever I landed on, I dialed.

I sleep with a dead night-light under my pillow. What's under yours?

"I think you have the wrong number, chief."

If I use another Post Office to send a letter to my mailman, will he get jealous?

More expletives, more confused half-awake yelling. Click. If I'd like to make a call.

"I told you to not call back. It's you or nothing."

That's what surprises sound like.

"Hello," I said. "I'm David. I don't think we've spoken before."

“Who?” replied the frail, breaking voice with a sniffle.

David, you idiot. Get the Kleenex out of your ear and put it to your nose.

“He left me!” she cried. If this hadn’t been so out of the ordinary, I wouldn’t have cared. I would have gone to the next rebirth right then. I had my own baggage, and it didn’t have polished leather handles and convenient little wheels to help me haul it through the airport terminal.

Would she like to hear about my night-light?

“Who is this?” she asked. Didn’t we go over this? “My name is—”

Maura. I already knew this.

“How do you know my name?” Sniffle.

I found it in the phone book, I said. On page— Between— You live at—

“Oh my God. What do you want? Are you going to kill me? Rape me?” She was a bit panicked by then, but she had forgotten about whoever the Hell she was crying over before.

“You’re not hanging up?” I asked her.

“I wanna know if you want to rape me first. I’m also smashed.”

I said, “I wasn’t planning on it. I honestly wouldn’t know where to begin. I could kill you, though, if that’s more of what you’re looking for.”

A laugh came through her tears. A sick laugh.

I hung up. That click of finality when the receiver connects with the base, and the room is suddenly more silent than it’s ever been.

## two

I'm falling through glass.

It's a perfectly flat sheet of plate glass a thousand miles in all directions.

I know it has to be a dream, because it's perfectly flat.

In the Einsteinian universe, everything exists on a curved worldline; that is, space itself is curved, and there's isn't such a thing as a perfectly rigid object. Nothing can truly be flat. But this is.

I can't tell where the horizon is, or what color it is, and that isn't at all disconcerting as I crash through the plate at a million miles a second. A million miles a second, and infinitely slowly at the same time. It's like water around me, passing in a flash and holding completely still.

I know it has to be a dream, because I can't feel a thing.

I can't feel the billions of triangles of glass shred my body like paper, because they don't.

I should be in pieces. I should be drowning in a red cloud of blood. I should have lost the ability to breathe seconds ago.

I should be all these things, but I'm not. Instead, I'm becoming lost in a collapsing, crumbling sea of glass. A crystal shower of tears.

It was Tuesday, so I was at my required weekly emergency systems test with Doctor Morgan.

Brown hair, pinned up sticky-bun-style.

She's one of those psychiatrists that would be a really nice person if she didn't have all the answers in amber bottles with childproof caps. Fluoxetine HCL, 40 mg. Thioridazine. You have to be careful with that second one. Prolonged use of thioridazine has shown to create cases of Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome. Every time I popped one, I hoped to become an unfortunate statistic. Suddenly, I wouldn't need the drugs anymore, because I'd be stuporous and vacant all the time. Life in a bubble in your head.

I told her I'd met someone. Well, I might have met someone. I wasn't really sure.

"How, David?" she asked. Black pantyhose, legs crossed.

I told her about the phone book.

"David, we talked about the phone books, remember? We agreed it wasn't productive, normal behavior. Didn't we, David?"

I said, "So what? She sounded interesting."

Perfectly round, black-rimmed prescription glasses.

I was hoping the cabinet of drugs I had at home would kick in and become side effects rather than treatments. I was hoping my creatine kinase levels would spike and I'd start pissing blood right there. Respiratory failure. Cardiac arrest. It wouldn't have been NMS; it would've

been something she wouldn't have seen coming. Rhabdomyolysis. Myoglobinuric renal failure. Anything more interesting than sitting there, explaining myself for not having done something terribly wrong.

Yes, I was listening.

"So why do you think you did it?" she asked. "What were you feeling?"

"You don't want to talk about feelings," I said. "You want to figure out the dosage I need."

Rhabdomyolysis can also be caused by overdoses of cocaine and heroin.

We'd gone over the phone books before. I had a bit of a problem, she told me. For months at that point, I was waist-deep in phone books and random phone numbers. And in reality, perhaps, I wasn't looking for conversation, but just those few seconds before the person on the other end hung up. Maybe I already knew that at that point. Maybe blind denial was keeping me from the surface.

In either case, it was all that was keeping me going. The only reason to live was a sleeping stranger.

I said, "We haven't met yet. I've just spoken to her a few times. Her name is Maura."

I told Dr. Morgan, Ph.D., that she has short, black hair that collapses around her ears. I told Dr. Morgan, Ph.D., that she never wears lipstick or other makeup not because they're made of or tested on animals—she'd prefer everything have its share of suffering and like it, she tells me—but because it takes too much time and energy to remove the stuff. So when she does wear makeup, it stays on until it wears off, often becoming just a layer of peeling paint like on some run-down tenement wall.

"It sounds like this woman might not be the best thing for you right now, David." She always used my first name. Cherry lipstick, loop earrings.

"We're here to make new discoveries—"

Shut up.

"About you as a person, and help you—"

Moron.

"Live your life as a productive—"

Idiot.

"Member—"

Retard.

"Of society. You've walked a long road, and I don't want to see you lose everything you've gained over this woman. We've talked about this, how your need to browse the phone book is stemmed from your longing for companionship. This Maura sounds very destructive."

Black, patent leather heels. The kind you fantasize about when you masturbate.

"Perhaps we can come up with another way to meet people," she told me.

"How have your meds been, David?"

I said, "Just as oppressive as ever."

Most people think psychoactive drugs make depressed or psychotic people feel good again. If you regard walking around in a dull cloud "good", then most people are right. You're unsharp; complacently muffled. Sometimes you sleep better, sometimes you have horrible dreams and never sleep entire eight-hour stretches.

"I've seen a great improvement in you since the dosage adjustment."

I had stopped taking it days ago, I was just tired from the night before. I'd been pushing my-

self harder than normal, and couldn't let my numbing meds get in the way. I didn't like feeling flat.

When I got back to the office, all I wanted to do was call Maura. I wanted to get that dirty rush as the rings counted off. She would have picked up, and I would have told her that Dr. Morgan, Ph.D., didn't think she was a good influence on me. Thought she wasn't good enough for me. Thank you, Mother.

Maura slept during the day, something I envied her for. She told me she had a night job as a telemarketer, of all things, and that she did it from her apartment. Maura wasn't selling products, though. She sold people.

Maura did polling for anyone that wanted the opinion of society's sheep. When a Presidential hopeful was planning to come through the state, his or her Director of Communications would place a phone call to Maura's employer, and Maura would get a call, and then start making her own:

Would you be in support of a ten-percent increase in defense spending over the next five years if it meant a proportionately large decrease in environmental controls and protection funding was necessary?

If the candidate for the party with which you are affiliated came out in favor of the House majority leader, a member of the traditionally opposing party, would that change your opinion of said candidate?

How many hours, approximately, of major network television do you watch in an average week: between zero and five; between six and ten; between eleven and fifteen; or more than fifteen?

That last one's the most important one. If the target demographic for your area watches an average of between six and ten hours of major network television in an average week, that might realistically equal between twenty and thirty hours in that average month. There's no reason to spend an extra sixty thousand dollars for a block of major network time nobody will watch, now is there?

But Maura liked this job for an entirely different reason than being up at night. Pollsters sit in front of a computer terminal and enter the responses they're given. Nobody's there to make sure the pollsters aren't lying, or even asking the questions they're supplied with.

"Hello, and good evening. My name is Angela." Maura never, ever gave her real name. "Before you ask, I'm not selling anything; I'm with an independent information gathering service. Would you be interested in entertaining a few short questions this evening?"

Sometimes, it took ages to find someone willing to sit there for thirty minutes.

"If your son or daughter were caught making love to the family pet, would you be: horrified; upset; mildly disturbed; or relieved?"

She loved the gasps of complete shock she'd hear.

"How large of a pile of burning children would it take to make you physically ill to look at it: a small pile of fewer than five children; a medium-sized pile of between six and fifteen children; or a large pile of sixteen or more children?"

How can anyone appreciate anything they have if they don't appreciate how terrible things can be?

"Of the following major diseases and biotoxins, which would you rather release on a crowded airliner: anthrax; the ebola virus; tuberculosis; or bubonic plague?"

If you're not part of the solution, what else could you not be a part of?

I was nothing special in *my* job.

There were a hundred people above me, and a hundred people below me. My title was irrelevant; I was irrelevant.

Maura helped me realize this. I already knew it, but before her, it was more a disliking of what I did for a living than anything more coherent.

Ring, across the room. Ring, at the filing cabinet. Ring, ring, ring, my desk.

Ring. Don't touch it.

Ring. The end of civilization is on the other end.

Ring. Snap. Rubber band.

So it was at that morning, ten minutes after we were officially within business hours, I gathered my rubber bands and marched right into my supervisor's office.

The fat little toad just sat there eating his turkey on rye while I stood there.

"Hey buddy," said my supervisor. I was his buddy. You're only someone's buddy if you're about to get the shit beaten out of you, you're in a bar with an old friend, or you're being sized up and sold to. "How's it going?"

"I'm going," I said.

"Good to hear. A healthy team is a productive team." Here's to misunderstandings.

"No," I explained, "I'm going home."

"Not feeling well, David?"

Not for a long time, I told him. "I won't be in tomorrow," I said, as flat and as drained as imaginable.

"Well, that's difficult to hear, David, with the schedule we're trying to keep. Let's see if you can try to make it in, okay?" My time is company time. I'm not paid to be sick.

I mumbled something about 'attainable goals' and 'not fucking possible'.

His eyebrow rose up just over the rim of his glasses.

"I'm sorry, I don't think I heard you right," he said.

That's when I gave him my two minutes of notice.

"What? Don't you mean *two weeks*?"

I said, "I don't want to be here that long, no."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"You," I said.

Had I said that out loud? I hoped so. It's surprisingly difficult to say what you really want to, but when you do, there's nothing like it.

I said, "I hate this place. I hate you. I hate everyone here."

"You *what*?" he replied.

I said, "I don't want to be here anymore. This is a terrible place, and I'm leaving. I despise everything here. The noise, the people, the management. You. I'm leaving, and there's nothing you can do to stop me. No stock options or profit sharing plans or high-interest retirement funds. You don't own me anymore." I remember my back teeth cracking together as I closed my mouth.

"You're some ungrateful prick, you know that, David?" He was pissed now. Finally. "All the things this company has done for you, and this is your idea of respect? This is how you repay your team? Me?"

"You're waste." I wanted to say it a dozen more times. I might have. I don't remember.

“Fine, then, get the hell out of here.” Now he was supposed to assert himself in the conversation, so it didn’t look like I was in charge of what I did.

“You make your own decisions, David. If you want to be an asshole to the people who have given you every opportunity for advancement, or go sit back at your desk and be thankful you haven’t been thrown out of here by security, that’s not my decision to make, now is it? I think I deserve an answer, as your supervisor.” Never screaming, just a manager’s *affirmative tone*.

Brown, laceless loafers. Ten-thousand-dollar grin that burns marks in the back of your neck. Crumbs of rye on his shirt.

“Well?” he said.

Your feelings of sexual inadequacy are signs of weakness.

He asked me again.

That voice, like a used car salesman.

“You make your own decisions, leave!” he yelled. He had always talked that quickly, like he was trying to hide the rust holes in the passenger-side door.

Briefcase on the sidewalk; levelheaded, mid-sized sedan in the parking lot; and me in my apartment in my bed. I needed sleep for that night.

Now, in sleep clinics, people with sleeping disorders are connected to a machine called a *polysomnograph*. Polysomnographs monitor the body for various biomedical data during the various stages of sleep. It monitors EEG, EMG, and EKG activity as well as respiratory activity, among many other electrophysical activities.

There are five stages of sleep, after waking sleep.

The first stage is simply drowsiness. In this stage, your body exhibits a fifty percent decrease in activity between wakefulness and this first stage. Eyes closed, but not asleep. This stage generally lasts no longer than ten minutes or so.

Your heart rate and body temperature decrease during the second stage, when you enter a phase of light sleep. This is similar to the kind of sleep your father was enjoying in his favorite armchair every time you came out of your room an hour after dinner. Gentle, with intermittent spikes in neuromuscular activity that might cause slight muscle twitches and relaxations in concurrence with auditory stimuli.

The last two stages before R.E.M. sleep, or rapid-eye-movement sleep, are deep stages known as *delta* or *slow-wave* sleep stages. It’s in stages three and four that your electromyogram reading will resemble the Pacific Ocean a thousand miles out. The EMG reading is a measurement of muscular electrical activity. As you get closer to R.E.M. sleep, the electrical activity, measured in waves, in your muscular system decreases in frequency. A rhythm has been established.

Any given stage, up to now, may last as long as ten or fifteen minutes. Stages two and three will actually repeat themselves, backwards, before you drop into R.E.M. sleep.

R.E.M. sleep. It’s often called paradoxical sleeping because it’s characterized by heightened encephalic activity but also muscular immobility. Your brain goes on a neurological spending spree while your body stays at home watching *Entertainment Tonight*’s latest useless gab-fest on what Ms. Celebrity wore to that party that didn’t really matter. Activity recorded by the polysomnogram’s electro-oculogram instruments skyrockets during this stage. Your eyes twitch uncontrollably, and you visit places you’ve never visited before.

This is where I kept dreaming of the shore.

Let me tell you something about cycles.

Sleeping is a cyclical process; that is, once you've gone through R.E.M. sleep, you make the trip back all over again. While your first R.E.M. sleep stage of the night might last only five or ten minutes, each time you get to the end of the cycle, the R.E.M. stage will be longer than it was the previous time. Slow-wave stages get a little shorter, R.E.M. gets a little longer.

You might complete four or five cycles in a given night. I couldn't.

It got to the point where I couldn't tell if I was choosing not to sleep for more than an hour or two, or if I was physically unable to do so. The muscle relaxers stopped working. Something about tolerances, Dr. Morgan would tell me.

Now, when your nightly sleep accrument sits at fewer than three hours for a long enough period of time, you start to notice. Things feel very different. The world has a different taste, all of a sudden.

I often wondered what Maura would have tasted like, had I been sleeping more. I wondered if there were things I was forgetting, but didn't realize it.

You begin to lose the ability to preserve memories after long periods of sleeplessness.

By the first time Maura and I actually met, I couldn't remember my first day of school. Memory loss is like that. People start to lose the major events from many years ago before they find their memory of breakfast absent.

I started to see things more clearly, even if I would lose them years down the line.

Who cared how many hours of sleep I was getting, as long as there was someone on the other end of the phone during the night?

It went on for weeks like that. I'd wake up at who-knows-what-hour and feel my entire body miss heartbeats as Maura's phone rang. That flurry behind your tongue because you knew someone *might* pick up.

"Hello?" Her slightly dented hello.

I told her to tell me about what didn't matter.

That was our special thing together. Every day, we would come up with one thing other people did that didn't matter. We wouldn't discuss it or labor over it; we just said it and moved on. Something that made everything and everyone look just as stupid and irrelevant as they really were.

"I saw a PETA member power-walking with a pair of expensive basketball shoes on today," she said.

"I can beat you," I said.

"I asked her if she was against treating animals unfairly. She said yes. I pointed at her hundred-dollar shoes and asked her if she thought the ten-year-olds forced to make those shoes for five cents an hour in a building with no air conditioning felt the same way about cute little puppies and whales that she did. I think she almost crapped her pants."

Maybe I couldn't beat that, after all.

"Now you. Tell me something that doesn't matter."

I said, "People buy carbon filters for their tap water at ten dollars a pop and litter their filtered water with ice cubes straight from the same tap."

"Interesting. Very cute and witty. Like a little Sunday comic," she said in that naturally easy tone she seemed to spill everywhere. "Did you just think of that one, or have you been sitting on it?"

I'd been sitting on it, I told her.

"Why?"

"Well, I don't know," I replied.

"What's the point of waiting? You're going to use it eventually."

I said, "We're only supposed to do one per day. I didn't want to—"

And then I got what she meant. It clicked. Everything gets used eventually. Everything dies, everything hits zero, everything breaks down. It's entropy. The universe is reaching room temperature, and there's nothing we can do about it.

I took a short breath and said, "The atoms in that lady's thighs don't give a shit if she goes power-walking three days out of the week, or if she bathes in rocky-rocky-road ice cream for an hour a night. She doesn't matter, and she doesn't even know it."

"David, I stand impressed," I heard back.

We laughed like we were in grade school.

I wish I could remember if our meeting was planned, or if the universe thought Maura and I had been apart too long, and decided to screw with us just to show us who was in charge.

I had a friend at the sleep clinic who would have no problem supplying me with the right combination to my insomnia lock, so without giving it more than a second's thought, I made an appointment to be checked out immediately.

Before I drone on and on about how whenever I wanted to go to sleep, I'd ask the assistance of a prescription bottle, let's make sure it's clear that there's nothing *wrong* with that at all. I can hear you turning your ears away now.

Drugs are bad. Drugs are bad. Keep repeating it to yourself. If you don't, you might become me. I'm wrong; terrible and depraved for what I do.

Stop right there.

Don't move. Not one inch.

Nothing is *inherently* right or wrong; if everything in our enlightened, tolerating world is subjective, then the notions of right and wrong belong completely in the time of the caveman. If, even after this fact is known to you, you still know right and wrong "in your hearts", I certainly feel . . . Well, you have my sympathies.

Maura shared this fully. She knew it like church doctrine.

If there's no right and wrong, can anything make a difference? To "make a difference" in the world, there must be a wrong to be righted; something over which something else can prevail. But if right and wrong are purely subjective, as they are, you can make all the difference you want, for the good of society, but you have to keep in mind that to those on the other side, you may have performed a great injustice.

You shouldn't feel so good about yourself, what with all the hurt you're causing.

It was pretty straightforward, really.

How many hours of sleep have you been getting over the past month?

How's your appetite and diet lately?

Any major stressors that weren't there before?

Have you had any trouble going to the bathroom?

When was the last time you had sexual intercourse?

He always asked the same questions. There was paperwork that had to be done for these sorts of things. Of course, for me to get what I wanted, I had to provide the right answers. And I always did.

Whether or not the relaxers were an addiction, this didn't concern me. It's not like it would have been an accomplishment. It doesn't take much for a man to become addicted to something. Anything can become an addiction, and anythings are a dime a dozen.

The scent of a hot dog at a baseball game. Waking up on a lazy, rainy day and sleeping an extra hour. Driving that extra five miles per hour over the speed limit. Novelty candies. The Internet. Stuffed animals.

There are people who can't reach orgasm without certain smells. The scent of a candle, for example. There are people who can't go to the gym without their workout socks. There are people who can't write without their fifty-dollar, gold-tipped pens. Addiction is everywhere. It's just that not everyone is enlightened enough to reach out with tracked-up arms and accept it.

I welcome it. It's a character attribute. It's the Barney to my Fred; the bacon to my eggs. I know I exist, because a part of me needs something else on a molecular level. Maybe *that's* right. Maybe *that's* salvation.

Redemption with a prescription pad. Listen to me. I'm beginning to sound like I feel sorry for myself. Or that you should feel sorry for me. Nothing of the sort. This is retrospection talking, now. Hindsight, twenty-twenty vision. Twenty-ten, even.

"If you put that thing on my breast, I'm going to tear your dick off through your neck," came the voice in the room next to mine. I would have laughed, but I felt something else instead.

It was like an extinguished cigarette butt smoldering in my chest.

I recognized the voice—I knew exactly who it belonged to.

I knew it like I knew the number of scars on my legs. I knew it like I knew how many states there were. I knew it like everything I could still remember.

"Dammit, I'm serious. Get that, that, whatever—"

"It's just an electrode, ma'am," came the interruption from the doctor.

"Whatever it is. I don't want it on me!" Maura was trying her hardest to make this point clear to the man.

"And it's going in the center of your chest, so we can record some readings about your heart before we go into the slumber room," he said. "Please, ma'am."

All this came through an air conditioning vent connecting my room and hers. I jumped to my feet, forgetting—or perhaps not caring about it at all—that my doctor friend would return in only a moment, and pushed the exam bed up against the wall underneath the vent. I tore the slippery paper from the bed and jumped on it, standing as tall as I could to make my head level with the connection.

I was there, and so was she. If the vent had been a phone receiver, I would have thought of ten things to say to her. As it wasn't, I was dry.

She continued to argue with the doctor. She didn't care if he put leeches on her chest; she just wanted a little excitement. Didn't want the experience to be static. Turn and cough. Legs up. Next, please.

Giving the guy a hard time was probably making her wet, knowing her. Her own mental erection.

Sometimes, people need to feel that wall in front of them. They need to hear the noise. They need to know that they're not in control, and things that will happen will happen regardless of what they do. Just like next Wednesday, you can't avoid fate. You can wear those white shoes that compliment your green housedress, but the purple sedan that clashes is still going

to scatter your plastic fingernails across the sidewalk when its driver loses consciousness from a myocardial infarction that could have been prevented had doctor's appointments been kept. Hey, sometimes you gotta go to the client's house to close the deal. You have to take care of the customer. Tell that to Anne and her pretty green housedress.

And if she doesn't learn what the front of that car feels like, then it wasn't really going to happen anyway, was it?

It's just fate's carrot, all over again. Big and phallic. Just when you thought you were home.

Anxiety, noun.

A state of uneasiness and apprehension, as about future uncertainties.

Also: *Psychiatry*. A state of apprehension, uncertainty, and fear resulting from the anticipation of a realistic or fantasized threatening event or situation, often impairing physical and psychological functioning.

I couldn't see anything through the vent, despite my efforts, so I just listened. Waited. Tried to say something back.

In the unlikely event of a water landing, pretend you thought you smelled smoke coming from the vent.

I was on my tiptoes on top of the table when the doctor eased back into the room. As if someone knew about his dirty little prescription pad. Tainted by who-knows-how-many addicts and compulsives and cheats and liars.

We say everything we need to say to get what we need. Even if it's just the perception of need, we need it. It's never about feeling *good*, it's about feeling *not-bad*. It's getting back to zero.

The Lockheed Martin SR-71A Blackbird reconnaissance plane leaks fuel through expansion joints when it's "cold"—that is, not flying and on the ground. When the plane reaches cruising altitude—usually around eighty-five thousand feet above sea level—and climbs to a comfortable mach two or three, the entire plane expands and stretches, sometimes as much as an entire foot, sealing the leaks. It's for this reason the planes often take off without full fuel tanks, being fueled during flight after the leaks have vanished.

It has to push as hard as possible just to get to normal.

Internal bodily fluids start to vaporize at sixty-three thousand feet.

The doctor closed the door just hard enough to let me know he saw me standing up there like a crazy person. I got that jittery feeling you get in your chest, that flush when someone's caught you doing something peeping toms hide video cameras to catch for *posterity*. Like the oxygen concentration of the room just changed.

In the unlikely event of a sudden cabin depressurization, oxygen masks will fall.

At fifty thousand feet, you lose consciousness instantaneously without supplemental oxygen.

I spun around and stupidly tried to explain how I thought I smelled smoke, and felt a little dizzy all of a sudden. He knew it was shit, and knew I knew he was thinking it.

*Fucking addicts. There's always a setup. I bet he's gonna want some diazepam now.*

I felt so much more free than him. Lab coat, tie. Forms and drug company reps. Little Post-It pads in the shape of heads, with the names of prescription drugs on them. Paxil. Xanax. Zithromax. The kind of words Scrabble champions are made of.

I listened to Maura's voice from the other room underneath all of the noise from mine. I imagined the face I'd never seen; the person I'd never really met before. I conjured images of Ellery Constance from high school. Three-quarter-inch-flat brown hair that ended tucked two

inches below the bottom of her ear. Cheeks pinker than Valentine's Day decorations. Eyes like blue tulips. A slightly cherubic smile.

Adrienne Companionship.

Olivia Solace.

Edith Comfort.

I could have told you the taste of each cascading flood of endorphins streaming through my brain.

I asked my friend, the doctor, what he had in the way of antidepressants. Something to drown some things out with. Just something light, for an afternoon.

Fluoxetine, 20 mg.

He left the room and went wherever he went when he did what he'd always done for me.

It's called an *enabler*.

I sprung back up to the vent and almost shouted it, I said what she'd sure to have understood, "Parents pay money to have their children's initials embroidered on the top of their backpacks for grade school, like some Fortune 500 company logo."

For that moment, I swear to you that vent was a telephone.

## three

Everyone's standing around looking at me.

I don't securely know who anyone is, despite the unsettling feeling to the contrary, but they seem to know exactly who I am. And that's frightening in itself.

But they're not looking at *me*, they're looking at a *part of me*. Below eye level. Down.

My legs. They're looking at my legs.

I look down, because suddenly something isn't right. I don't feel anything strange, but something's definitely up.

A vein. They're staring at a vein in my right leg which has become engorged. I think nothing of it, perhaps because, even through I don't know it, this is a dream. I look away, but I don't.

Without warning, feeling, or even me noticing it, my leg has changed. Now I see what everyone's really gawking at, jaws down, eyes out.

A flaccid, wrinkled flap of skin hangs down the entire length of my leg. My leg isn't in pain, but like someone standing behind you in a dark room, I know the skin is there. Phantom feeling. I lift the leg of my shorts above my knee and suddenly feel the python-like constriction of a cord of rubber medical tubing. It's tight over my leg, just above my knee, and that's where the loose skin starts. Still, no pain. No screaming, binding intensity. But there's blood.

It doesn't happen until I roll and snap the tubing down over my knee. As I look past the tubing now below my knee cap, a river of the thickest red reaches for the floor. I don't know what made the cigar-burn-sized hole in the back of my knee, the origin of this torrent, be it bullet or spread of infection from a needle or nail. But somehow I know it came from within; that this black and maroon void was not the product of outside influence.

It's dark, and now I'm cold.

"What the Hell do you mean you've found someone else? How do you find someone else? You find fuck buddies and pennies, you don't find *other people*," Maura said to the man on the other end of the line.

"Well, we met at my NA meeting, and—"

"You just happened to *find* her on your lap? That what you mean? Christ, Danny—"

His name was Danny. Her name was, well, it doesn't matter.

"I can't fucking believe you!"

Danny had secretly been saying *hello* to the little harlot—the other girl, not Maura—at his Narcotics Anonymous meetings for months. Maura was just finding out then.

"You don't think this hurts me, too? I've been thinking about how to talk to you about this for months, that's how bad it's been for me. I can't stop pacing."

*For months.*

“For months? Danny, do you even know what it means when you say ‘I love you’ to somebody? You can’t just say that to somebody, Goddamnit. It doesn’t work like that.”

A beat.

“For months! Fuck you, for months!” Maura went from just simply mad to the kind of mad political dissidents get when they cross that line from activists to rock-tossing rioters. And then, a minute—a solid minute—of silence on both ends.

A little background on Maura.

Before her twisted little telemarketer scam, Maura was a nurse on the chemical dependency unit of the hospital behind her building.

How she got there, she never told me. I like to think she was once there herself. You know, a hen returning to the farm to help the others lay eggs. But she never said, and I never asked.

When a driver full of cocaine would slither out of his wreck unharmed after nailing to a tree some car full of formerly breathing Girl Scouts, Maura would be there, holding his meds as he sat there. Handcuffed to his bed, breathing into a pan of his own vomit, Maura stood there with him. Bleeding from ashen, infected track marks, a worthless heroin addict was comforted like a newborn, courtesy of Maura. A grit-encrusted drunk whose only home is the detox ward is given solace between falling down and wetting himself.

Puke, blood, and piss, Maura was there for them.

*Housekeeping to room 407, housekeeping to room 407.*

That sick little smile I’d come to depend on, well, that was just the tops of the trees. Everything Maura saw on that floor—all the dependents, all the drifters, all the burn-outs—was exciting to her in ways that made everyone shiver like drops of quicksilver down your spine.

They were the end of society. They were the bottom. The people who came through her unit were the first on the boat when natural selection came calling. She was watching evolution in action; the herd thinning to make whatever’s left that much stronger.

Bottom-feeders. Low-lives. Societal fungus, clinging to the walls and floors.

They were free, she thought. The hanging clouds of addictions and dependencies only heightened their freedom. These people weren’t tied to jobs they despised; they weren’t tied to hundred-thousand-dollar mortgages on seventy-thousand-dollar houses; and they weren’t tied to closets of glossy shoes and evening dresses and those perfect little earpieces they found in that store with the tall glass windows and pretend people with twenty-dollar scarves around their pretend necks. The mannequins, not the salespeople. As if you could tell the difference.

*Sharper Image* junkies, these people were not.

Each one was a breath of freedom; a product only of nature, not some advertisement-ridden magazine. Complacency in complete depravity, just like Maura.

Not surprising, then, was when she began seeing one of the residents on her unit. Not surprising after that was when that same resident took up the wonderful world of prescription pain medication as a hobby. Nothing surprised me after her, and nothing surprises me now.

It’s just how Maura was. How she worked without giving it a thought.

Your acquaintance, your lover, your accomplice.

She didn’t get under your skin; she became your skin. Wet and visceral and real. Maura became your clothes, became your fingernails, became the dull red glow of light through your eyelids when you close your eyes. And you became a part of her, inseparable from the rest without structural collapse.

Co-dependent, adjective.

Of or relating to a relationship in which one person is psychologically dependent in an unhealthy way or someone who is addicted to a drug or self-destructive behavior.

Doctor Whatever-His-Name-Was couldn't have understood her. He was just an addict, no better than the common crackhead, and she was just another rock. Another pill. Another line, another track, another shot, another fuck.

I don't even think they spoke the first time they met. It's hard to speak when you're face-first in a stack of hospital gowns. There would have been the obvious signs: smeared lipstick pressings in the cloth, a dusting of rouge next to that. Eyeshadow fingerprints. Maura didn't wear such things, so all that was left was a damp oval where her mouth had been.

Doctor Whatever-His-Name-Was was inhaling a dune of cocaine in the laundry room when Maura walked in to get a gown for a patient. He didn't even flinch when she interrupted him.

No sense of shame, she thought.

It excited her; made her stand up straight. A sharp smile eased across her face, and she shut the door behind her. He barely even looked up when it clicked shut. Facing the door, Maura looked down at the lock.

No reason to keep people out of here, she thought. Neither of us has any shame.

Doctor Whatever-His-Name-Was might have objected had he not been fried out of his mind when Maura grabbed him by his ears and started kissing the powder from the top of his lip.

Most people, when they want to do something wild and unexpected, they wear flashy sunglasses or take off for the beach spontaneously for the weekend. They might have a snowball fight in the park. Run around in the rain in their good Donna Karan dresses.

Maura, never one to acknowledge where the line is or even see it sometimes, saw a quickie in the laundry room with a stranger she'd undoubtedly see again as wild and unexpected; something to do. Fast, anonymous, and dirty; adventurous. Maybe "adventurous" isn't as close to Maura as "dangerous" really is. But Doctor Whatever-His-Name-Was didn't even register it. All he knew, and barely knew it with all the coke sizzling through him, was that some nurse he may have seen somewhere before had just thrown his belt on the floor. That, or a snake with a metal head.

There wasn't a lot of resistance, and soon enough Maura had her back to him, bent over a table of powder-blue patient gowns. Hair stretching and swaying toward the ground. Tiny breasts flattened into the table's end. She did most of the work, pulling him forward, pushing back into his lap. Letting out a small whimper every time she crashed backwards, she enjoyed herself. Her mouth opened and screamed into the gown, right into the faded flower petal design, as she came at the top of her lungs.

In the unlikely event the reactor core reaches critical temperature, release the steam reservoir valve immediately.

"Can't thank you enough," she managed to squeak out between deep breaths.

She stood there for a moment and just stared at the damp spot her screams left in the cloth. A pretty, temporary reminder, she thought.

Maura turned around to face him, finally, and looked up to his completely red eyes. Doctor Whatever-His-Name-Was wanted to go again and again and again. Maura just smiled and pulled her scrubs back down, her pants back up.

"These gowns need more softener," she said, catching a glimpse of his name tag, "Doctor Daniel Kelly."

Maura tightened her waistband, cinching her scrub bottoms below her navel.

Doctor Whatever-His-Name-Was zipped himself up.

And the beautiful thing about all of this was that this was only the second time they'd done this.

She thought, she thought, she thought. That's all Maura did sometimes.

And when Danny came to her with the news—he'd begun attending Narcotics Anonymous meetings daily over the past few weeks—she thought maybe she and Danny could have something more meaningful. Maybe she could fill an ever-growing void she had so deep inside that she wasn't aware of its existence. Maura was always about what didn't matter, and in her world that mattered so little, it was impossible to see what did.

Losing things in her life or being without something weren't the things that made her hurt, but there were those sensitive cavities that made her cringe in pain when touched. Little places in her heart that cried with complete silence; aches of loneliness and reflexive anger. She changed boyfriends—and occasionally, girlfriends—almost as regularly as the seasons changed, never hanging on to anyone for any substantial length of time. Maura threw people away like so much plastic freshness wrapping.

Here today, gone tomorrow. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Something about cycles, she told me. Something about how she couldn't love someone like that—that people weren't objects you could show affection to, and how love was just some arbitrary thing that people used as a reason to get married and split the monthly bills. Relationships go from being exciting and full of brilliance and luster to situations of convenience and mere contentment; holy vows of indifference and adequacy. Maura didn't want to become one of those people who were like that. She couldn't stand to feel static and muted, like a lab animal half-brain-dead from electroshock conditioning.

Being a part of someone else for that long was against Maura's doctrine, so it never happened. Maybe one relationship would end because she made it end, sabotaging it from the inside, while another fell from cruising altitude and crashed to the ground before Maura could save it. Probably, even those were inside jobs, destroyed subconsciously by Maura's need to re-experience the genesis of a relationship as many times as she could.

A desperate, broken record player, playing the first wonderful passage of the most beautiful song ever, over and over and over. In this sense, getting her fix from a completely different kind of needle.

The first step toward recovery is to admit that you are powerless over your addiction, that your life has become unmanageable.

Assuming one piece of the universe can have control over another, even Maura couldn't understand how something that didn't have any physical manifestation could have any control over anything at all. Addiction, to her, was a word to describe something very normal; something that just happened in the universe. What Maura thought of as the subjective *good* and *bad*, after all, didn't apply. Things are what they are. Manic-depressive Zen apathy.

With the drugs gone, there was room enough for her. One dependency out, another dependency in. Poor Danny. At least I saw it coming.

All I wanted was to be alive for a little bit at a time. I took it any way I could get it.

Tripping people over in malls for the curses they'd shout, I knew where I was; strolling through restaurants, putting my cigarette out in the wine glasses of upper-class white people

who hadn't seen a speck of dirt or a black person in their entire tiara-crowned lives, everyone knew I was breathing; dropping half-empty baggies of pot into the baby strollers pushed from department store to department store by sport-utility-vehicle-enabled soccer moms, that was being somewhere and in the moment.

God, sociopath-sized for your convenience.

Maura was never that kind of dead inside. I mean, she was certainly in disrepair, and even falling down in decay, but unlike me, she fed off it. She used the holes in her heart to slide down and revel in.

She had it all in having absolutely nothing.

This was not Tracy and Hepburn. He was not Humphrey Bogart and she was not Lauren Bacall.

Maura and David weren't part of some legendary Hollywood dream romance—Maura and Danny, I mean. Maura and Danny.

In fact, the two weren't even Archie and Edith Bunker. The Odd Couple would have felt like kings of civility next to the two of them.

There was no Mike and Carol Brady; no Ward and June Cleaver.

That is, unless June Cleaver enjoyed barking like a dog in public at strangers—you really can't appreciate that until you see it for yourself—and Ward was a recovering addict with a penchant for relapses.

And they came like clockwork, too, let me tell you something.

Everyone's an addict.

Danny found out just how many addicts there are in the world one night at a meeting when an orderly at the hospital came late, right in the middle of him and his confession to involvement in a string of missing medication trays on the floor below the C.D. unit. Right in the middle of explaining how easy it was to walk around with pockets lined with colorful treats like a gumball machine. Codeine candies. Librium lollipops. Dexedrine Dum-Dums.

We're all diseased.

Right in the middle of spilling his juicy little sins to the crowd of first-name strangers.

It took all of about ten minutes into the next morning for word to get back to the Chief Resident. Five minutes after that, fired.

Cut to: Fifteen minutes later, fried on the dash of his car. Head snapping back against the headrest of the seat. If this had been a movie, this is where you'd hear the seventies rock blaring through the car speakers.

Cut to: Click, the turn of the key in the steering column.

If you've ever seen a car swerving out of control toward the median on the road, you know what happened next.

Cut to: The SOUND OF THE JAWS OF LIFE as they TEAR through the roll cage of Danny's overturned car, twenty-one feet from the start of its skid across the asphalt.

Automotive safety experts recommend you have your seat belt certified or replaced every two years.

Now, as your new, sensible family sedan takes a slice of that Pinto at sixty miles per hour on the freeway, the rubber on the tires begins to heat up. This happens because you're skidding across the one-hundred-ten-degree asphalt road counter-clockwise doing sixty, coming up on your side. With the rubber heated up and the left-side tires' sides being chewed into landfill, the tires burst. That's the exact moment you switch directional axes, and roll over and over into the immovable concrete median. And just before the median teaches you a thing or

two about inertia, a mechanical switch is activated inside the steering column which closes an activation circuit connected to sensors monitoring the acceleration rate of the vehicle. In this case, it's monitored by an accelerometer only there for this reason. Accelerate too quickly, or drop in acceleration too quickly, and the switch is triggered.

Sodium azide and potassium nitrate combine inside the inflator to create explosions of nitrogen gas which inflate the airbag inside the steering wheel. The potassium nitrate is called a *solid propellant*.

It takes one twenty-fifth of a second for this chain reaction to occur.

The bony parts of your hips and your sternum are pulled back on by your seat belt.

Your body is sent forward, pulled back, and pushed against the seat. Amusement parks charge a lot of money for this experience, so enjoy it.

You hit the median, it doesn't move, and you're lost in a hazy cloud of talcum powder sent into the car by the airbag as you sit there and wonder if you can feel your legs.

But you can, amazingly, and you crawl out of the car without so much as a scratch.

You've been reborn.

It's a shame that all this was lost on Danny, whose synapses were drowned out by the powder flying through his head.

Cut to: Ambulances and fire trucks and rubbernecks.

Cut, cut, cut: A hospital bed on Maura's unit, and Danny resting as comfortably as someone in withdrawal can rest. Sweating vomit. Convulsions from the bottom of your stomach and the inside of your chest. Everything is hot. Sleeping, but not sleeping. Teeth moving around in your gums.

It breaks like a fever, and the immediate craving is gone. Enjoy it while it lasts.

Maura didn't stay next to Danny, but she kept coming back to watch him. This time she was also feeding off his suffering, not only her own. Once, in passing, she almost felt sorry for him. Once, in a fleeting moment of amnesia, I almost felt sorry for her.

Fade to black.

Not everyone's beginnings can be so violent *and* miraculous.

Not everyone can know that what they want is stupid and useless.

Not everyone can breathe water and see the light.

What others couldn't have, Maura owned from the start. She wasn't demure, she wasn't frail.

You might have thought she was, the first time you saw her, but you forgot it all the moment she opened her mouth. Once she stopped being the listener, everything in the room belonged to her.

Danny relapsed twice more before things ended. Maura watched him as he sank deeper and deeper into quicksand. Half of her paycheck and all of his savings sent up the end of a straw, washed over the water-soluble coating of whatever pills they could get ahold of.

Medicine continued to disappear from the hospital.

Danny sold everything he owned.

Nothing ever changes, even when it does.

Maura quit her job at the hospital to take the telemarketing thing, and Danny moved in with her. Well, not so much *moved in* as simply stopped going home for longer and longer periods

of time.

Things happened, seasons changed, and there were weeks where Danny pretended Maura's couch was a bed. But she never complained—far from it, actually. If anything could have delivered her from banality and the mundane, it was a passion-starved, hopelessly sick relationship.

I think I hear irony knocking.

When Maura was a little girl, she told me, her mother gave her a wooden keepsake box as a birthday present. When her mother was asked what was inside, the response came, “You’ll never know, Maura, because you aren’t allowed to open it, ever.”

To anyone else, that would’ve been a terrible present. Maura loved it, and it traveled with her everywhere until it was lost during a move some years back.

It was everything and nothing at once.

The keepsake box represented the innocent wonder Maura had when she was a little girl. Everything was fresh; new. Unadulterated and untainted by drugs and sex and carbon monoxide exhaust. Not corrupt.

There were purple elephants in the box.

There were beautiful jewels. Shimmering stars and comets. Far-off worlds hidden from everyone.

There was even the little brother Maura always wanted, right there in the box.

Maura’s mother never told her what was in the keepsake box, and Maura never looked. Maura was six when her mother passed away, and still the box remained closed.

Some wonders have to be mysteries to be wonders at all. Maura could never know what was in the keepsake box, because she refused to open it, and because the moment she did know what was in it, the wonder had to end. Part of the reason it was anything and everything was because the inside was left unseen.

There was once a famous physicist by the name of Erwin Schrodinger, and in 1935 he posed a thought experiment involving a very famous cat.

In this experiment, he described a cat inside a perfectly sealed box—no doors, no windows, no holes, and no cracks. Inside this box with this cat in it was a “lethal device” capable of rendering the cat dead. The lethal device would be triggered by the detection of the decay of a radioisotope also inside the box. Given a fifty percent chance the radioisotope would decay over an amount of time  $x$ , was the cat dead or alive at the end of  $x$ ?

Superposition, noun.

*Physics.* An undetermined state of existence where two or more states of being are superimposed upon a single piece of matter or energy.

The answer, as Schrodinger put it, was that the cat was both alive *and* dead until you opened the box to find out whether or not it was; the state was left undetermined until the cat was observed.

As long as Maura didn’t open the keepsake box, anything was in it. Once opened, the only thing that was in the box was what was in the box.

Maura’s mother was a 1950s vision of Maura, right down to the Cold-war-issue blue-and-white polka-dotted house dress. Black hair to her shoulders, turned up in a bouncy curl right before it touched her skin. She wore heels of some sort whenever she wasn’t bathing, sleeping, or wearing slippers, so I suppose it would have been strange to see Maura in anything different.

She had aged beautifully, even though she was only in her thirties when she died. She had only a few lines like fine thread around her eyes and at the edge of her mouth, and just a sliver of grey running along the inside of one side of her hair. Maura was sure to inherit her mother's wonderful skin when she got older, something to which she looked forward.

Cherry red lips and shiny silver earrings, the wonderfully pretty things Maura grew up with.

"Maura, dear," she said. Maura recalled a conversation she and her mother once had at an amusement park. "What does that look like to you?"

Maura, all of six years old, craned her neck to take in a mighty Ferris wheel.

"It's a big starfish," the little girl said.

"It's a Ferris wheel, but it's more than that. Look closer."

"It's yellow," the little girl said.

"Look at the people in the cages, Maura. They're so quiet and happy up there. There may as well not even be a ground below. Right now, the entire world is outside them, and they can't be touched by it. Maybe they don't even realize it, but it's true."

Maura listened carefully, eating a cone of cotton candy bigger than her entire head.

"When I was your age, I went on one for the first time, and it was the scariest thing I'd ever done. My mommy just wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, no matter how much I cried and screamed. She knew I would appreciate it when I was older, and she was right. I was afraid out of my mind when we sat down in the cage, and the carny slammed the door shut. All these people were looking at our cage, at the little girl who was crying her heart out and her mommy who just kept pulling her down in her seat.

"When it started moving, I really got scared. I got so scared that I stopped crying and froze to the seat. I thought I was going to fall through the teeny-tiny little holes in the side of the cage. Back then, the cages had pieces of wood over the floor, so you couldn't see under your feet, but I thought I could feel how far down the ground was."

The little girl just kept eating her cotton candy and looking up at the ride while her mommy talked on.

"We got to the top, and then I thought I was going to float off into space. It was like we were over the Sun, and not even the birds could reach us. How's the candy, sweetie?" Maura simply smiled and nodded.

"It's hard to eat," she said.

"We went around three whole times, and when we stopped, we were all the way up top. I was still too scared to say anything, but I wondered if we'd be stuck there forever," her mother said.

"Were you, Mommy?" Maura asked naively.

"Of course not, sweetie. I'm here, right? We're at the park, eating candy and riding the rides, aren't we?"

Maura laughed as the candy made her sneeze.

"So I'm all the way at the top of the wheel, and my mommy starts talking to me. She tells me that I'll always be afraid of something, but that I'll never be more afraid than I am right then. My mommy told me that I could do anything as long as I wasn't afraid, and to remember being stuck at the top of that Ferris wheel with no way to leave or anywhere to go when I thought I was too scared to do something, and I wouldn't be scared anymore."

Then Maura remembered how the candy was bought at a candy shop down the street. She

remembered how the park was closed, and how the Ferris wheel wasn't moving and no one was on it. Grey clouds had started to rain and melt her cotton candy. An empty park and a puddle of water below their feet.

FAINT THUNDER in the distance.

"You're not scared, are you, Maura?"

How ironic that Maura, a former nurse on a unit full of co-dependents, was one herself. Stuck in a morally draining relationship, afraid to leave, lest what was left of her world fall apart.

You'd think she would have been into that. The falling apart thing, I mean.

She once told me, "You won't be better at living until you've come apart at the seams."

I once thought I said that to her. Funny how you remember things sometimes.

No sense in being strong; being weak and beaten and destroyed was knowing what you could do and what you couldn't. What you were capable of.

The people you loved were useless to you if they didn't know more about you than you did. This is where we fit together. Tight and solid and complete. Tab A into slot B.

Some of the strongest kinds of glue in the world are made from the hooves of dead horses.

"So, just how many months, Danny?" she asked. The setup.

"Three, but it didn't get serious until really, really recently," Danny replied.

Four, actually.

"So three months is better than a year? You can't leave me, Danny." Maura was finally getting to why she really cared. It wasn't betrayal, it wasn't territorial. She was afraid.

Maura didn't want to be left alone again, but she was realizing—very quickly, like an avalanche—that it was inevitable. Another person was leaving, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Danny took the longest breath in the history of Man.

"I am a co-dependent, Maura, and so are you. We can't be together, and more importantly, I can't be with you. I'll never get better," he said. A dagger through her neck.

The fourth step toward recovery is to take a searching and fearless moral inventory of yourself.

He finished, "And neither will you."

In her head, Maura couldn't decide if he was being petty and back-stabbing or telling the truth. In her heart, she knew it was the truth. It was time to break off another part of herself and let whatever happen. Throw it away and find something she didn't have.

"Just by being with you, I've hurt you. I can't tell you how bad that makes me feel, but I'm deeply sorry for all of it, and I hope one day you can forgive me," he said.

The ninth step toward recovery is to make direct amends to such people you've harmed wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

I guess he didn't think too hard about that last part.

"It's you or nothing," Maura cried. That was the only way she could say it, giving him a choice without options, making it happen.

Maura's heart tried to break. There were some things she at least *wanted* to care about, I guess.

She cried over it, the fucked-up little grown-up girl. She cried because she was lost inside the only thing she had any control over. Maura let go and fell through the bottom like glass, and

got completely lost inside herself. Alive again because it hurt.

That night, on the telephone, she was found.

Not by God. Not by Allah. Not by Ganesha.

Maura was found by David Preacher. Don't call me a savior, or a healer, or a divine beam of wisdom. What I was, was freedom.

What I was, was fire behind driven eyes.

I was going to show her sick little laugh what didn't matter. And she would save me.

## four

The trees scratch her dress as she runs through the damp, dead forest.

Her feet crush the clay and branches covering the forest bed as she eclipses the edge of the woods. It gets thicker between her toes with every step.

She's almost shimmering in her white dress, a sleek wedding dress, exploding from the wake of the grey trees of the forest. The dress is marked with charcoal slashes and splashes of thick clay. It used to be beautiful. Maybe it's more beautiful this way. Dirty. Worn.

Tattered, broken, soaked.

Her legs are covered in smoky debris up to her calves.

The wind is slowly gaining strength, fluttering the silk valleys far behind her.

Something's building. A cliff. The edge of the ground stops her cold.

The earth breaks off here into a deep, open fog, roots and all. She's holding on at the edge. The lace arms of the dress end in sharp points on the backs of her hands. A second, woven skin.

She and her dress glow against the titanium sky.

Winds pick up, and her veil goes floating into the fog below, devoured by the clouds. Her arms reach away from her hips like a tiny, upside-down V.

Her hands like roses, her fingers springing from the ends of the arms of the dress like trembling petals. Eyes closed, expressionless.

The clouds thicken, and she opens her eyes.

White-cloth forearms melt into a deep, deep red as her arms start to bleed profusely beneath her sleeves. She looks down at them, the wind changes direction, and the mess starts slinging across the front of her dress.

The wind changes direction again as the fog from the crevasse rises. She pushes herself and is soaring down to meet it, maroon streams like ribbon from her arms. She disappears into the confusion.

This is Maura's dream.

Everyone needs a mantra.

Om let your money concerns be flushed down the sewer by the hand of Poseidon.

Om may your glitter lip gloss grow tumors in your cheeks, so sayeth Rama.

Om your only way to freedom is on the business end of a speeding city bus, as David has foretold.

Okay, maybe not that last one, but you get the point.

Om may I have strength to run out of my exam room and into Maura's.

The use of Sanskrit mantra, where the sounds and vibrations made by the words mean just as much as or more than the words themselves, is designed to put the different bodies at ease and connect them with a higher brain. This is common in Vedic studies.

And I thought I felt alive before. This was more than electrochemical—this was high-tension lines. Children near me could get cancer.

I can tell you the average amount of neurons in the human brain. About one hundred billion, if you're interested.

I know how many ridges there are in a dime. For your information, that'd be one hundred eighteen.

And it's actually called *milling*, by the way.

I know so many things, but can't figure out how I got from inside my room to outside hers.

Om I have courage enough to open the Goddamned door.

Om shall I speak volumes of wisdom and make a good impression.

Who was I kidding? Impressions are for the impressionable.

Maura sat by herself, legs swinging back and forth, on the edge of the table. Black hair curved under her chin; plastic, pastel green dress with faint polka dots everywhere.

"The doctor's gone to get someone to restrain me," Maura said shyly.

My ears were ringing.

Maura held out her hand to me, proudly showing me a thin film of blood on her palm. Blood is never blue inside the body, contrary to what many people think. See, blood gets its red color from the iron in hemoglobin. And since all red blood cells contain hemoglobin, and each molecule of hemoglobin contains four atoms of iron, all blood in the body is either bright red—arterial—or dark red, depending on the amount of hemoglobin present. Blood sometimes appears blue because veins are white and very opaque, and lets little light through. It makes dark red blood look blue through skin. They call dark red blood *veinous blood*.

"I almost can't believe I did it," she said.

"What did you do?" I asked her. Glass on the floor.

"You're really slow," she told me. "I hope all of our trips together won't be me explaining everything to you."

Maura just smiled and looked past me when I asked her what she meant. She didn't care that I was standing right there in front of her. We'd been phoning for what felt like forever, and the wall was more important.

People rushed around in the hall outside in a whirlwind.

I just looked back at her, scanning her elfish face up and down, as my ears continued to ring. Her eyes hit the floor under me.

"You're standing on me, David." Maura pointed to my shoes.

Sure enough, as I looked down, I was stepping on tiny drops of blood that surely came from her hand. Glass on the floor next to the wall behind me.

My ears weren't ringing after all. Maura had pulled the fire alarm.

Schadenfreud, noun.

Malicious satisfaction. From the German *schaden*, meaning "damage", and *fruede*, meaning "joy".

I grabbed her by the wrist of her bloodied hand and pulled her right off the table.

"Shit, let's go," I said. The rush is better when you're on the run.

"Let go of me!" I let go. "What for?"

Things can only be as good as the anticipation that precedes them, but I couldn't have an-

ticipated this.

"Are you deaf? The alarm's going off," I said.

"As long as it's not boring." What a smile.

No matter how hard I pulled, Maura didn't budge, didn't falter. Didn't follow me.

She had to follow me. I was there to rescue her.

"I don't want to leave," she said.

I asked her, why did she want to stay there?

Because she'd never been caught pulling a fire alarm before, she told me. She wanted to see how much it would matter to people before and after they knew it was a false alarm.

Action, reaction, observation. Watch how fast they run. If they scream. If people get knocked over in a frenzy of confusion and get trampled by athletic shoes with bubbles of air in them.

"Well, now you know, so let's get out of here," I pleaded with her.

"David," she said softly, "stop."

Here comes the sun. It's all downhill from here.

"Look out there. They're worried to death and wondering what's going on. There are people asleep being waken up because of this. They're gonna have to do this all over again, and will spend days, maybe weeks, cursing me after the firemen get here and say it was a prank. Doctors writing charts will forget what they wanted to write in fifteen minutes, and it'll be an hour before they can get back in the building."

My hand went from holding her hand to being held by it.

"They're so alive right now, David, and they—"

"They have no idea," I finished.

I was someone who understood.

I'm a pillow.

Maura looked through me while I kept pulling at her.

"Let's just go. Before police come," I said.

"David, let go." I thought she was going to cry. She would have cried, and she would have wiped her tears away with that messy hand, making everything worse.

We stood in the hallway while people scurried past us.

We felt the breeze of lab coats and file folders moving by.

"So, why did you come here?" I asked her. You know, other than the whole fate thing.

"It was something to do," Maura replied innocently. "What about you?"

"Drugs."

"I see," she said. "I like a guy who knows how to get things."

I smiled. I actually smiled back. I hadn't smiled in months. It was a really goofy fucking grin that only goofy fucking people smile, and I hated it and everything it meant, but it flew like a flag from my cheeks. At least I didn't laugh.

This time, I didn't try to pull Maura out of there, I just started walking slowly and she followed beside me. Our hands, cradles to each other's.

We turned the corner as slowly as we could.

I kept thinking, what a coincidence we met here today. What a strange way to meet someone you've met, but never met, before. Maybe I'd told her I was going to be there, and couldn't remember telling her. Whatever or however the reason, it was done. I'd finally seen her bell-shaped black hair and her steel-blue eyes. I'd seen her hopelessly petite ankles above open-

toed heels. I'd seen her short, chewed-up fingernails and short, chewed-up toenails.

I had seen Maura, and Maura had seen me.

We stopped in the reception lobby. The receptionist was on the phone with the fire department, trying to figure out what the Hell was going on. These days, fire alarm systems are tied directly into local emergency department systems, and the local authorities have to be notified of fire drills when the alarm is involved. I remember wondering if the receptionist's concern was for patients and records, or more for figuring out if she should take any of her personal affects when she left the building.

"I think this is going to be interesting," she said.

I asked her what she meant.

"Us. We. Me and you."

A beat.

I started back toward the open doors, to the blaring sun of the outside. I looked back at Maura, and she spoke to me. She tried to talk some sense into me. Give me one final chance to escape, to opt out, before I was in too deep to walk.

"I won't make you feel any better," Maura said.

"I know," I told her. I was intent, fiercely intent.

"I won't make you love anyone any more," she said.

I know.

"I probably won't even give you a better orgasm," she said.

I know.

And her heart tried to break.

## five

Dark spots in the corner of my eye flicker as I stand in the terminal.

I turn my head toward them, but they're gone. The teller asks me if I want change for my tram pass.

I tell her no.

The dark flicker's still gone, no matter where I look, replaced by the flicker of fluorescent pipe lighting above me.

Nothing behind the columns on the deck, but I can't really see around them from here.

I take my token and pass through the turnstile.

At the door to the car, I wait behind a line of people. Dozens and dozens of faceless people. I'm trying to put the spots out of my mind, because the train's about to leave, and I need to be on it. I can't remember where it's going, but this is important.

The train's always important. I have to catch it. I have to be on it.

I'm going somewhere, I know it. I just can't remember where, is all.

I turn to my left, and the whole world around me rotates clockwise in parallax.

There they are, like some ghoulish three-dimensional shadows, walking toward me. Black, like the deepest charcoal cloth, and undefined like the surface of a dandelion.

I think they have claws. Or teeth, or horns, or countless other things with which to tear apart my chest. To slice open my neck like so much plastic wrapping, spilling me everywhere onto the floor.

There *are* monsters under your bed.

There *are* demons hiding in your closet.

I'm looking at them coming closer to me.

I want to move, but the figures are closing in on me, and the floor is like glue. My heart's stopped pumping, and my brain is being clouded with the dark, moving voids in the buzzing fluorescence.

I have to get out of here. I have to scream. I have to get someone's attention. But they're not paying attention, the faceless people moving around me. Dammit, see them. *They're right there.*

But no one can, and I stop breathing. Everything's eternity at this moment. A second is a century, and a century is forever. Air escapes into my lungs, and I can run again. And I do, like directed lightning, my feet tearing up the tiles in the floor.

There *are* monsters under the streets.

There *are* demons hiding in my head.

And this isn't a dream this time.

Sometimes, when I think back really hard, I can remember being born.

I'd like to tell you about all the wonderful things my mother did for me when I was a kid. I'd like to spin stories about how she would take me and my brothers on road trips across the country during the summer. I'd like to tell you these things, but I can't, because I can't remember them. And if I had any brothers, I don't have any memory of them, either.

I couldn't remember my mother well enough to describe her, or even say her name, but I did remember certain things here and there. Bits. Snippets of life. Cut-out newspaper headlines and magazine articles from my past.

Baby Boy Born to New Mother, page A3.

Playground Fight Leaves Boy Crying, page D2.

New Wristwatch Broken During Fall From Bicycle—see *Style* insert, page 4.

All the little things that chew up five minutes of your life, and somehow leave you crying each time.

You wake up one morning, and you can't remember what color your shoes are. What you ate for dinner last night. What you watched on T.V. Insignificant things that make reality seem shifted an inch to the left.

My shoes are black.

And I put them on, and they're brown. That can't be right.

I just took them off a few hours ago.

Something's wrong, you say to yourself.

The good part about having a memory full of holes is feeling like there's no past, that there's just here, and there's just now, and that's where you can live. The bad part is when all you can remember is the bad things, and that's where you end up living.

We live in the past, because that's all there ever is.

We are who we are because of what we can remember.

Because that's all there ever is, and it hurts like nothing could ever hurt.

Searing fire pokers in your ribcage.

It got to the point where the only reason to get up was the chance I could get hit by a car or a truck or something while walking across a busy intersection. I could wake up with a gun in my mouth and stain my pillow with whatever memories I had left.

Spill a wasted and meaningless life all over my cotton-poly blend bedsheet.

I could get cancer in inoperable places.

I could be in a McDonald's somewhere when some psycho gunman decides to kill six bystanders and wound fifteen more after being fired on a Friday after work. It's not supposed to cause stress when it happens at the end of the week.

Neurofibromatosis is a genetic disorder that causes tumors to develop anywhere along the branches of the nervous system. I wanted that.

I wanted to fall asleep and get my memories back. Wake up on the shore with my past intact.

The bitter metallic taste of the gun barrel is the last thing you'll ever remember. Because everything's a memory, and it lives forever, you'll live forever.

I could live forever if I could just wake up, I thought.

It's funny how you never remember the good things that happen to you nearly as well as the bad things. Made me wonder if Maura was a good thing or a bad thing, seeing as how I clearly remembered everything about her.

Deep inside the limbic system, the hippocampus is a horseshoe-shaped part of the brain whose job is to weigh the importance of short-term memories to see whether or not they should be stored permanently amongst the other memories in your brain. Studies show the storage of so-called *episodic memory*, memory of contextual events, is regulated by the hippocampus, and that there may be as many as five memory centers of the brain to handle both episodic memory and semantic memory. Semantic memories are like facts that are without context.

Knowing the amount of milling on a dime, for example.

With the parahippocampal gyrus, special cells called *place cells* construct three-dimensional mental images of people and places. Without them, you wouldn't be able to navigate your own house.

I sometimes forgot where my kitchen was. I sometimes forgot where I lived entirely.

It made me wonder if my house wasn't somewhere else one day, and I just didn't know it. Couldn't remember it. Maybe it changed, and my memory with it, but not enough to know what was going on.

Maybe *deja vu* is a toddler screaming at you from another room to get your attention. A fading memory of that exact moment in time, already taken place. You did something last time, didn't get it right, and got to do it again. You're just repeating the past, over and over and over until you eat the right fruit, drink the right water, close the right door.

Try to remember what you did last time. Stop and think hard. How many times have you repeated this single moment? You could be replaying this moment for the hundred million millionth time and you wouldn't have any way to know. You'd just be that needle skipping across the record with the hairline scratch in it. God rest, ye— God rest, ye— God rest, ye—

Memories buried in the scratches of time.

But maybe all those memories aren't real, like a memory is supposed to be. Maybe there isn't a past at all, and there isn't a future. There's just one moment in time, one flicker of existence. You just *think* you remember blinking a second ago; you just *believe* you turned on the television and saw that train accident wreckage somewhere on the interstate. But there wasn't a second before now, and—

Blink—

A second didn't just pass, and you didn't record the second before that. Really, it's just all just facade. Prop memories held up with masking tape and thumbtacks.

Maybe your memories are wrong.

Obsession, noun.

A compulsive preoccupation with a fixed idea or an unwanted feeling or emotion, often accompanied by symptoms of anxiety.

I replayed the diner over and over. The rain sheeting down the windows and how Maura wasn't afraid of it as long as it was on the other side; the blisteringly red panties stretched like a flag across the table; the airheaded blonde behind me on her cell phone.

*It won't make you any smarter. Get over yourself. You aren't more important than anyone else.*

The more I replayed it, the more I wondered when it all happened. Did I quit my job because of Maura, or did I meet Maura because I quit my job? We'd been meeting there for weeks, after the clinic, but I couldn't remember when everything really started.

"Are you comfortable here?" she asked me. "Like, eat-by-yourself kind of comfortable?"

I suppose, I said.

Tiny cracks where her cheek met the edge of her lips as she smiled.

“Okay, then. Let’s fix that,” she said. Fix it, like there was something wrong with it in the first place. I looked down at my menu.

I tried my hardest to focus on it and all the stuff on it that wasn’t good for me. The stuff healthy people tell you will clog your arteries and give you gastrointestinal illnesses. Great, I’d say to them. I don’t know what cancer feels like, and I bet if I eat enough of this stuff, I’ll get it someday. After all, give a lab rat enough of anything, and it’ll sprout tumors faster than you can say *angiogenesis*.

Maura fidgeted with something under the table, leaned over so her head was almost on it, when the blonde’s phone went schizo again. Repetitive pop-song ring tones. Antenna poking out from her chemical-laced hair. Trying so hard to be connected and loved.

Worthless.

I gave up on the menu and stared out of the window into traffic.

*You are what you eat! Eat right!*

And then, the product pitch. Advertising with life lessons. That way, the young, hip executive in charge of the campaign gets the seat in Hell next to the air conditioner.

I wouldn’t have paid so much attention to the billboard if the bus it was on hadn’t stalled at the intersection. People in cars around it screamed and honked their horns like time was going out of style. They must have all been transporting donor organs or something, with the rush they were in.

You are what you eat. Words to live by. I thought about the blonde on the cell phone behind me. Structure, Gap, Old Navy, J.Crew, Nike. There’s a billboard stalled in traffic, and a billboard on the phone, I thought.

*You are what you eat. Consume enough products, and you will become one.*

I looked back at Maura, and she was smiling contentedly, very proud of herself about something. I remember thinking that this wasn’t going to be a good thing. People don’t get that look when their intentions are filled with sugar and syrup. You only see that look when your kid has flushed your watch down the toilet.

“Do something unexpected and dangerous,” Maura said, “and you won’t have time to fear anything.” About here is where everything changed frame rate. She’d slipped her panties under the table into my lap, like some covert agent slipping secret documents into the hands of anonymous contacts.

*The crow flies to Albuquerque at dawn.*

I looked down at half-speed to the red glow of her underwear resting quietly on me.

Maura asked for them back as loudly as she could without yelling. I went frozen for a solid minute, until she leaned over the table and stuck her hand out to me. I think it was her eyebrows that pulled me in, but I’d like to think I leaned closer and reached over to hand them back to her on my own free will. I’d like to think that, but it isn’t true.

I balled them up tight, so maybe no one would see. After all, I wasn’t the pervert, Maura was. She had other ideas, and grabbed my hand tightly with one hand and pulled her panties out of it with the other hand just as quickly as I shot mine out to her. I tried to let go, but she’d pinned them to my palm. There we were, playing tug-of-war with her underwear over the table, next to the napkin holder and the \$3.99 breakfast plate menu.

She held me over the table and stared through my eyes to somewhere deep in my brain. She held me up with a stare. I froze again.

You are what you eat. And right then, I was eating icebergs.

I came back to reality for the second time when she *barked* a sharp, loud yelp across to me. If anyone wasn't looking before, they're glued to us now, I thought. Little. Red. Panties.

Erection, noun.

Maura burned her eyes into my memory as the panties turned everything else in the diner a flat, empty grey. Some sort of kinky sore thumb.

Om there is no one looking at me.

Om the only thing in the world is the falling rain.

Om I am the universe, and nothing can affect me on that reality.

And then, like all things, it passed. Over. The former present.

Everything was water.

If people can be addicted to anything, they can be afraid of anything. Most people don't like to be afraid. Most people are stupid. Fear is a motivator.

Fear makes you do what you didn't think you could do. Fear reminds you that you're still breathing. More importantly, it makes you breathe.

I feared everything. I feared I was coming completely apart, like a ball of string. I feared I was nothing more than a hypocritical, contradictory, tacked-together patchwork of a shell of a person. Less and less made sense, and more and more weighed like stones for feathers on my head.

It started all breaking down, and I was incapable of stopping it. Carthage was falling.

I felt it like never before when the diner owner stopped me at the door. In the excitement, I'd gotten up without paying.

*Money is worthless. It's just paper and ink. So are suicide notes.*

In the unlikely event of a complete financial collapse of the world markets, you will be worth every penny you were before.

Maura was eyeing the door, and I just stood there. That's all I *could* do.

It only takes a few seconds, and you're there. Rolling down a hill for the endless few minutes it takes for the panic attack to run through. Sweating, nauseating, collapsing, confining fear like fear was nothing before that moment. Hyperventilation takes your lungs away. You choke on your own throat and hope you die just so it'll stop.

There isn't a specific trigger—you're just holding the right ticket for your own personal panic disorder lottery when everything goes wrong. My head was already flooded with endorphins when the owner stopped me by the arm.

The only thing you want to do is blow the windows out screaming at the top of your soft palate. Drowning in a fog of complete confusion and panic.

I don't know what's happening.

The owner squeezed my arm harder, and I got dizzy. I got a taste in the back of my mouth, sweet and sharp like acid. *Deja vu*. I thought hard, like I was replaying a moment in time. I flashed, and my head burned like a solar flare.

I flashed. Knife in my hand. Knife on the table. Knife in my hand.

I don't know what's happening, but it keeps coming. Faster and stronger.

I flashed again. Burying the knife into the fat oaf's neck. Being showered with blood. Burying the knife deeper and harder into his neck.

My lungs filled with air, and I was staring at the table with the knife on it, untouched.

My lungs filled with air, and I woke up in my apartment.

There are five schedules of drugs, I through V, as defined by the Drug Enforcement Agency. An individual drug's schedule designation is determined primarily by its habit-forming properties. Non-habit-forming drugs available over the counter, such as aspirin, are labeled as schedule V drugs, while drugs that come with high risks of becoming dependencies, such as morphine and codeine, are labeled schedule II. Schedule I drugs are limited to research use only, and include things like cocaine and heroin.

Schedule I drugs tend to mimic the effects of endorphin rushes in the brain, lending to their addictive properties.

The way I see it, fear is the perfect schedule I drug.

The way I see it, everyone needs to be afraid to know they're alive.

Agateophobia is the fear of insanity or going insane. How's that for irony?

Hylephobia: The fear of materialism. Or epilepsy. Make of that what you will.

Fear of confined spaces. Fear of the moon. Fear of being afraid; fear. Imagine living with that one. You may as well just eat the bullet now.

Ombrophobia is the fear of rain or being rained on. Down this hallway, third door on the left, Maura sits still in an exitless room. There are no doors here, no windows. Dirty floor tiles are always cold, and the lights are never on bright enough to see them clearly. This is an oppressive place, one in which the corners are a thousand miles deep and as black as night. It's draining and too dry even to shed tears. All you can do is shiver in the deep, dark corners and hope the light finally goes out so you can get some rest. Imagine that claustrophobia kicking in about now.

Imagine pellets of rain falling on the glass, and imagine Maura's dry mouth as she watched it and waited for it to stop. Imagine her panties coming off, and her telling me about doing something unexpected and dangerous so there's no time to fear anything.

Her head ran in place like a rat in a cage, unable to leave the diner until the rain stopped. And right when the rain's stopped, and she's free to leave, I go and almost flip on the owner in the diner.

Worthless.

The kind of worthless that comes with peel-and-stick decals of wrecking everything in front of you. The kind of worthless that requires assembly. Requires you to help it along.

Not the kind of worthless of out-of-control consumerism—

Imagine the blonde sitting behind me—

But plastic and worthless just by being in the moment.

Atychiphobia. Fear of failure.

Imagine me, blacked-out on the floor of the diner.

I slept for two days, Maura told me.

People don't sleep for two days, they *go comatose*.

Pretend when you wake up, you've never woken up before.

Pretend it's all been a dream up to that point.

That isn't just any shadow lurking behind you—that's the void of memories you can't quite fill in. If it's been a dream, what was before that? You'll never be able to remember.

Were you a murderer before? Did you have another wife? Robbed a bank?

Now here was an idea Maura loved. Poured over. Soaked up like honey, thick and dark. Around me, Maura had changed. Had she ever been the person she was before, she wondered.

No, the real reason the idea excited her was that it meant you were free to be and do any-

thing you wanted—every day, every time you woke up.

Go ahead, bark at a stranger. It doesn't matter.

Switch those strollers around. No one's going to notice.

Walk backwards for a day and curse at people who run into you. Watch where you're going next time, buddy.

She was free now, because of me.

I stopped going to my appointments with Doctor Morgan, Ph.D., after that.

Either I was totally enlightened at that point, or was too far beyond her help. Whichever it was, there was no point in turning over a chunk of what was left of my savings to her every week.

I kept wondering if I really quit my job, or if I'd been fired. I didn't *care*, but I kept thinking about it.

My grungy, greedy, sloth of a landlord was starting to get in my face about the rent.

Bills piled up.

No one in my apartment cared.

My sleeping problem was gone. I slept for hours at a time during the day or night by then.

Revolution, not evolution, as they say. Everything was changing, one staccato at a time.

Things were picking up. Getting much better than I could have imagined. Maybe I should revise my tombstone:

*Here lies David Preacher. May you be as edified in your next life as he was in his first.*

There are a million ways someone can make himself or herself better person. You can be a better driver. You can cut down on salt and saturated fats. Donate to charities. Volunteer at church.

But you're really just making sure you don't run your sport utility gas guzzler into a cheaper car. You're really only avoiding costly medical bills, adding more tax write-off line items to your books, and making sure you get that great spot in Heaven next to that movie star you've always wanted to meet. You're no better than anyone else.

So stop trying so hard.

Do the things you didn't think you could ever do.

Step into the light, like me.

Sleep. Quit working at your draining, repetitive, carcinogenic jobs. Crush your digital life-style devices under your shoes and throw the splintered debris into the streets.

Give up, let go, be saved.

I woke up and realized I had powers I never knew I had.

I was important and powerful.

I had the power to make someone know they were truly, really, fully alive. And I had the power to take that away from them if they chose not to embrace it.

Death, esquire.

Actually, I prefer *freedom inhibitor*.

Here's the edge, and this is me, big swan dive over it.

## six

My head is full of caverns.

Narrow, twisting sepia channels connected by mysterious brown doors that never open.  
They're hallways.

Trap doors appear in the strangest places when I'm not looking. In the wall. Slanted on the floors. Cockeyed on the ceilings.

Without sources of light, they're all lit by incandescent smolderings of light from odd corners. The random, gently swaying light bulb hangs from the ceiling. Each one I stumble across, like portentous monoliths hidden in plain sight, makes everything else darker. Voids on dangling wires like the eyes of hurricanes.

My dreams are scattered with these caverns and tunnels. One door opens into another identically blank hallway, and into another, and so on, for miles and miles and miles.

Paint peels at an inch per millennium and there's nothing but mold in the corners and floor joints. A hundred years of grease and smoke layer the walls.

This building scares me deeply. It has an open channel to touch my core and make me shiver from the inside like trees in wind. This is an ominous and nightmarish place from which I'm unable to escape.

Broken, deteriorated hardwood floors. They creak from all directions even when I'm not moving. And there goes another shadow across the wall which isn't mine.

I'm shaking from somewhere deep inside like a child's spinning top.

I'm awake for this part of the dream, but I can't move. I'm paralyzed.

In place. In the dark. Alone, no one to save me from the shadows or the paralysis.

I keep slipping in and out of sleep as I run through the corridors.

It has long fingers like icicles that curve inward at the tips.

I'm trying to open my eyes and get up. *Wake up. Please, I don't want to die.*

It doesn't make a sound across the floors and walls and ceilings. My heart is a shivering spring.

I sink into the dream again and I run as hard as I can.

Doors everywhere are locked, and the ones that aren't lead to still darker places I can't force myself down.

It's behind me. Looming over my shoulders between me and the light bulb swaying back and forth. I don't have a shadow, but it does, and it's a tornado around me as the light moves around.

Bent over my shoulders; bent over to fit in the hallway as if it were taller than the walls.

Leaning in on its prey, cornered and unable to move for fear of something worse than death.

The light bulb fades away, and I go with it.

There are certain things about a man that no one pays attention to.

How tall or short he is, as long as he's not a freak one way or the other.

The color of his eyes if he's wearing glasses.

Whether or not he's smiling.

No, what do people pay attention to?

The brand of clothes he's wearing.

How expensive his car probably is.

How do you know what's important anymore, I wondered. What's in your briefcase doesn't make you important. How much those shoes with the faux gold buckle cost doesn't make you important.

In the unlikely event of a terrorist hijacking, you're all screwed.

A man no one's seen before jumps out of his seat and rushes the open cockpit door with a Hechler and Koch 94-A3 semi-automatic assault rifle while everyone sits and watches with their mouths on the carpet of the cabin floor. With a one-hundred-dollar bolt re-engineering kit he bought out of the back of a survival magazine, the HK is running on full auto, and the pilot and co-pilot get a taste of it in the second-person.

Crack—

Crack—

Crack—

And they're in technicolor all over the control panel.

The "single-barrel rifle" conversion that shortened the barrel of the weapon has diminished its accuracy, but the man isn't concerned with picking ducks off of a pond.

The flight attendants don't know what to do.

So much for those crisis training courses.

Know what to do during a fire at cruising altitude. Procedures for water landings. Be aware of what to do when the forward landing gear doesn't deploy properly. Know what to do when your mind goes frozen and your body locks up in fear at the sight of the pursed lips of bullet holes in the seat next to you.

Everyone grips their seats tightly as the plane dips down.

It takes way too long to dump the fuel from the plane, so that's not an option for the man.

He hears footsteps and turns around.

Crack—

Crack—

Crack—

And the plane's only hero is suddenly just keeping the floor from getting up and running away.

A new widow screams.

This time, the man locks the door to the cockpit and chants some over-distorted half-truths about some extremist religion and his family. Prisoners in far-off lands. His people in exile. Big governments sticking their dicks in everyone else's business. The flight recorder manifesto to save his soul and get his "message" out to the world.

The severe change in elevation triggers the oxygen masks. Everyone sucks it down like mixed drinks.

The top speed of a Boeing 747 passenger airliner is six hundred four miles per hour. The thrust is generated by four forty-three-thousand-pound-thrust Pratt & Whitney J-series engines. From cruising altitude—forty-five thousand feet—that gives you about a minute before

you find out what the phrase *resistance to move* really means. Even those four elephants of engines won't keep the plane moving after it kisses over four hundred billion short tons of sea.

Think "plate glass", but with concrete instead.

You have less than a minute to think about anything you want.

Less than a minute to slide into Heaven.

The Atlantic Ocean covers seventy-six million square kilometers of the Earth's surface.

You're not thinking about whatever you were thinking about twenty seconds ago. What are you thinking about?

Not dresses that match your hair. Not shoes. Not cell phones. Not who paid for the beer last time. Not the lien on your house, and not the lease on your car. Not candy bars and trendy titanium packaging. Not your stupid, inconsiderate neighbor. You don't think about these things with the last minute of your life, because they're not important, and nothing unimportant makes it into the final cut of the end-of-your-life life-flashed-before-your-eyes reel.

Not everyone dies the instant the plane hits the water.

Most do.

Broken necks. Shattered spines. Heart attacks. Crushed rib cages.

Hope you're one of them. Pray you're annihilated by crumbling, twisting bulkheads and seats flying at you like rocket ships.

There are about three-point-five kilograms of salt in every cubic meter of water in the Atlantic Ocean.

If you aren't dead by now, you're going to know just what that tastes like.

No one noticed me when I walked into the bank.

Not a soul looked up an inch.

That's right, keep your heads in your newspapers and bank books.

Don't even look at me.

Don't bother looking up when my duffel bag gets caught in the revolving door.

Don't look at my shoes. Pay no attention to my jacket. This bag, ignore it.

And they did.

I knew Maura's dark little secrets by then, and she was figuring mine out—

Right—

About—

Now.

But it didn't matter. Like everything before, it was totally meaningless.

If I would have grabbed the teller and stuck a knife in her breast, that wouldn't have gained any attention. If I would have shot her with the sleeping security guard's gun, no one would have flinched. They only cared, only gave a damn, when I calmly walked up to the counter to close my account.

Sorry to see me leave, she said to me.

Hope I can be their customer again, I was told.

Thank you for your business. Please come again.

And everyone went back to not noticing as I left through the door with ease.

You can do anything when you're invisible.

And before that, I went unnoticed in the sky lobby on the thirtieth floor of the Knight Building.

Right below the snack court, on a crisp Monday morning.

And before that, on the street with the man in the three-piece suit.

Sometimes, when you're taught something, you're stifled at first. Might even get hurt a bit. You don't always see the value of the lesson at first, so sometimes the lesson seems stupid and pointless.

We can teach ourselves more than our teachers can show us if we try hard enough.

I excused myself as he banged past me. Actually, I ran into him on purpose. I saw him from down the street, no salvation from anyone. He looked so alone. So desperate for worth.

Black, slicked-back designer hair swimming in designer mousse.

I kept moving and heard him chatter into the phone lodged in his ear.

While small-cap stocks may generate more of a turnover on your investment, they tend to be significantly riskier than mid-caps and high-caps. Mid-caps with good market histories tend to be very attractive to potential investors—they show room for growth while showing market maturity. I thought about that snippet of “conversation” when he didn't flinch at my courteous apology. Important stuff, those markets that trade imaginary values.

“Excuse me!” I said it a little louder this time. Okay, a *lot* louder. That got his attention. There goes all that jazz about courtesy, I guess.

“Hold on, Bob, I'll call you right back,” he said to his—

Friend?

Associate?

Father?

People like that call their parents by their first names, and their children by their last. Some sort of sick corporate life inmate thing. How's it been, Frank? Eat your peas, Mr. Wallace.

“Excuse me? Buddy, you bumped into *me*.” There we go with that again.

My eyes burned from an hour and a half of sleep the night before. So much for sleeping schedules, I thought. Just when you think you've got things under control, there you are reading a dictionary at four in the morning.

Provoke, verb.

To incite anger or resentment.

Actually, I prefer: *to stir action or feeling*.

I said maybe we'd bumped into each other. If he was sorry, I was sorry. I don't usually change my story, but then, I'm a pretty non-confrontational guy.

Queue laugh track.

He started yelling at me. Phone, in his pocket. Composure, on the sidewalk.

“I'm David,” I said to him.

We're all invisible.

None of us can see each other, but we have so much to say about ourselves. Our neighbors. Majority whips who ensure strong direction in their parties by “farming the vote”. Tiny people who are important enough to complain about and critique, but not important enough to think of as human beings.

People, or as close as you can really get without getting dirt under your fingernails, anyway.

The woman at the checkout counter who asks if you have a valued customer card.

TV news anchors with painted-on smiles who don't exist from the waist down.

The cop who was nice enough to let you go with just a warning, but had the nerve to pull you over in the first place.

We're all see-through, broken-down versions of ourselves. Drones oblivious to every-

thing around us. Dumb bombs with the spatial awareness of goldfish.

I think of the Visible Human Project.

I think of Cold-War-era compartmentalization and conformity. Nuclear families with two-point-three children.

I think of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.

And I don't know why, but it makes me think of a little black-haired girl being pulled across the highway in the rain.

I've never figured out why people keep secrets. If you really stop to think about it, the only thing secrets are good for is impeding progress. Big road blocks on the way to the future for the *good of the people*.

The rain was coming down harder by then.

Governments keep secrets from the people who appointed them. Majestic-12. Project Blue Book. The FBI has seven hundred thirty-four pages on Adolph Hitler alone, freely available through the Freedom of Information Act. But why bother releasing something like that if you're going to black out half of it? Freely available magic marker testing is more like it. Covert black-ops office supply experiments. Special Agent Papermate. I can see boxes of rubber bands and empty staplers now.

Maura's mother snagged her dress on the broken gate dragging her daughter out through it. Almost tore her shoulder off.

Secrets and lies. Deception agents. It's not Big Brother breathing down your shirt or looking over your shoulder, it's Little Brother cleaning up after himself when no one's watching. Hiding the tracks in the snow.

The giant cone of cotton candy had melted away by the time they were out of the amusement park.

"Nope. Not scared," the girl told her mother.

"That's good, honey. You can't let things scare you, or you'll never be able to do everything you want to do," her mother said. "And never believe anyone if they say they love you. You can't just believe that, because it might not be true. Don't let anyone lie to you about that. Okay?" The sharp downturn went over Maura's head.

So she nodded innocently, but her mother didn't see, and didn't pay any attention anyway—she was looking out into the thick highway traffic. Lost in whatever slope she'd slipped down.

Maybe if Maura had known—

Now they were at the median—

Maybe she would have had the courage and wits to do something. Maybe she wouldn't have been a useless kid standing around watching the cars and trucks try to hit them. She could have stopped destiny; changed the future.

Here's where the wind kicked up, and Maura saw the bruise and dry gash on the side of her mother's face behind that bell of black hair, the random wet river of hair clinging to her cheek in an attempt to hold her jaw together. I guess Daddy loved Mommy, too.

Imagine the smell of singed flesh underneath a hot iron, and a bright red triangle where a pale belly used to be. Think of punishment in the form of a hammer crushing delicate, carefully manicured fingertips. Broken ribs. Breasts marked-up from the rough texture of brick walls. Bloody lips and noses. Cuts that never heal. Leather belts and wire coat hangers.

I can see this woman at the backyard barbecue parties of neighbors, trying to explain away

her latest bruise or mark.

The cabinet door put that cut there.

I slammed my hand in the car door. That's why I'm in a cast up to my wrist. My, this is lovely potato salad. No, it was the car door.

Any pathetic excuse for being some meatbag's kicking post.

Just a reminder that all the makeup in the world can only make so much of a difference.

On weak knees, she kneeled at the muddy median and talked directly to her daughter.

"Remember the sacrifices others make for you, Maura. If they haven't made any for you, remember that, too. People only get away with what you let them get away with. They say they love you, but no one really loves anyone else. They're liars, honey. Don't let them lie to you. Do you understand?"

She brushed the hair from Maura's eyes and shook her violently. Maura just looked back blankly. Her mother asked again.

Didn't matter what the response was—the endings to these things are always the same. The car always crashes; the train always derails; the ship always capsizes. It's all downhill.

Think *gravity*, but without the predictability.

Her mother rambled some more incoherent things before marching across to the other side of the street. Maura was left behind until she had the sense to follow.

The man yelled and yelled.

I thought his head was coming off.

Better him than me, I thought. I tried my best to calm him down.

"Abnormal levels of stress have been known to cause impotency in men between the ages of—"

He reached back to hit me when what must have been his anger management classes kicked in and he just took off down the street again. No violence—no more than what was swimming under his skin, anyway—no confrontation, no release. He couldn't bring himself to be human and in the moment.

I think of pushed-down corporate politeness and courtesy.

I think I kissed a nerve when I uttered some profanities about him and his little phone friend as his back was turned, because he whipped back around almost instantly.

*Come on, you're getting closer.*

I threw out every disgusting, nasty remark I could think of on my feet. World, upside-down. Feeling, through the roof.

*Stay with me. You're almost alive.*

I told him how many volumes there were in the Oxford English Unabridged Dictionary, and somehow bent that into a remark about his probable illiteracy. Made sexually explicit comments about his wife/girlfriend/stock analyst. Told him just how silly his ear stud looked. The worthless man obviously had never heard any of it before spoken to him, so he needed it—needed to hear, and was long overdue for, painful things that were painfully obvious.

"No one talks to me like that," he said. "Do you even know who I am?"

Do you know yourself, that's a better question. No one talks to themselves anymore, but maybe if they did, they *would* know themselves. At least then people would be guaranteed someone would know them.

I pulled his arm to follow me with every word I spoke to him, every motion I made with my body. Tried to take him across a line he thought he had no business over.

And again, he walked away.

All the things I was trying to do for him, everything I could do to help him, everything I could do to try to save him, and he walked off. Fucking. Walked. Off.

*I'm not worth his time*, he said.

*Just some crazy shithead on the street*, he said.

You are what you eat. And right then, I was eating volcanoes.

The little girl followed far behind her mommy through the break in the fence.

Reeds as tall as she was, on the other side. She couldn't find her mommy over them.

Maura yelled out for her. Came the response: *rain*.

Came the response: *the terrifying scent of silence*.

Came the little girl through the crest of the tall grass onto the wet beach. She shook in skin cold from ice-water rain as she looked back and forth. An empty beach with night falling over it, save for the shadow of a single person high up on the edge of the dock.

Maybe that lady saw her mommy run by, she thought.

Maura battled the quicksand and was covered with it to her waist by the time she got to the dock. She crawled up a hill a million times her size if it was an inch, to get there.

With her feet on the first shaky plank, she called out to the silhouette.

Nothing came.

Step after step, shivering all the way, Maura fought her way down the dock.

Maura enjoyed watching people cry. After she told me what happened, I knew why. I got it. I got why the whimpers and tears of destroyed people made her insides flutter with joy. It's almost a sickness, she explained to me. Some twisted daily agenda decidedly absent from most people's day planners and personal digital assistants.

In falling down, you will be found and lifted up, and therein lies the beauty she saw. Everyone's real when they're in ruins. You'll see what you're capable of when your insides are torn out and the walls are decorated with them. Tortured and murdered, like some pathetic kidnapped child. You won't find anything closer to being complete—having nothing means having everything you could have—and you won't find anything closer to purity. Back to innocence. Back to being able to be loved. To love. To dream, to be vulnerable, to take chances.

She found her mother spilling tears into the sea at the end of the dock. A wasted excuse for a woman; a memory of a shell of a person. Imagine the car wreck. Imagine the field surgeons with scalpels and the firemen with the jaws of life.

Imagine Maura tugging on her mother's cuff, trying to get her attention.

Imagine it all came crashing down into the thrashing seas below the dock, and pretend for just an instant—a moment a millionth as long as Maura lived it—that you saw Maura's mother slip under the water after walking off the end of the dock.

"Mommy?" Fade to black.

Talk about being born with a silver spoon up in deep, Mr. Slicked-back had the entire tea set up his ass.

He whined and whined and *whined*. And in the end, he just turned and walked away.

People used to ask me what I was bothered by. I'd tell them I'd like to go back to when the first amphibian crawled onto the shore and break its neck. Actually, I'd go back in time and flick a used cigarette filter into the primordial ooze. Being unable to do that? That's a bit of a bitch, yeah.

I traced him from across the street. He moved fast, and lost me between some cars or a bus now and then, but I kept on him as we got to the intersection.

We crossed at the red light. A newspaper quickly copped from a newsstand kept me out of his sight. As if his imaginary conversation would have let him see me, anyway.

The crowd kept him from moving as quickly as he wanted, and the light hit green before either of us got across.

And as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death—

I pushed him under the bus as the light turned.

I fear no evil.

The bus took off and sucked him under.

Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

And he was saved.

## seven

I'll tell you how I got to standing on the outer ledge of the roof of the Knight Building.

I'll tell you, but you won't believe me.

It made the papers, even.

But you won't believe it. Not one word of it.

Maura was screaming at me from the maintenance access door, and the wind was trying to push me off the ledge. News choppers were going to swarm, and I was going to be the crazy jumper on the roof of some fifty-story phallus of capitalism. That is, until they figured out who I was. Then, I'd be the *famous* crazy jumper on the roof.

I'll tell you every little detail, but you won't believe a word of it.

*I Belong.*

You've probably seen those words before. On t-shirts. On bumper stickers. On billboards on the side of the highway.

*I Belong.*

I didn't write that, of course. Cherry did. And what she didn't write, she had written. I bet you even have a copy of my book somewhere.

Cherry Dixon was the head of Product Marketing for BDM on floor thirty-four of the Knight Building. Cherry was a *marketing professional*. Talk about selling people.

*I Belong.*

You should see the stuff she rejected, that her "team" came up with.

*Let Your Joy Be Endless.*

*Make the World Your Own.*

There were too many to count, and all of them just as bloated with saccharine. Everything from inspiration to flat-out propaganda—Cherry and her "team" covered it all. Sometimes, I wondered who was using whom.

So many people want to be loved; to be a part of something important. A relationship, society, that clique of popular kids in high school. Anything to define them. Most people don't become any of that, though. They feed off of whatever they're told to; become what they're marketed in the shape of. That's *real* belonging. That's *really* being a part of something.

They are the images of what they're told they're supposed to be. People aren't given what they need, they're told what they need.

They buy themselves off a rack in the mall.

Marketing? Marketing is the creation of necessity.

Lexus, Abercrombie, Rolex.

That man on the street? I saved him. Freed him from needing *things* and people made of plastic.

*I Belong.*

The invention of need.

Maura already needed me, and I needed her; Cherry made everyone else need me.

Skip back a little bit, to my last few moments of fame: I think of the gun, I think of the look on everyone's faces, and I think of the little piece of yellow legal paper that started it all.

Everyone took three steps back if they weren't stuck to the floor.

With the gun pointed squarely at Mr. Talk Show Host and the ON-AIR sign buzzing happily, I thought about just how I got there.

Now, come way back.

Flashback, noun.

On the street, listening to the howl of ambulance sirens coming after Mr. Slicked-back, I walked away without so much as a double-take from anyone. Completely invisible. People barely even noticed it when the man in the three-piece suit hugged the front tire of his saving grace, that pollution-factory bus.

There are six steps to your standard time-delay anti-personnel hand grenade.

One, remove the safety pin from the striker lever. The striker lever is also called a *spoon*, if you talk to the right people.

The bus spewed carbon monoxide into the air around everyone, and no one cared. It burned through the gasoline it guzzled and the oil that lubricated its gears and pistons, made from the bones of the biggest creatures ever to walk the planet, and not a single soul was interested. The dinosaurs didn't survive, and neither would their bones.

Two, the spoon pivots at the top of the grenade and releases its hold on the tip of the striker, a piece of metal that works like the hammer on a pistol. At this point, you'd better have a good throwing arm.

Some things get born again, some don't, I guess. One more dose of randomness in the universe that people try to control with trade tariffs, environmental regulations, and drug laws. Some things get the short end of Darwin's stick, for whatever reason. There is *chaos*, and I want every part of it, I thought.

Three, the striker is shot down into the grenade *hard* by a spring inside the ignition chamber, a small cylinder that houses the end of the striker, the striker spring, and the percussion cap. This chamber is sealed off from the rest of the grenade.

*I wanted to turn cities into smoking craters and piss into the smoldering ruins.*

Four, the percussion cap explodes and ignites a *chemical delay*. In this case, the chemical delay is a simple chemical fuze that's designed to burn through in about four seconds, in most hand grenades. Without it and the ability to count from one to four, you'd see many more one-armed Marines walking around. The chemical fuze is sectioned off from the rest of the grenade.

*I wanted to sentence corporate heads and Greenpeace members to death and push the plungers with the bones of endangered species.*

Five, the chemical fuze burns into the detonator, which is nothing more than a small cylinder of combustible material. It's more powerful than the percussion cap, but it's just a taste of what's to come.

*I wanted to teach people lessons they couldn't teach themselves.*

Six, the explosion from the detonator bleeds over into the rest of the grenade, nothing more than a reservoir for explosive material—often an amount of flaked TNT—inside a fragmenting, serrated cast-iron shell. Enter fireworks. The grenade explodes and sends fire and

shattered pieces of its shell everywhere. Some hand grenades these days are made of plastic instead of metal, so they don't all behave the same.

All anyone on the street cared about was this giant bus that was blocking their paths.

Six steps: Pin, spoon, striker, cap, fuze, detonator.

"Hurry up, David," Maura said to me outside the elevators in the sky lobby on floor thirty. She met me there wearing some absolutely hideous blue bubble-wrap dress normally reserved for ecstasy-fueled raves. I paid it little attention, other than to let her know she looked like the inside of a FedEx package. I rubbed my face after she slapped me.

To get the explosive material inside the grenade reservoir, the material is loaded in before the filler cap is put in place. To get the explosive material *out*, you need steel briars for nerves. Funny how demilitarizing a hand grenade is harder than setting it off.

I stood at the exit door and stared at the grenade gripped in my fingers.

"What the Hell are you waiting for?" she asked me. I felt her fingers on my back, pushing me just a little bit. Everything in my life so far, and I still needed a bit of a push now and then.

"Don't rush me," I told her. "There's no one in there yet."

I kept my eyes on the elevator doors, and Maura kept her eyes on my ear. Fingers on my back.

"Think about all—"

She dragged that last word out as long as she could get away with—

"Of the people going up and down inside that shaft—"

Like I said, I wasn't the pervert—

"All day long, every day." She giggled in my ear. Fingers like a trained piano player's trailed up my spine. "Where did you get the idea for this, anyway?"

I tucked the grenade into my jacket and pulled out a scrap of yellow legal pad paper. Maura took it from my hand and read it aloud back to me.

JAMES, I THINK WE NEED TO TALK LATER. – DIANE

"I found that last week on the sidewalk," I said. I didn't tell her how I found it, or what I was doing—saving Mr. Slicked-back—when I found it. "I couldn't stop staring at it."

"It's just a stupid note," Maura replied. Obviously, all meaning was lost on her.

"But it's not just a note," I said, "it's a thought someone had. Someone, somewhere, had to construct that thought, use the energy, and waste the time to write it down. And *then*, this Diane woman had to give it to this guy, or had someone give it to him.

"If thoughts are just chemicals and cells in the brain, that thought on paper is still a piece of someone. It's a piece of a person, and I own it now. I can keep it in a jar or a box or a scrapbook, and it's going to outlive the person who wrote it."

"Okay, fine, whatever. What does it have to do with why we're here?" she asked.

"Don't you wonder what was so important? Maybe this Diane chick was breaking some bad news to that guy. Maybe something else. I don't know. I thought about it for a while, and started thinking about what that note might say if one of those two people thought they were going to die." I waited for her response.

"That's pretty fucked-up," Maura replied.

Hello, kettle? It's the pot calling.

JAMES, I HAVE CANCER – DIANE

JAMES, I JUST SWALLOWED CYANIDE PILLS – DIANE

JAMES, LOOK OUT, HAND GRENADE – DIANE

If you knew you were about to die, you'd be a different person.

The elevator down the hall had begun to crowd, so we took off for it. I'm a bullet. I'm a button on a string. I *am* the bee-line.

Nothing between me and the elevator doors could dare stop me. I'm the train.

Inconspicuous, efficient, and unstoppable. A secret agent on a mission. We meet again, Mr. Bond.

The elevator doors closed as we walked by.

Maura and I hid around the corner and buried our tongues in each other's mouths right as the drones on the elevator figured out what was going on.

Cut to: Inside the elevator.

I fell the hand grenade, through the closing doors, with the pin following close behind it. Everyone stared for a moment, dumbfounded, as the doors sealed shut.

The screams and howls could be heard across *floors*.

And then, nothing but the loud POP of the detonator.

To get the explosive material out of the reservoir, use a diamond-tipped drill bit to get through the filler cap. A solution of acetone nail polish remover, rubbing alcohol, and club soda, shaken around well enough, will help remove any material you couldn't remove with a vacuum. Rinse with water, drain, and let dry for seventy-two hours.

The sound of the grenade hitting the floor should have given them a clue—there's a big difference between a full one and an empty one when it comes to tile floors.

Back in the hallway around the corner, I ran my hands up and down Maura's body. I wondered what it felt like underneath all that plastic and bubble wrap. Two rushes in the span of ten seconds, counting the elevator.

One of her bubbles popped and we slowed down. Quiet, compressed laughter.

Kiss.

"Okay, so tell me why this building," she said.

Grope.

"Anything special about it?" she added.

"Read the papers lately?" was my rather short response. I have such a way with words.

Kiss.

"Waste of time," Maura said. There are no complete sentences in between two kisses.

Kiss.

"James L. Knight the third died last week—" Kiss. "Got hit by a bus. Owned this place. I thought—"

INSERT—A MONTAGE OF MEMORIES:

*Do you even know who I am?*

*JAMES, I THINK WE NEED TO TALK LATER. – DIANE*

*Do you even know who I am?*

A beat.

"What's wrong, David?" Maura asked me. Her nails bit into my neck.

I stuttered for a second and said, "Nothing." Choke.

"Nothing," I said. Swallow.

"You thought? What did you think?" I'd forgotten to finish my sentence, I guess.

I told her I thought it was interesting that I'd never seen what he looked like before his obituary. Kiss.

Enter a feeling of joy, but not like before. Dimmed. Less lustrous. Just below the chin-up

bar. Something about tolerances, Dr. Morgan once told me. Getting to zero was going to take some serious work.

Enter: Cherry Dixon, stage right.

She stood ten feet tall in one-inch heels. When the building was put up, the contractors made the doorjams and the ceilings higher just for her arrival. An Amazonian twig towering above us while weighing all of a sack of rice.

I could have broken her in half with a good, hard sneeze. *Ah-choo.*

The look on her face, now that was something I'd never seen before. Not quite disgust, and not quite approval. More like the interested look people have when they're watching a tape of someone's execution by the state. A deer on the side of the road, split open by some redneck's headlights. Trying to spot black ice at night.

Intrigue, but without the real interest in the given situation normally experienced by human beings.

Cherry Dixon. People say snakes don't have legs, good eyesight, or hearing. Bullshit.

Maybe in another life, in another body, I'd have fucked *her* up against the wall. She had one of those bodies that really wanted to be shapely and seductive, but just didn't have the meat to go around. I kept thinking she was under the impression that more lipstick would make her heavy enough not to blow away at the first light breeze.

"That's cute, what you did," she said to us.

Another bubble popped.

"What's your name?" she asked. Folded leather clipboard between her arms and her chest.

"Maura," I heard from next to my ear.

"Not you," said Cherry. Me.

David, I told her.

"David. What's your last name?" Inquiring minds, etcetera.

Psychologists say people in stressful situations often ease their discomfort with humor or laughter. I kept my mouth shut.

Cherry stared me down like a guillotine until I opened my mouth again—

"Preacher." Pop, another bubble. Maura tried to make me lose balance and kept popping—

Popping—

Popping—

Popping bubbles while we stood there under fire by this Pixie Stick.

A greenhouse of a conference room behind her housed more pushers, and she looked back at one of them who just nodded approvingly. Or submissively. A rat in a cage pushing its nose up and down for a pea of a drop of water.

If your worth is dependent on someone else, who's really the one with the worth?

"Well, David Preacher, I think you should follow me. You and your . . ."

Nothing from the peanut gallery.

"Doll, too. Bring her along," she said. I didn't know if it was a sex joke or a plastic toy joke. Maura twitched, like she was going to root her fingers in Cherry's neck as she turned and walked back into the conference room. I was almost let down when it didn't happen. "Or I could just call Security."

"No one got hurt," Maura sneered. I didn't have the heart to tell her about Mr. Knight.

"Who are you wearing, honey? Christian Dior or Verace?"

"Fuck you," Maura snapped.

"What a lovely lady you got here, David. But that doesn't change much. The ball's in your

court. Go with Security or come with me,” Cherry said from the doorway. I almost took Maura by the hand and pulled her back against the wall.

But we’re all sick, and we’re all sheep, so we followed.

“David Preacher, people. That’s our name. David Preacher says . . . What does David Preacher say?” Cherry walked around the conference table while she talked. The walking, talking dry-erase board. Everyone in the there watched her every move with those slick, focused little eyes their kind is so famous for.

Aside from Cherry, there weren’t any three-piecers in the room. These people—with their all-week-long “casual Friday” slacks and short-sleeved button-up casualwear and “survival” watches that tell the time in sixteen different countries—they thought they had it all figured out, telling everyone what to want and what to be. Turns out, though, that life is just like they tell you it is on television, anyway. There’s never anything good on—only reality shows and game show reruns, all day long.

Love doesn’t make the world go ‘round, but dumping \$49.99 on a designer sweater made by ten-year-olds who can’t even say “cashmere” sure as Hell does. You *need* the sweater. You *have* to have the sweater. It’s the final missing part of your soul. Consider yourself lucky they made sure you realized it before you melted like an army man in a microwave.

One by one, they chimed in. Every last chimp, university-trained at Chiat/Day State College.

“David Preacher says, ‘Hope is in your heart?’” one said. I smothered a laugh at the look on his face as Cherry shot it down.

They sent my name around the table.

“David Preacher says, ‘Be empowered.’” came another.

“I got it, I got it,” someone else started, “David Preacher says, ‘What’s inside you?’”

This went on and on. I threw up over and over in the back of my throat.

What a joke.

David Preacher says you’re a moron.

David Preacher says, “Life is God waiting for you to redeem yourself.”

David Preacher says, “Up with entropy.”

“I belong.” A tiny voice from the farthest corner of the room.

Cherry Dixon. As quiet as a mouse, breaking character, and making everyone around the table pay close attention.

“David Preacher says, ‘I belong.’”

You have to be kidding, I thought. I could *hear* my eyes rolling backwards.

*I Belong.*

“What’s the concept?” a BRIGHT, YOUNG EXECUTIVE asked.

Behind every scheme, behind every campaign, there’s a concept. What’s it going to do for us? How will it sell the product? What product are we selling? What do we *want* to sell?

That last one, that’s the important one.

What’s our concept? How do we take it from the whiteboard to the pockets and messenger bags of our target demographic, and could its influence range be expanded outside the current target demographic into other potential growth zones?

Furthermore, what is *it*?

It was me.

It was an *idea* of me—of something people needed, but had to be told they needed it before they'd believe in it. Before they'd believe in *me*.

"The concept is the same as it has been," Cherry said. "Give people the hope they need."

Give people the hope you tell them they need, she meant.

She looked right at everyone, plain and straight, and started, "Everyone's looking to this religion and that person for guidance and just a little bit of hope. Hope that the future's good, and the past has taught us lots of real important lessons, and all that crap. We'll fill the gap, and it'll be huge. It could just be revolutionary, and everyone wins.

"If we can meet our expectational and projected quotas, the company trip is the smallest thing on the menu, guys. Everyone has faith, and the ones who don't can wear it on their chests and have some of their own. Our faith is just gonna be more visible and comfortably affordable than everyone else's."

"People will really wonder what it is, and it'll be what, anything they want it to be?" The executive was so BRIGHT and GOAL-ORIENTED, I wanted to eat glass.

"It'll be *everything* people want it to be and mean. 'I Belong' isn't just a billboard or a shirt, it's an idea people want to be a part of. It's huge. It's this firm's future," added Cherry.

From mouse to laser-guided missile. I'd seen microscopes with less focus.

"Everyone wins. We win with the market exposure and capital gains, and they win with a little piece of serenity," she said.

"Who wins?" I asked.

I said the wrong thing. How could I be so stupid, as to not understand what was going on? I must have been pretty dense. No sponges here, just us cinder blocks.

Everyone—but Maura, for what it was worth—stared at me, dumbfounded.

"And that's going to be your icon?" asked the SMARMY little FUCKER. I bit down on rusty nails in my gums. Swallowed acid.

"David is going to be *our* new icon, and I don't think he's going to turn us down," Cherry told the Wonderful Young Man.

Give them the hope you tell them they need—when in reality, if they have to be fed hope, they already need it.

I'm an icon.

I'm a figurehead.

I'm hope in a bottle. Have faith in me.

*What Would David Do?*

David would head for the door, that's what.

He can't be owned by anyone. He's not a product or a service. David Preacher? He's salvation, and you can't put salvation on the auction block.

Up came the phone from the table, and Cherry started dialing. Didn't say a single word to anyone except when someone picked up on the other end.

"Yes, Security, please," she ordered.

Maura jumped out from the other side of me and tried to stop Cherry. Maura must have panicked and completely lost her head, because I know I hadn't taught her to break like that. So much for things that didn't matter, and all the stuff we'd learned together. All the stuff I showed her, taught her—all of it—was worthless. Flush, the sound of progress going down the drain.

"Hey, hey, hey—"

St, st, stutter.

“Don’t do that, come on. Please.” Maura pleaded with Cherry. She was a suspension bridge between Cherry and me, holding onto my sleeve and trying to motion to Cherry to put down the phone at the same time. “No one was going to get hurt, we swear, right?”

Maura looked back at me. I was ready—and trying—to keep walking out of the room, but my sleeve was caught on something. Like I’d snagged my leg on a barbed-wire fence.

“David? Right?” She went back to Cherry. “Come on, don’t be such a—”

And the cabin fills with salt water.

She caught herself a little too late. In six words, over the span of two short seconds, Maura single-handedly made the both of us belong to Cherry.

Today, ladies and gentlemen, we’ll start the bidding on salvation at \$14.95.

The twelfth step to recovery is after having had a spiritual awakening as a result of the steps, to carry the message to addicts and practice the principles in the steps in all of your affairs.

*I Belong.*

That’s the message Cherry came up with for me to carry to people. All the people who wore it on their chest or stuck it to their cars, they were all addicts, too. In their case, what they carried their works for was being a part of something bigger than them. Mainlining religion with one giant shared needle so the infection just spread faster. God, Heaven, the universe, me. Whatever. They couldn’t really *touch* it, so it couldn’t be anything but grand and comforting on some monotheistically mythical scale.

Just made them want more, is all it did.

It makes you want to fill the syringe full of air and jam it right into their chests.

Maura jittered and shook as she tried to make it look like she *wasn’t* about to relate Cherry to a female canine. Back and forth, from Cherry to me. Cherry, don’t call security. Me, listen to Cherry. Cherry, me. Cherry, me.

I’m feeling so torn, and I’m not even in the middle.

But boy, was I about to be in for a treat.

More pleading. If there’s anything she can do to apologize.

I’d travel, Cherry said. See the world. Be part of a movement. All I had to do was say yes. Sell it all away. If I believed, everyone else would, too. All I wanted to do was get more than two hours of sleep a night.

Maura got upset again when Cherry told her to sit down and mind her business. Back and forth, up and down, on and off—Maura’s switch kept flipping, and I started to snicker a little with each reaction.

“You—” she started.

I saw her take a step forward, and reached out to grab her by the arm.

“Fucking—”

Without even finishing her sentence, Maura’s claws shot out to Cherry. Like she was wearing some plastic shield that made her invulnerable, Cherry was a block of ice. Didn’t move. Didn’t flinch. Six inches from being short an eye or two, and the icy little cunt didn’t so much as step back.

The Latin form of *frozen* is *glacialis*.

I jerked Maura back and whipped her up against the wall.

I don’t know why I did it. I just remember looking into the thin red cracks in her eyes and being unable to hear Cherry laughing at the crazy girl struggling against the wall. I don’t know why I stopped her from ripping that road cone of a nose off of Cherry’s face, but there I was,

pinning Maura against the wall.

That grin, like running a knife behind your ear. Maura wiggled a little bit, and looked up. She asked to be let go of without opening her mouth, and I did.

I told her I'd do it if she wanted me to.

Sap, noun.

Maura looked up at the ceiling for a second and came back down with the loudest sneeze in existence. I took that as a yes and glanced back at Cherry. The whiteboard seemed satisfied and in approval of the two of us, suddenly.

Back to Maura.

Blood. Everywhere. Like a blasting expedition.

Four hundred tons of TNT.

She took her hand away from her nose and wiped it on her bubble-wrap-and-packing-tape dress. More blood filled her palm and covered her fingers when she reached back up to her face.

"Oh, shit," she said calmly and without a breath. Almost out of it, I'd imagine.

Damage to the nasal membrane can result in posterior nosebleeds triggered by hard sneezes after intense or repeated cocaine use.

Danny had left more than some clothes and his toothbrush at Maura's place. And Maura, never one to let new experiences get wasted, got just that herself earlier that morning.

You've never seen horror until you've seen the looks of horror and shock on the faces of those people. A boardroom of marketing executives, treated to a front-row seat to Drug Abuse 101. Maura, looking like some beating victim from the nose down. A kiss of reality none of them had ever seen before was dumping blood by the gallon from her nose, and they had to sit there and watch it all. Each one of them cringed and felt the strain of nausea as the pristinely manicured 1/8" beige carpeting got painted a lovely shade of maroon between Maura's feet.

The seams of Maura's teeth were staining red as she smiled at me. This wasn't violent; this was sad and lusciously sweet.

I would have kissed her right there, if there hadn't been that mess all over her face.

"Why is it," she started, "that every time we go out, someone ends up bleeding?" It was like she knew about my hallucination with the diner owner. I thought maybe I'd mentioned it, and forgot about telling her.

We were hip and fun people, I told her.

"People might start to think we have a problem, David." Her nose blew bubbles while she talked. A tiny arrowhead of a tongue slipped out and took the blood from the edge of her lips.

No problems here, just us sociopaths.

We're all normal. Subjectivity, as Maura said, is a wonderfully freeing thing to understand.

She kept smiling, and I kept ignoring Cherry. I even blocked out the moans and cringes of disgust coming from everyone else behind us.

I didn't love her, did I? No, that couldn't be it, I thought. Maybe "pity" was closer to the word I was looking for. Felt sorry for. Anything else.

But definitely not that. My tombstone wasn't about to be on some discount, package-deal twin plot with anyone else's, I could make sure of that. I kept telling myself I didn't need Maura like that. I could've quit her whenever I wanted, structural collapse be damned. No need for a twelve-step program or a sponsor or a little plastic chip that told me how many days it had been since my last shot. Being truly free is being able to leave before the neon signs and ceiling

fans are turned off, and I had that down like a grizzly crossing a stream.

Her attack couldn't ambush me, I was sure. Couldn't blast me open with breaching charges across my chest.

Maura gave one last look up at me, and I brushed the hair away from her face so it wouldn't sink into the carnage drying on her face.

I didn't blink, I just let it happen. I let fate do exactly what it had always done, and I got the Hell out of the way. Without looking back at Cherry, I agreed to everything.

Sold, to the lady in the black suit at the head of the table.

## eight

In the unlikely event you become a national phenomenon, don't let it go to your head.

I'm so full of ideas, I'm a patent office.

I'm positively *overflowing*.

Well, I was, anyway. I had all sorts of ideas Cherry and her team couldn't have come up with. Things not nearly as vacuous and meaningless as *I Belong*. They came by the ton.

*Better Living Through Suicide.*

*School Zones Make Great Firing Ranges.*

Imagine those on your minivan, right under the tiny mock-roadsign warning about how many children you have with you. Get your fists out of your ears, I say, and listen. Really hear it for a moment and let sink in the bad things your mommy warned you about. It's a very horrible thought. It's disturbing. It's dangerous.

It's evil and terrible and makes you want to sew your ears shut with dental floss. But at least it means something. At least it isn't fake. Cherry's little slogan—tagline, mantra, whatever—didn't really mean anything at all, it turned out.

What do you belong to?

Anything. That was the point. Sell the remedy without knowing the affliction; sell the want without knowing the need. The people who need it will make it what they need it to be, and everyone's gonna need it. The sizzle, not the steak, as they say. But that's how it was designed from the start.

It's one of those things that gets in your head. Not like the little bits of random conversation you waste your life on during the day. Those five-second fillers for uncomfortable silences that only make things worse.

"Yeah, that new album by that one band, that's a good album," you'll say in a crowd.

In ten minutes, no one else will remember you even opened your mouth. Sum all of the things like that you've said and multiply by an average of five seconds. I bet most people, over the span of a lifetime, end up with more seconds than brain cells.

"I would keep using that product, but this other product just has a better whatever." Completely useless and insignificant, but you say it anyway.

Maybe they *are* just like what Cherry came up with. They don't stick to the wall, but they sure as Hell mean about the same as, well, you get the point.

You belong to the vacation club. You belong to the real estate company.

You belong to the support group. The self-help collective.

You're a valued customer. V.I.P. club member. A part of something.

You're a *special person*, aren't you?

You should LOVE your LIFE because it's so FUCKING RICH.

You, you, you. Choke me with a broomstick.

"Tell me something, David," Maura said over her shoulder to me. We sat on my living room floor, back to back, reading the contracts Miss Dixon gave us before we left. This time, at two in the morning, Maura was my encyclopedia set.

In case anyone asks, we sat on the floor because my furniture was stolen—I didn't decide to sell it after realizing I hated it. It didn't get in my way, and it wasn't annoyance after annoyance. Burglars took it all. In case anyone asks, this is me whistling inconspicuously.

I left my window unlocked, I swear.

I also didn't tell Maura she could stay until she wanted to leave. She followed me home, honest. The gimp-legged puppy your mother said you couldn't keep. Maura also wasn't wearing one of my large shirts because her bubble-wrap dress had been ruined earlier in the day.

"Once a day, remember?" I reminded her. We'd wasted them earlier that day, on the way out of the conference room. Something about contracts and stain-resistant carpeting.

"I don't care. Tell me," she said. The shirt was really way too big for her, and made her legs look like they started at the knees.

I told her I really wasn't in the mood, honestly. While Maura had already banished her contract to the floor, I was sinking deeper into mine.

SIGNER agrees to complete participation (as defined under PARTICIPATION, I) to the extent as determined by CHERRY DIXON and BDM MARKETING, LTD. in program(s) to be defined more clearly in PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES.

First, there would be the full-page ad in the Sunday papers. The New York Times. The Washington Post. Nothing extraordinary, really. Just black block text on white, picture of my head underneath it. *I Belong*.

Breach of CONTRACT shall attach penalties of no less than the amount defined in PENALTIES (9) to the SIGNER, payable immediately upon breach of CONTRACT to parties as defined in PENALTIES (9), which may or may not include CHERRY DIXON and BDM MARKETING, LTD.

The Philadelphia Inquirer. The San Francisco Gate. Later, *Prevention* and *Redbook*.

*Better Homes and Gardens* fodder is all it was.

Production rates for full-page advertisements in the Sunday New York Times can run upward of twelve thousand dollars or more. How much is your message worth?

"Don't mess with me, David," she said. "Out with it."

I brushed her off. Back to my soggy cereal and contract. No time to be distracted. Maybe I should have said the words "coke head". That would have gotten her off my back. As it was, I just ignored her some more.

"Talk, dammit," she said. "You have all of these books, and spend all your time reading them, and you have nothing better to do than tell me every dumb little fact you can find, but when I ask you to say something, I get nothin'. Forget just telling me something, how about you actually say something to me for once?"

Where that came from, I had no idea.

"Why are we doing this, again?" I asked.

"I don't know, maybe because you like to argue?" she said.

"No, no, I mean, why are we going along with this lady?"

"I think it'll be fun, David. I've always wanted to travel, and we might even get on T.V." Since when did Maura care about being seen? When did shit like television matter?

"Well, maybe I don't want to travel," I sneered over my shoulder.

"Well, maybe I didn't mean with you," Maura said. I couldn't tell if she was joking or not,

so I just grinned at her behind her back.

I'd like to take this brief moment to acknowledge all of the wonderful people who made this uncomfortable pause possible.

"You know," she started up again, "I bet most people would think a place that looked like this was creepy."

Well, thanks. Great. Love you, too, dear.

"It doesn't bother me, though. I mean, it's really screwed-up, but I don't think anyone else can really complain about someone else being screwed-up. Especially not that Cherry bitch, either. I swear, David, if she ever calls me a doll again, I'm going to tear her head off," she told me. It was kinda cute, actually, in a twee-psycho sort of way. Maybe I would have smiled again, had the sheets of paper in front of me not been drowning me in legalese.

"I bet Cherry would just love to see all of the stuff you have," said Maura, looking around to wall-to-wall empty carpeting and thick, dark sheets nailed to the windows. "I don't know how you keep the girls away."

Maura reached back, between us, grabbing my hand as she stood up.

"Get up," she commanded with all the power and authority of a gumball. She pulled on my arm hard enough until I had no choice, and stood up. Almost fell up, really. I dropped my copy of the contract and almost toppled over. Maura didn't let go and kicked over my bowl of used milk.

All over the contract, soaking it through to the floor.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I shouted.

"Oh, like you care so much about this place to begin with! Forget about it, David, it's just paper. You can get another one. Let's find something more interesting than this legal stuff, and we'll clean it up later." Funny, that almost sounded like me for a second there.

I didn't want to get another one, I told her, because to get another, I'd be begging to some lady I really couldn't have cared less about for some stupid contracts I wouldn't have blown my nose on willingly. It wasn't a pride thing, it was a sanity thing. I almost fed her some extended diatribe on being forced to do things, whatever, but instead, I put my foot in my mouth.

"This is the second time you've done this to me, Maura," I said to her.

A system known as the *Torino Scale* is used on Earth as a method of describing the impact hazard of comets and asteroids.

"Done what?" Maura stared me down hard and let go of my hand. I said nothing.

There are five warning level zones in the *Torino Scale*, consisting of ten individual levels.

Starting in the white zone, a hazard level of zero describes the likelihood of an object unlikely to collide with the Earth or survive a trip through the atmosphere in the case of a collision. Completely inaccurate bodies and objects too small to survive the thousands of degrees of heat generated upon entry into the atmosphere. Extremely unlikely collisions, having about the same chances as an object of equal size striking the Earth within the next few decades, merit a hazard level of one. This is the green zone. Sunny days and blue skies.

The yellow zone consists of hazard levels two through four. These are labeled as "events meriting concern", and range from very unlikely collisions resulting from not unusually close encounters to objects with a one-percent or greater chance of collision which would result in regional devastation. Still, not very alarming possibilities of contact at this point.

"Threatening events" describes the orange zone, hazard levels five to seven, which detail significant threats of collision with the potential for regional devastation, to close encounters with objects having extremely significant chances of contact with the planet's surface. The lat-

ter object's collision results in a global catastrophe.

The red zone is certain collisions. There is no sidestepping, no ducking. Hazard levels eight, nine, and ten comprise the red zone. Level-eight objects are the light ones of the group, capable of localized destruction and hitting between every fifty and one thousand years. Level-nine objects carry regional devastation and collide with the Earth once every one thousand to one hundred thousand years.

Level-ten events occur once every one hundred thousand years or less. They're capable of global climatic catastrophes, and carry scenarios of devastation on a global, extinction-level scale. At this hazard level, I'm sitting on my porch and sipping iced tea. People are running around in the streets, looting, rioting, and screaming wildly. Trying to get through traffic jams to get to relatives and remote places for some level of imagined safety and immunity. But there's really no reason to be afraid, I think to myself as I drop another lemon wedge into my glass.

This is it. This is the end, and it's inescapable. Let the fear—all of the fear you've ever had in your entire life, every black drop of it—wash down the side of the mountain. Let everything become water.

In case you're wondering just what a level-ten hazard feels like, imagine me standing in front of Maura, not answering her, and knowing I can't avoid her or the conversation at this point. The yellow revolving emergency lights spinning and flashing. Caution tape flapping back and forth in the breeze. Sirens.

"Done what?" she asked again. She was extra heavy on the "what" part.

Frozen, like the North Pole. Maura said it again, for EMPHASIS.

"You made me her bitch, Maura!" There. I said it. Shouted it. Yelled it. Detonated it like a hydrogen bomb. It was out there, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Wrong answer. The sound of the buzzer.

"Excuse me? Want to tell me what that means?" I was in it way, way too deep to shut my mouth, so I kept going with it. I should have just shut up. I didn't, but I should have.

There's just so much noise. Static in, static out. Broken rabbit ears wrapped and held together with aluminum foil. Nothing sounds right because nothing is right. Every time I open my mouth or open my ears, things shake downhill like avalanches.

Yesterday was terrible.

Today is worse than yesterday.

And the threat of tomorrow makes today that much worse. Makes you wonder just how bad tomorrow is going to be.

That big promotion doesn't make today a good day. Scoring that cute girl's phone number at the party with a hundred mindless talkboxes moves nothing upward. You can't move up the mountain because the mountain is a crater, and all you can really do is fall into it.

Into Hell. Burning, searing, fiery depths.

Dante described my level of Hell more like a deep wood; a forest where the souls of those who upon themselves would have laid violence are turned into the trunks of trees. Fruitless and filled with venom, and for the harpies to make their nests on.

There's a place for everyone in Dante's version of Hell, though.

Maura's next to me, rooted in the dirt of the self-damned. The greasy, disgusting, obese impression of a toxic waste dump next to you on the bus, he's cast down with the gluttons deluged with the hail and snow deep in the third circle. Business Partners and Corporate

Executives—hypocrites, thieves, and falsifiers like no others—are banished to the gulfs and their filth, serpents, and pestilence. A fitting end to unfit people. Wastelands for the wastes.

You'd better keep moving, or you'll get stuck somewhere you don't want to be.

When you don't know what to do, just keep on the accelerator. Take the curve hard and don't look back. It's a steep fall, and it feels just lovely.

You can save some of the people some of the time, but you can't save all of the people all of the time. Imagine me trying to save myself by keeping my mouth shut.

You know what? Fuck being profound.

Fuck making a point, and fuck thinking deep.

I yelled at Maura, and she put her foot down my throat. Hard. End of story.

"Why do you even care if the damn thing is ruined or not? You're acting like it's some big deal. Crying over spilled milk is for little girls, David. Are you a boy or a girl?" she said. I was acting like. Spilled milk. Shut up.

Ring, the sound of Maura's voice coming from across the room. I choked on her toenail polish. I thought about that for a second, and tried to remember when Maura started wearing that stuff more than once in a while.

Thinking deep is for little girls.

"I'll tell you something that doesn't matter," I said. "This conversation, that's what."

"And now you're just being mean, David," Maura said.

Stop saying my name like that.

I asked her what she wanted me to tell her.

"That some stupid fucking piece of fucking paper isn't more important than me!" Maura took her foot out of my head and put it on the floor.

When you believe you may be treading out of familiar waters, stop and take a quick inventory of the situation. In the event you're unable to locate familiar channels or shallow water, climb onto the nearest piece of buoyant debris, such as a fallen tree or a floating piece of the fuselage's aft-mezzanine section.

"Of course it isn't," I said. "It's just as unimportant as you, Maura."

You've never heard a door slam so hard. Never in your entire life.

Of course, what I *meant* was that it all didn't matter that much. What came out, though, was enough to make Maura forget she was wearing only a long shirt and panties when she stormed out of my apartment and down the fire exit stairs. This time, it was my foot down my throat.

I locked my door and laid awake in bed to the sound of the fire exit alarm and a hundred pissed-off tenants in their boxers and nightgowns out on the sidewalk.

Five o'clock came and brought two more hours of sleep. I didn't hear from Maura the next day. I never even asked her about her nose.

Cherry gave us three days to think about the agreement.

One year minimum, with the possibility of as many as the market value would sustain. The media saturation would be first: print, television, and billboard marketing. Later, radio and television appearances would be utilized to extend our reach and maximize exposure and revenue potential. My book was certain to be a bestseller once the tour started.

That's right, my book. They had already written it for me. For my character.

I'm a puppet.

The book they'd already made for me was going to have my signature alongside "Keep up hope, Billy" at the request of the painfully optimistic mother of a Sanfilippo Syndrome patient.

Most afflicted with Sanfilippo Syndrome don't live past fifteen. A genetic defect lacks them the ability to break down a specific complex sugar. The sugar collects in the brain and kills them over time.

I thought about that in the taxi on the way to the Knight Building. The contract, I mean.

Maura didn't show up at the meeting. If I'd have known why then, I wouldn't have mumbled things about how stupid she was being, and how I wanted my damn shirt back. In the waiting area, I kept looking at the frosted glass doors, hoping Maura would come tripping in at the last second.

Funny, the things you remember sometimes.

When I was in the seventh grade, I got on the wrong school bus going home one day. I didn't realize I'd stepped onto the wrong bus until I looked around at the kids on the bus, and couldn't find anyone I knew. In about the span of five seconds, I went from happy and stupid to scared and aware. Sometimes, it's best not to know what's going on.

If it hadn't been for a girl in the seat across the aisle, I'd have gotten off at the next stop and been *really* screwed. But as soon as I started whipping my head around like a tire swing, she piped up.

"You got on the wrong bus, didn't you?" the red-haired girl said to me. She had to say it twice, through the noise of the other kids, just to get my attention.

She bet me she was right, and after winning that wager, hopped into the seat with me. We talked about stupid things that stupid kids talk about, and before I knew it, I was at her stop. I got off with her and used her phone to call my mother to come get me. I never saw the red-haired girl again after that.

I waited for her to show up in the waiting area outside Cherry's office that morning; I waited for Maura to slink through the doors and ease my mind, just like the red-haired girl when I was a kid. Make me forget how much I didn't want to be there; how uncomfortable the place was. That's why I was really mumbling to myself. Keeping my mind off of the speckled floor tiles—no two are ever alike—and the fake plants in the corner. Magazines with scratched-out address labels. All the crosswords in the newspapers, ruined already. The records of the lost civilization of the 4:30 appointment.

I'm convinced blue plastic chairs are built by engineers trained in inciting scoliosis riots.

Make a list to pass the time. Take your mind away from the situation and go into your comfort zone. Count the panels on the ceiling.

Two hundred fourteen.

Stare at the wall of glass overlooking the city. You wouldn't be caught dead hanging from the roof and washing the other side of it.

The dry, completely inert air makes you yawn. They leave the lamp on the table next to the chairs on all day, even when it's sunny outside, just so your eyes don't get too wet. And you think to yourself, if you have to hear the saxophone soft jazz version of "When a Man Loves a Woman" again, you're going *through* that hundred-square-foot window. Think *suicide jumper*, but without the attention to detail.

It's office Hell, but with the warm slant of a proctologist's office. That's about when Cherry came out and called me into our meeting.

Om I am as calm as the faux parlor palm plant in the corner.

Irony, that plants that are supposed to be good for the environment are copied into

petroleum-based evergreens produced in factories that mainline pollutants into the environment.

I looked at the doors. Still no Maura.

"If it's all the same to you, I'm just going to go," I said. "I'm really not interested, I don't think. It's a generous offer, and all, but it's just not—" I stuttered a lot more than that, trust me, before she cut me off.

"We've barely talked," Cherry assured me. "Come into my office and at least see what we have to offer you. Think about it, at least."

And to think, I was about to turn around and leave when she said that.

I think I pulled a muscle lifting the pen on Cherry's desk. I bit down so hard I thought I had lockjaw. Almost loosened teeth. I say I think I pulled a muscle because I know that pen was heavier than a truck if it was a pillow.

"Don't think so hard about it, David. You're going to enjoy this. This is your golden opportunity here—more than fifteen minutes of fame. You're going to be somebody," said Cherry.

No one will ever forget me, she said.

"Bigger than millionaires and milk and missing beef," assured Cherry.

Maybe that's just what I needed to hear. As soon as I *did*, it hit me. Hard.

When you photograph something in either moving or still film, it takes an increasingly heavier amount of light to make it show up on film properly. The farther back you are, the more light the director of photography and lighting supervisor have to put on you before you'll be lit well. So when you're trying to see everything in one shot, things farther from the camera have to be hit with more light than the things closer in.

Memories are the same way. The longer back you think, the harder things are to remember. Unless it's sprinkled with discomfort or trauma, it's hidden in the background. Without memories, do you exist at all?

It made me try to remember why I was there.

Instead, I thought about why I *could* be there. All of the potential, like snow banks on steep mountainsides.

The world changes when we do.

"You shouldn't worry so much. We're going to take care of you and show you what you'll need to know. The most important thing is image, at all times. If we're going to sell you as somebody, you have to be that somebody." Even as I put the pen to the paper, Cherry was still selling the idea on me.

"I'm still wondering what's keeping me from signing this at all," I said. "All you know is my name. I could walk out of here and there's nothing you could do about it."

I leaned in.

"I could go on and live the rest of my life happily without signing anything."

"Your little doll doesn't know, does she?" asked Cherry.

Confusion, noun.

A state or instance of being confused; without spacial, temporal, or mental reference.

"Jamie didn't see you, but I did," she said calmly.

Fingernails on a blackboard. She saw me kill Mr. Slicked-back. She was a witness to the *miracle*.

You just can't escape the past.

A nondescript black convertible speeds through a red light at an intersection. Its driver pounds furiously on the steering wheel, late for an appointment. Something catches the driver's eye at forty miles per hour through the congested street.

It's Cherry, and she's just seen a large city bus run down a very familiar-looking man.

Funny, for a second, it looked like that man with the newspaper—

Nah. The guy who got hit just tripped and tore the newspaper out of the other guy's hands.

The next day's headlines told Cherry she's going to have a card to send to a funeral. When she saw me at the elevators, she put two and two together.

Now there was someone else who knew.

They had this thing in Italy in the 1500s called a garroting chair. It was a torture chair that had a leather or metal collar and a big screw through the back of the chair. They'd put you in it and slowly turn the screw from behind. Eventually, the screw would bore through the back of your neck. Slowly. You could hear the fat point breaking into your neck right before it punched through your brain stem.

A quarter of a crank at a time.

First, Cherry had me because of the stunt Maura and I pulled in the lobby. Twist. Then she had me because of the mess we made on her carpet. Twist. Then, when the man tripped and pulled the newspaper out of my hands. Twist, twist. I winced in my chair, even without a screw behind me. I was stuck—stuck without my red-headed girl to talk about stupid things that didn't make anything any different, but felt really good to talk about.

If Cherry tells anyone, I'll lose Maura, I said to myself. No more midnight phone calls, no more public pranks, no more anything remotely alive. I go back to being dead. I'll be like everyone else, popping Demerol at 300 milligrams a ride. I don't know what hurts, but Goddamnit, something does, and I'll make sure I know what it is. Handfuls of scored, powdery Endocets and the return to normalcy after drowning in them.

Ketoconazole puts you straight to sleep in under an hour guaranteed. It's better than real sleeping pills. I'll take what I can get, though, I thought, because my doctor friend was starting to come under the wonderful watching eyes of the AMA and the APA. I'd have to find new doctors if I was going to go on a book tour, anyway. No worries, there's one in every city.

"You don't have a choice, David," Cherry said.

"You're right, I don't," I said. If anyone's going to be saved, I thought, this is the only way. If I'm going to save myself, this is the boarding pass. It's all downhill from here.

"I need someone that'll do whatever I tell them." She kept going. "And it doesn't seem, to me, that you're in a ton of position to turn down the offer."

The offer.

I'll be reached by reaching people who come to me for hope.

"David?"

I must have spaced out, because I have no idea how many times she called me. I fell back to the world and agreed to sign the papers because I wanted to, that time. And the great thing was, Cherry knew exactly what she was getting into at that point.

I don't know what the fear of the unknown is called.

There was a single message waiting for me on the machine when I got back to my place. It was the E.R. at Maura's old hospital. Curiosity, panic, fear, like some screwed-up yogurt swirl. It's the end of civilization, I thought.

There is no known cure for Sanfilippo Syndrome.

## nine

So we're standing on this bridge, me and Maura.

She's *screaming* at me, and I'm thinking about tearing her heart out with my teeth. I hate her. I despise her. She's not Maura, she's the antichrist.

Satan, the Devil, Beelzebub.

Belial.

Apollyon. Whatever you want to call it, it's got black hair and steel-blue eyes.

We're standing on this four-lane bridge at the edge of the eye of a hurricane that's actually bigger than the ocean, and we're yelling at each other because we blame each other for being in the middle of the bridge, rather than safe at the other side.

Maura pounds on my shoulder with her fist.

Abaddon.

She wants to get out of the rain. I want to sit on the edge of the bridge and get swallowed up, nail and tooth, by the wall—okay, the *mountain* of a wall of water and mist coming closer and closer in the distance.

More bruises on my shoulder. Fuck you this and screw you that, crushing my arm and my rib cage.

I don't normally hit girls, but I think you just dislocated my shoulder. The prince of Tyrus.

Maura's wet like an oil slick in the rain here, her hair's stuck flat to her head. Our clothes are completely soaked through to our bones, and we're up past our toes in water with the bridge starting to collect the rain. More yelling, like I'm some sort of sponge for her abuse.

We're pretty much beyond pissed at each other, but all we do is hug and hold on tightly as the big, thick wave steamrolls past the bridge. The ocean rising up to absorb the steel-and-concrete blemish. Breathing into each other's shoulders while the wave turns the bridge into gravel.

Makes you wonder whose dream it is.

Everything is a tragedy.

And I mean that in the best way possible.

I don't mean the loss of a family pet, I don't mean passenger train wrecks. I mean loving someone even just a little. Caring about someone you think really loves you back, someone who isn't a false memory. Not the silver linings, the grey clouds.

I always loved Maura's stories. When I could pull them out of her, that is.

When Maura came home from work at her hospital one day, there was tragedy all over the floor of her kitchen. Little bits of puked-up disaster and the warmth of blue-skinned depravity, courtesy of her wasted fuck-bunny Danny. I bet she would have blown him right there on the

kitchen linoleum if she thought he could have kept it up.

SCARE ME.

That's what they tell you.

S—STIMULATE the victim. If you shake him, does he react? If you yell in his ear, does he flinch? Rub his chest, see if he responds.

"Get up, you asshole!" she screamed. "You're fucking up my floor! Get up!"

Nothing. Nada. Less than one, responseless, without reply.

Maura started to panic, but remembered the stuff from her job. With her scrubs and comfort support shoes on, trying to revive Danny, you'd almost think she was still at work. That is, except for the fact that she wouldn't normally have kicked a patient in the ribs to revive him. Well, not all the time, anyway.

C—CALL 9-1-1.

Maura skipped this part. See, most police officers tend to make a note of heroin overdoses in their incident reports, and details like that often cause problems outside of detox. Her panic went from pre-staged, to staged, to full-throttle panicked in the time it took her to tear the elastic rubber strap from around Danny's upper-arm.

A is for AIRWAY. If the victim isn't breathing, clear his airway and make him breathe. Pinch the victim's nose tight—unless you like being sprayed with snot—and tilt his head back to open his airway. You hook your index and middle fingers together inside the victim's mouth to scoop out any obstruction—say, for instance, slimy chunks of vomit—to make sure air can get through. It's called *sweeping*.

Maura swept out gallons of breakfast while trying to keep her hair out of her eyes. Think about her hair sticking to her face from sweat and Danny's half-digested Lucky Charms.

R—RESCUE BREATHING. Breathe twice hard and count calmly. One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, three-one-thousand. When you get to five, give two more firm breaths.

I thought about how it tasted in her mouth while she told the story. That sour gastric smell like you've been eating melted rubber and raw sewage out of someone's intestines. Nobody in a business meeting knows what love is, she thought. This is love, Goddamnit. This is having a deep relationship, being capable of devotion. I love *you*, and you're gonna love *me* when I revive you.

E is for EVALUATION. Has your brave and valiant work done any good at all? Check the victim's chest and fingernails. If you're lucky, his chest is moving up and down on its own, and his nails aren't blue. Lips and gums, too. If they're not blue, pat yourself on the back and pretend you haven't wasted your entire life on snack foods and fifteen-percent gratuities.

If not, remember that M is for MUSCULAR INJECTION.

A drug called *Narcan* is used like an antidote to temporarily reverse some of the effects of opiate overdoses. As long as you can keep the O.D.'er breathing long enough, he'll probably come through the tunnel just fine. Narcan is what's called a *competitive narcotic*—that is, it reverses respiratory and central nervous system depression caused by drugs such as heroin, methadone, and Darvon. In fact, if you administer too much, you can actually trigger withdrawal symptoms.

She came crashing back into the kitchen, syringe and vial in hand, after tearing the bathroom mirror from the wall searching for them. Bits of mirror on the floor around the sink. Seven thousand years of bad luck.

You're supposed to give the injection in a large mass of muscle, like the shoulder. You also can't have any air bubbles in the syringe when you push the plunger, so you have to be very

careful when drawing the chamber full. That's why you see doctors on television hold them up and tap them before squeezing them just enough to make the needle jizz into the air a little.

Pat the veined area to swell the veins, insert needle carefully. Don't penetrate to the other side. Or, in Maura's situation, turn him over, jam it into his ass, and push hard on the plunger.

In three to five minutes, the victim should regain consciousness, or at least start breathing normally again. Imagine a couple of diluted milligrams of salvation streaming through Danny as quickly as it could, and more rescue breathing from Maura after rolling him over on his back again.

E is for EVALUATION.

Your O.D.'er is breathing on his own again, despite being a little tachycardic. Monitor the heart rate until the ambulance arrives. Hope it doesn't become too erratic, because if it does, there isn't much you can do about it, short of a small supply of lidocaine.

All Maura could do was cry her stupid little head off on the kitchen floor, while Danny laid there shivering and clammy. She collapsed on top of his chest, sobbing and cursing him for not getting it over with. Not dying. Not leaving her. Not pushing a bigger needle and locking his heart down like a prison riot.

He got to live one more time, and she died again to make it happen.

Fair enough, I guess.

Now, Narcan tends to induce vomiting—in Danny's case, *more* vomiting—so Maura struggled with her entire being to get him on his side when he started convulsing.

Imagine the thin, murky fluid of an empty stomach coming up onto the flower-pattered kitchen floor, burning Danny's throat all the way up. Dousing his esophageal tract with acid, and filling the room with that smell that pokes through your nostrils with ten-penny nails.

"Fuck you, Danny!" she screamed.

For not handling your high.

For fucking up my kitchen floor.

"Shut up—"

Gasp, shake, tremor.

"You stupid bitch," Danny mumbled and stuttered back. He could barely talk, and that was what he chose to say. Shivering on the cold linoleum.

Fuck you for not dying, she thought.

For everything.

Induce vomiting. Induce cascading waves of love. Induce devotion, adoration, made-for-T.V. movies.

Induce the wonderful pain of being born again on the dirty floor of someone's kitchen.

They never tell you anything over the phone.

It reminds me of upper-management zombies firing people on Fridays and holidays. As if everything is perfectly okay in the world, as long as they're not in the office when it happens. No conflict. Separated by letter or phone, no danger to anyone.

Sterile, non-threatening public service announcements baked in buckets of starch.

"Hi, I'm trying to get in touch with David Preacher. This is the emergency room at— Maura Spring listed you as a contact— There's been an incident—" Maybe the voice said incident. Maybe she said *emergency* or *accident*. *Nuclear meltdown*. *Extinction-level collision event*.

Panic, adjective.

Of, relating to, or resulting from sudden, overwhelming terror.

Think “panic attack”, but without the clarity of direction.

They don’t tell you how it’s really only the shooters and hangers who are actually serious. Not crying for help. Those people don’t turn chickenshit and get talked down. Click, squeeze the trigger, kick the chair over, cut to black. Druggers take whatever they have—Depronal, Valium, Nembutal, whatever—hoping they’ll fall gently asleep and never wake up. They tend to think it’ll go well with red wine or something else equally poetic, but they usually just end up puking all over the place and living with a gastrointestinal feeding tube in their belly for the rest of their lives. You gotta down a lot of depressants to make it quick and easy, and most drugs—they always think mixing pills will make it so much better—don’t hit you at the same time. Some smarter druggers even take antihistamines to ease the vomiting.

Jumpers, all they’re doing is looking for attention. Whining for someone to save them at the last second. Most humans can survive a five-story fall onto concrete, most jumpers don’t know that. Even if they had the balls to jump, they’d just make a funny sound before the rescue workers got to them. Never mind that it’s almost impossible to kill yourself in a wheelchair. The same goes for those people who lock themselves in their garages with the car running. If they were really serious, they’d be somewhere their family wouldn’t stumble in on them.

Slashers are split into two groups. Most slashers are really just scratching their arms up, horizontal cuts across their wrists. This never works. It’s indescribably painful, and unlike the movies, there isn’t some blood geyser waiting for you three millimeters under the skin. All it takes is some applied pressure to stop the bleeding, and that’s no fun.

Don’t even think about your neck, either. The carotid artery that comes out of your heart and splits off into the side of your neck is protected on one side by your windpipe. It takes some serious will power and a deep blade to sever this thing successfully. Serious slashers razor the entire length of their arms instead, taking as many veins and arteries with them as possible. It’s next to impossible to stop an arm from bleeding once it’s split wide open like that.

Occasionally, a shooter will leave “hesitation marks” in the wall behind him, where he jerked the gun up at the last second before firing. May as well be a druggie. Most of those can’t even put the pills in their hands.

Maura was in restraints in her bed when I got to the hospital. I stood in the doorway while she slept—or was out cold, whatever—and talked to the attending on the floor that night. He told me how Maura’s neighbor called for help after stepping into a stream of water running out of Maura’s apartment. How the door was cracked slightly, and when her neighbor opened it, he could see the water pouring out of the bathroom in the near hallway.

The average person can lose five pints of blood before they bleed to death.

The EMTs found Maura in a blue house dress, submerged in a bathtub of warm, bloody water. They found the steak knife at the bottom, next to her waist, and a long gash lengthwise down her left arm. I thought about how much a cut like that must have hurt.

They call dark red blood *venous blood*.

Pretty purple lips obscured by a garden of hair drifting around her head under the surface, fingernails colored to match. Jagged, serrated forearm skin leaking like an oil tanker off the coast of some habitat for endangered marine life.

A bathroom full of tragedy, spilling into the hallway outside.

Maura looked completely helpless and frail in the bandage wrapping around her arm. Looked, shit, she was helpless, locked to the bed with those thick leather straps around her arms.

"It's really quite the miracle she survived at all," the doctor told me. I wouldn't have called it a *miracle*. Unfortunate accident, maybe. I thought Maura was rather unlucky in that respect, actually. Imagine being forced to think about it every time you looked down at your arm, or every time your scar itched in the rain or heat.

I tangled my fingers around her neck and shook her. Really shook her hard, like my worst enemy's mother.

Die, I screamed.

You should be dead, I told her. I cursed her for not finishing the job, not leaving me, not throwing me away like everything else before me. You're just killing yourself, I said, and you can't even do that right.

You wanted to die, that makes you happy, I'll help you. I'll do it for you, Goddamnit. My fingernails started gathering flakes of skin scraped off her neck.

I'll give you violence, if that's what you want. I'll give you self-destruction. I'll give you *love* and *devotion* right through your windpipe. She looked at me blankly and let out thin threads of breathless gasps and creaks as I tightened my grip on her throat.

The *world* flashed this time, and I was standing in the doorway with the doctor again while Maura slept quietly.

"It's hospital policy to monitor all suicidal patients for at least forty-eight hours. You're welcome to stay as long as you like, but she's going to be moved to Psych in just a little bit. They may or may not let you see her after they admit her," he told me. "Probably won't."

I stared at the sheet covering Maura's belly going up and down as she breathed.

"Your girlfriend is pretty screwed-up," the guy went on. "Ultimately, it's up to her to get some help, but I'll give you a list of doctors with this hospital that can help her, or help you help her, whichever."

I didn't tell him I wasn't planning on staying there long enough to get his list.

"So, why'd she do it? Any idea?" Kamikaze pilots don't have those kinds of nerves.

Cut to: The tiled floor of Maura's flooded bathroom, and up the side of the bathtub.

The water poured over the lip, Maura floated under the surface, and a small pine box watched over the whole scene from the flat corner of the tub.

Many people clean their houses when they're angry or depressed. Jump back to Maura straightening up some boxes in her closet and finding a small pine box in one of the mislabeled ones. A tiny, wooden keepsake box. Any other time, the box would have gone up on a shelf or a mantle or something. But when you're upset, you do stupid things, things you normally wouldn't do.

The piece of a person inside the box told Maura she loved her. The elegant handwriting on the aged, yellowed paper.

Trigger tears.

Waves of joy that hurt like a jackhammer on your chest.

Trigger shaking hands.

Cascades of chemicals in the emotional centers of the brain.

Trigger a four-hour uncontrolled descent to the bottom. Rain falling on her head. Dark rooms and close quarters.

There was that dress they found her in that was like one her mother wore all the time. Maybe it was once her mother's, but she couldn't remember. There was the hairband in her hair, that was her mother's, too.

You get the point. Deja vu, screaming at the top of its lungs as Maura's filled with bloody

water.

“Where’s your doll?” Cherry asked.

I told her she was in the hospital. I didn’t tell her why.

“She’s still signing, right?”

Yes, she was, I assured her.

They covered the bullet points at the first meeting. The flagged info items.

Trained me to remember my life, the one they wrote for me and sent through Standards and Practices. Quality-assured, fact-checked life experiences. You don’t need your own memories when someone else is writing them for you.

Cherry’s team covered my philosophy. My checkout-aisle statement of purpose. There were three basic principles by which to live your life, according to the new me:

One, always remember you’re an important part of the world.

Two, remember that the light of the world is inside you, and with it, the key to universal happiness and love.

Three, the world is yours to change with your light.

The light inside you. That changes the world. Things this sugary and sweet give me big, fat cavities. It’s the same kind of stuff you hear chanted over and over by people who think they can talk to their dead grandmothers.

Learning your past is interesting. Being taught your past is fascinating.

Where was I born?

“Never answer that one.”

“Don’t ignore the question, but don’t reveal anything that points to anything. You’re mysterious and always seem to know more than you’re telling.”

I’m *mysterious*.

What was my childhood like?

“The orphanage—”

The orphanage.

“Was a lifelong struggle until you were in your late teens, but you persevered through it with the help of God and a sense of purpose and direction in your future life ahead.”

What does my message mean to me?

“Hope.”

“Love and understanding.”

“A sense of being and purpose in the world.”

What influence did my mother have on me as a child?

Oh, yeah, I forgot. The orphanage thing.

What do I believe my ultimate purpose in the world is?

“Giving hope to those who don’t have any of their own to give.”

This went on for weeks. Every day, I learned a little more about myself. Every night, I sat on the bus and hoped I’d get nailed from behind by a runaway tractor trailer. Broken glass and twisted steel collapsing and exploding everywhere from all directions. It’d be better than sex, even.

It went on for weeks, and I didn’t try to stop it.

Maura hadn’t gone back to her apartment since her suicide attempt. She was staying with me by then. We barely talked anymore. We were no more than thirty feet away at any given point in the day, and we were more apart than before.

I got to enjoy going to my training, I guess.

“Where were you born?”

I was adopted, so I’m not really certain about that. Being adopted has given me, I think, a good outlook— An insight into— A deep understanding of what it means to *belong* to something.

“What was your childhood like?”

The orphanage was a lifelong struggle, blah, blah.

“What does your message mean to you?”

My message fills me with *hope* and *love*. I’m given *purpose* and *strength* by it.

Don’t ask me about my mother.

## ten

I've never been so happy.

"I'll teach you," I tell her.

She's running behind me as fast as she can.

"Don't be afraid, Maura," I yell over my shoulder. "Don't close your eyes, or anything, just take my hand."

She flinches for a second as she drops her hand into mine. I tell her to keep running—to keep running as fast as she can as the sidewalk starts crumbling away beneath us. If we can fly, we can't be hurt, I tell her.

The end of the world is here. It's epic, like nothing anyone's ever seen.

Her hand falls into mine, and she falls *up*.

As long as we believe we can fly, we will.

The grass is falling into the same black crevasse as the sidewalk. Streetlights bend and explode all around us in some sort of D-Day fireworks exercise. Sparks and halos of light everywhere, cutting through the night. Buildings collapse into blackness.

We're flying away as fast as we can, high over everything that's left for however long it's still there—however long the world can hold on—and I've never been so happy.

And all I want to do is fall.

In San Francisco, I waited for the doors to open and the people to flood in, looking for my signature on the flap of some book written by six different people who weren't me.

In San Francisco, Maura was talking to me again.

It was no coincidence that people showed up. Welcome to the plan in full-motion action.

For example, they pass out bumper stickers in heavily populated malls. You see them coming sometimes, because they're wearing the t-shirt, too. Flyers and more stickers get stuck under windshield wipers in parking lots. Free literature, more stickers. T-shirt freebie packages.

"Street teams", they're called.

It's guerilla marketing. With all of the major media markets covered, you get *total market saturation*. Usually, street teams are made of volunteers. Fans and stuff. When you're looking to create fans, though, it doesn't hurt to build a street team. Hired fan bases.

The street teams did their thing right up until San Francisco. Actually, they never really stopped. There's a reason they call it a marketing *machine*.

In San Francisco, I got ready for Los Angeles.

In Los Angeles, I was a best-seller.

So, the gun, yeah.

Guns are beautiful things. They're raw and perfect. They're designed for one thing, and

they do just that.

They don't take "me" days. They don't leave their wife and two children for another woman. They don't break promises, and they don't max out their credit cards on premium imported crap.

It's so much easier to kill someone with a gun, because it doesn't feel like a part of you doing the killing. With a knife or a pipe or something, you get dirty. You're actually doing something, not just watching from fifteen feet away as someone's face goes all bloody and splattery.

Sometimes, I just get ahead of myself, I guess. I wished I'd had a gun then, right there sitting behind the Designated Signing Table.

In San Francisco, the doors opened and the line of people crept in, like they'd camped out for some big-budget sci-fi movie. I fed them my scribbly ink marks, and they lapped it up like thirsty puppies.

Smile, yes I'm sure things will work out for you and your wife. I hope my book helps guide you, whatever.

Smile, big teeth, now.

I'll pray for your daughter, Ma'am, of course. Every little bit helps!

We're all in this world together!

Smile!

They stood in the hot sun outside for hours, for me. For the signature of some guy they'd only get to say three sentences to, and one of them would be, "I can't wait to read your book."

By Austin, it was how much my book had changed their lives.

Crowds and single-file lines of soccer moms and Gap-clad family men, the total opposite of the people who wrote the damn thing, they lined up for hours on end for the numbered limited edition of twenty-five thousand with the silver cover and the personal message to them from the author. They baked in summer heat just to put me on their shelves.

The smell of hairspray cooking in the mid-morning sun.

Sun visors and lawn chairs.

The smell of rotisserie perfume basting sauce.

Two-dollar bottles of water to cool it all down.

The smell of desperation is SPF thirty-five.

I expected an execution-themed hotel in Houston for some reason.

Couldn't imagine why.

Check-in is always after twelve, so it pays off not to be able to sleep.

And if you've seen one hotel, you've seen them all. After the sixth or seventh one, you don't even bother looking around at all the potted plants and gold-and-marble-trimmed lobby fountains. Like watercolor paints, they all run together in one big, sloppy puddle.

At one, you're still going over the briefing packet for the next day's signing event.

Cold and clammy eyelids.

Sweaty fingers and armpits.

In the hotel in Houston, Maura watched the hallway while I let a nicely chilled bottle of red wine go down the laundry chute.

"You know, they're just going to get washed anyway," she said.

We drew chalk outlines in the street at night in Topeka, and blocked off the area with caution tape.

"Don't make this seem like more than it is," Maura said.

"Shut up and keep still," I told her. She kept squirming, and it was making it hard to get a good outline of her body on the road.

"I'm just saying, don't make this into some sort of message or some bullshit. People die for a reason, you know.

"Even people who don't exist," she finished. I'm sure she meant the outlines.

"People don't die for reasons," I said. "Accept that and move on. Otherwise, you're still only just pretending things don't make any difference."

She said,

She said to me, "You're saying I don't believe that? What are you saying?"

I ran my finger over her lips and showed it to her.

"Lipstick? What the fuck is this for? Does buying this and putting it on make you a better person?"

Never mind that she didn't *buy* it.

I said, "I don't know what you believe."

She sat up right as I finished the last chalk outline.

"Every time I get where I really like you, you go and fuck it all up. You're a real winner, you know that, David?" Maura stood up and walked off toward the side of the highway.

You have to either stop caring about things, or end up being fucked by them again and again, I told her. If you can't accept the fact that the universe doesn't give a shit about you, why are you still alive?

Accept that you're doomed to fate.

Accept that the universe is slowly cooling down and will die alone.

Accept that the universe is not something you can control.

You cannot change fate. You do not have this power. You are, in a word, inconsequential.

It's the tragedy and the silver lining.

All of this noise in my head and the conversation, I'll never know how much of it actually came out of my mouth.

"Police these days don't use chalk because it comes off too easily. They use masking tape because it doesn't fade away with rain and foot traffic," I said.

"We should do anything we want, anything that's remotely interesting, because in the end, it's all going to shit. There aren't any reasons or points or big, giant plans. People don't die for a reason, they die because it's going to happen. You can only be but so important."

"You're such an asshole," she said through her whimpers.

"Let go, Maura. It isn't going to get better, because there's no *good*, and there's no *bad*."

"But—"

Walls came down in Topeka.

"I keep hoping things will get better," she cried. "I keep hoping it won't hurt like this forever."

Fuck subjectivity, I guess. Maura was a light switch, back and forth, off and on, yes and no, things matter, things don't matter, blah blah blah. It got really annoying sometimes.

I stared her down and said, "If you let go, it won't hurt anymore."

Give up and be saved.

Because there's no good or bad, just doomed and saved.

Hope, I said to her, hope is something you have to let go to make room for more important things.

Understanding.

Inner peace.

Love, yeah, if you're into that sort of thing.

Illumination.

Edification.

This is cosmic dissonance, and you're a part of it, I said. Nothing makes sense, nothing agrees, nothing lives forever.

We're both dying, just like our fake murder victims on the street died, just like train wreck passengers die.

Just like prisoners executed by the state die.

Here's your sense of inner peace.

Just like your mother died, I said.

Accept it and nothing, not even yourself, can hurt you.

You have to discard what you believe to make room for the truth.

Self-affirming karma.

Finely tuned chi.

Paint-by-the-numbers feng shui.

Affirmations of faith and devotion.

Garbage-disposal it all. Make room for the knowledge that it's not the insignificant things that don't matter, it's *everything* that doesn't matter.

"Are you saying you don't love me, David?" Sniffle.

No, I'm saying that if I didn't, it wouldn't matter. I told her to close her eyes.

"Go ahead, close them."

They shivered and shuddered, but Maura closed them.

I said, "Imagine everything you can see is the whole world, the entire universe. What does it look like?"

Well, nothing, of course.

"Good, that's all there is, then. I'm not real, the highway isn't real, maybe nothing's real," I told her.

If you can't see it, it may as well not exist.

The Sunday afternoon solipsism value pack.

"You can't even prove anything exists at all, because once you close your eyes, it's all gone. You look away, and it's not there anymore. Memories of your childhood, recollections of old lovers, there's no way to know what's real and what isn't, anymore." I talked like I could prove *she* existed.

Every time I stopped for punctuation, I clapped my hands together.

Accept.

Your.

Place.

In.

The.

Universe.

Sniffle.

Maura shook a little bit and said, "So where does that leave us?"

"Right here, in one single moment, with no before and no after," I said back. "The world ends when you do, Maura. I can't save you if you won't let me.

"I'm just trying to help."

I went back to tying the caution tape across the highway as Maura collapsed and sat limp on the grass.

In Salt Lake City, there was the surprise escape of several endangered cotton-top tamarins from the Hogle Zoo.

The biggest line yet was in Salt Lake. It was more like a roadblock of people rather than a line, really. A woman who showed up had me sign her interstate-mega-jackpot lottery ticket instead of her copy of my book.

"Bring me luck!" she said.

Lottery tickets. Hope, at a dollar a play. But I guess that's why I was there. Because of the hope, I mean.

Maura and I had come up with a new game by then. Well, not so much a *game*, as an experiment in instructional cacophony.

We played it in every city.

I'd be signing some first edition—by Albuquerque, we were in our second printing—for some woman, and suddenly I'd feel a tap on my knee.

"I won't sign your book, Ma'am," I'd say.

But she came all this way—

"I'm going to give you a better gift. I want you to take this book and give it away when you leave here. Each day, you're going to wake up and give up one thing in your life that you can't live without. It could be bridge with your friends, it could be your coffee table, it could be your split-level house. But you're going to give it up.

"Don't stop until you feel like you're a better person. If you feel waves of joy and enlightenment, you haven't given up enough," I said.

I should be a motivational speaker.

Look at me, I'm inspirational!

I'm the answer to the question everyone's asking.

A little enlightened magic eight-ball.

I'm anti-corporate dogma in a convenient leather carrying case.

I'm shrink-wrapped independent thoughts and ideals.

Look at me, I'm the answer to the world's problems.

"You are not going to eat for a week. Starve yourself." He just stared at me, expressionless, waiting for my next word. This was the guy in Fort Worth, with the five-gallon hat.

Cherry pulled Maura aside after she heard that.

"You'd better tell your boyfriend to stop this shit," Cherry said. "Or there won't be any more cities or bookstores to visit. I have every talk show on the planet on their knees and ready to swallow every sticky little drop of his, just to book him.

"But only if he doesn't screw it up. If he fucks this up, I'll make sure he's fuckin' beyond ruined. I'm talking Stonehenge, here. There won't be anything left of him left standing when I get done with him. And the same goes for you, so at least think about saving *your* ass." Cherry made no bones, ran around no bushes.

The world was simply waiting for her instruction.

"I don't control him," Maura said.

They looked back at me.

"At the end of this chosen week, you will be a better person. You will know what children in third-world countries go through every minute of every day. You will thank trade embar-

goes and greedy capitalist corporations for starving entire mud-hole countries to death, because you will have learned to appreciate the suffering of others.”

“Start. No more second chances,” Cherry sneered back.

“I can try,” he said to me in that Texan Judeo-Christian drawl.

“Trying isn’t good enough. Make it happen,” I replied.

You can do it. You have it inside you.

The light, I mean.

That changes the world.

I’m unfiltered clarity of sight.

That changes the world.

“You are going to feel better about your life if you do this right,” I said to him.

“Life,” as Maura would say, “is God waiting for you to redeem yourself.”

I’ve heard that somewhere before.

*Coping With The Shadow* was a support group for people afflicted with terminal brain cancer.

It was in Nashville.

The group closed without an announcement, just a flyer posted on a bulletin board in the basement of Saint Augustine’s.

It’s gone.

And no one remembered it.

The group had never been there. No one ever came to meet there, no one stopped showing up after their cancer cells metastasized and smothered their brain stem.

Maura and I closed it without it ever opening in the first place.

But people started remembering it, and lobbied for the church to sponsor it again, and they did, and it came back.

Makes you wonder what memories are true, if any at all.

*Learning To Live* met twice a week for ten years. Amputees met there to discuss their injuries and support each other in times of pain.

It never really existed, either. The people at Saint Matthias’ didn’t have a clue.

All in all, twenty support groups no one had ever heard of closed that week. Every single one of them came back from the dead. Clergy members apologized sincerely for the rash of sudden closures.

These people, they had nowhere to go, and suddenly needed to go somewhere.

Oklahoma City, Greensboro, Atlanta.

Washington, D.C.

Baltimore.

Groups closed in every city after Nashville, and all the cities just slurred together, like some stroke victim’s speech that’s been fucked up by a lack of blood to their frontal lobe.

Boston.

Hartford.

You visit a lot of cities when you’re being chased by a giant marketing ogre.

In any given major metropolitan city, there are any number of state-run hospitals. Most of the time, they’re overrun, crowded, and chaotic. Those are the ones you look for.

You visit a lot of cities, and you’ll eventually find the right one.

You look for the ones with overflowing ambulance bays. Med students running around with their heads up their asses.

You look for nursing stations that are piled high with charts and history folders.

Go on crowded nights—major holidays are the best times—and never leave through the same place you came in.

We're all invisible.

As long as you don't pass the same place over and over, you go pretty much unnoticed. A set of scrubs helps. Ditto any other accessories you can cop from a laundry room or doctor's lounge. Some larger E.R.s keep spare stethoscopes in trauma rooms or equipment closets.

You're from Radiology if no one recognizes you.

Or you're a med student from OB.

Let me tell you something about cycles.

The med lockers are always locked, sealed in glass. Anything that's worthwhile is inside.

Haldols. The tablet Tylenols with codeine in them.

A ten-dollar glass cutter gets through the thin glass without flinching. Some hospitals use that chickenwire glass stuff, where they sandwich wire between two thin panes of glass. Unless you're brave enough to carry wire cutters, just keep moving.

If you have the balls to throw the fire alarm—

Hello, Maura—

You can just take a pry bar with you under a lab coat and break the lock.

This is how I fed the monkey.

I mean, I got whatever I needed from Cherry's doctor, a nice man indeed, but the point of this was the rush. Dirty, sick, and wrong. Maura even followed me, usually.

It needed to feel bad to feel good.

If you can feel worse than you did before, feeling like you did before feels pretty good. If you can't get to zero, move the zero mark.

She'd stand outside and wait, ready to run as soon as the warden found out there was an escape and the search lights went up and the guards started firing from their towers.

In another lesson of the universe, nothing lasts forever.

In Baltimore, Maura tossed her cigarette on the ground and we left without anyone noticing.

"Since when did you smoke?" I asked.

"I thought I might want to try cancer for a change," she said.

Fair enough.

"And you think that'll get you somewhere?"

"Better than doing nothing," I heard back.

Fair enough.

"You know, sometimes, you really impress me," I said. Kiss.

"Whatever. I hope your pills make you happy, David," Maura replied.

A beat.

"I wish I could."

Could what?

"Make you happy."

But I just kissed you.

"A kiss isn't happiness. A kiss is just sex you can have in public, or at Christmas dinner with your family. A kiss is meaningless unless you love the person." Cavities in my back teeth.

So now, what, I need love, too?

I guess I did, yeah.

Fair enough.

## eleven

Modern passenger trains don't use steam engines.

They travel on powered cable lines from station to station. It's cheaper and more reliable than burning coal to heat a boiler in the end for a variety of reasons.

Each wire's current is ninety degrees to the frequency of its neighbor, so the train gets a steady push of electricity all the way down.

They're called *phases*.

They run over and along the tracks with the train.

But this train, this is billowing the thickest, blackest smoke you've ever seen from its engine stack.

It's a fifteen-car monster pushing gravel down the tracks.

Trees sway as it crashes along the mountainside.

Mountains tremble.

Even for coal, this train is powerful. I think, maybe something's wrong.

Maura looks at me complacently as I stare at the scenery flashing by outside the car. There's no one else in this car.

I think, maybe we shouldn't be here.

Time is a vector based on velocity and distance traveled. You cannot move through space in any direction without simultaneously moving through time, and any movement at all—any change in relative position—implies velocity.

FLICKER.

A shot of daylight through lines of western red cedar trees hundreds of feet deep.

SHUTTER.

Like a camera going off. Twenty-four frames per second.

We're ripping past forests, so we must be moving, therefore time must be passing.

But it isn't.

There aren't any clocks near us, but we can *feel* time not moving.

I think, maybe something's wrong.

In Seattle, we sat high up on the Yesler Overpass and rained handfuls of glass marbles down on the cars below.

I tried not to say much after Topeka. I knew Maura's track record, of throwing people away, and I wasn't about to be part of it.

And really, I wasn't sure if she wanted me to be part of it. First, it's about what didn't matter. Then, love. Somewhere, Cupid was kissing the barrel and splattering bits of his skull everywhere. Everything's changing, even if it's for the worst, I thought.

The planets are falling out of alignment.  
Galaxies and superclusters are colliding.  
Things are breaking down all around us.  
Nothing is perfect, and even if it were, I wouldn't want any part of it.  
Consider me a fan of imperfection. The knicks and cuts in the wood.  
I *am* the B-minus.

I don't care how little sleep you're used to, when you take a red-eye flight clear across the country, you want to flush your head in the chemical toilet the second they tell you to exit the cabin.

You wish you'd blown the emergency exit door upon final descent and exited calmly with your carry-on in hand.

We came into at LaGuardia at six in the morning.

We were back in New York again, and I could barely see straight after the taxi to the runway. Drowning in a mess of CNS stimulants wasn't helping, but it was all I could do to keep from tipping right into a coma. We did seven cities in seven days right before that, and I got all of zero hours of sleep from beginning to end. I was setting records left and right.

I'm the *Guinness Book*.

We did seven cities.

Tacoma, Chicago, Boise.

In and out, like a John and his escort.

Kansas City, Jacksonville.

Seven days, seven thousand milligrams. Welcome to St. Louis. New Orleans.

Up until then, all Cherry really had me doing was signing books. I didn't need to do anything beyond that, other than spit out a few facts about my fake life to keep things moving if I got in a conversation with a fan, just long enough to move the subject somewhere else.

What do you plan to do with your life?

How do you deal with the loss of your mother now that she's gone?

But I kept changing the story each time someone asked me something.

Every time I woke up, I was a new person.

You're always someone different—well, you could be, every time you get out of bed. You can do anything you want. I'm not fake, reality is.

And it's what I tell it to be.

And it doesn't make any sense at all.

And it's a figment of my imagination.

And I can't control any of it.

So, the gun.

How I got the gun isn't anything special.

I took it off the sleeping guard in the bank lobby that day. Right after I walked in to close my account.

I didn't need Cherry's money. I didn't *want* Cherry's money. A liar's revenue.

"Sir, you don't have an account here," the teller said.

Of course I do.

I don't?

I must be in the wrong bank.

Maybe she didn't say any of those polite things to me when I left, I thought.

Maybe I didn't leave quietly or catch my duffel bag on the way in.

You begin to lose the ability to preserve memories after long periods of sleeplessness.

Maybe my past changed when I wasn't looking.

If I try to remember—

If I think hard enough—

I killed the teller. I shot her twice in the face.

The guard, too. Here's your greedy capitalist dogma, the searing bullet hole in your cheek.

It's called a *psychotic break*.

Oh God.

Jesus Christ.

Mother fucker.

Oh God.

He just shot her.

Oh my God.

She's dead.

Help. Fuck.

They're both dead.

Oh God.

The lives of everyone were changed in the second it took for the chamber to spin and send the bullet out of the end of the barrel.

Oh God. Blood.

Her face.

His face.

Oh. God.

It's called a psychotic break, and it's unstoppable.

It's not a slide, it's a trap door.

Their faces exploded into my sleeve when I pulled the trigger, and I'd written their obituaries in the span of five minutes. I got a little closer to zero then, too. They were reborn, and so was I.

They didn't get chances for redemption or salvation—they were saved in death, not life. Everything they had accomplished in their lives and all the difference it made when I pulled the trigger left a dark stain on the wall behind them. See, there's nothing after death.

Because there isn't anything before it.

I put the gun in my duffel bag and ran out into the street. Across it, through traffic, and tumbling over the hood of some beefed-up dick-extension muscle car.

It takes eighty pounds of pressure per square inch to break bone. I broke three.

Left wrist and two ribs, I didn't even feel them snap. Everything's water, and it's drowning me out.

Nose got shattered, too. I felt that one.

And now,

And now, nothing's real anymore.

I must be sleeping through reality.

A constant half-conscious daze cluttered with a thousand milligrams of—

Insert any drug you like here. Oxycodone to help you relax; methylphenidate to get you sharp again; a thin, bell-haired twig of a girl to wash it all down the side of your stomach. Toss in some Lanoxin to help steady your heart rate when you take too many stimulants. Because

you will, because you can't stop yourself. You do not have the power to say *when*.

And it wasn't important. Up until then, all I did was sign books. That day, I had a television appearance to make. A *media event*.

Foreshadow, verb.

To present an indication or a suggestion of beforehand; presage.

Imagine me and my blood-splattered jacket running clear across the city to the T.V. studio. Running like I was being chased by—

Demons?

Shadows?

Memories?

You are what you eat. And right then, I was eating shovelfuls of coal.

Imagine me billowing black smoke down Seventh Avenue.

Cherry slammed the door of the hotel room behind Maura.

"Enjoy your last thirty seconds of fame and fortune, honey," she said, "because this time, David's endangered not only a brand we're getting closer and closer to firmly establishing, here, but my entire firm. Everyone's fucked, honey."

I heard a woman in Raleigh strapped a bomb to her chest and cleaned out an abortion clinic on an overcast Friday morning. Not that I had anything to do with that.

Cherry went on, "Can I control this? I don't know. Spin and damage control is one thing, but this, this isn't bad. Fucking stupid is what it is."

"What are you talking about?" Maura asked.

I told the woman to discard one belief that was set in stone. She chose to throw out the belief that all life is sacred, and let take over the impulse to punish those who she believed were evil. She became, for one happy, enlightened moment, she became God.

Cherry told Maura what she knew, that I told the nice lady with the recycled-fiber shopping bag and hemp skirt and shoes to kill a bunch of people.

Cherry told Maura *everything* after that.

About Mr. Slicked-back.

About the deal, why I was really doing everything she asked.

"And the best part, nobody has a clue where he is," Cherry said. "We've been here two days, and nobody has even talked to him."

"I talked to him last night." What a liar, covering for me like that. Useless.

It's hard to cover for someone when you're trying your hardest not to cry.

Cherry's advance team was already at the studio. She was supposed to pick me and Maura up at the hotel and meet them there.

There's the pre-taping meet with the host during makeup and the audience warm-up. Typically, it's a producer or stage manager doing the warm-up. Sometimes, it might be a comedian or even the host himself, if you're really, really lucky.

If there's anything else you want to talk about before the taping, that's the time to bring it up. Otherwise, stick to the cards the host has on his desk. Prearranged spontaneity.

"So, how, just exactly, do you know all of this stuff?" Maura asked through her salt-water cheeks. Her head bounced up and down like some shaken car wreck victim. Family splattered on the bent safety glass. Crushed rear-facing infant seat.

Sniffle.

"What, did he *tell* you, Cherry? Confessed his sins to you? You know, because you're such

a fucking confidant of his.” Sneering, almost, through waterfalls.

“He hates you, you know that?” Maura said.

Maura went on.

“And now that we’re here, I think you’re a total bitch, too. You never cared about David, and every time—”

She called her *doll*—

“I want to beat the shit out of you. You’re so fake, and you don’t even know it.”

This is the part where Cherry told her how if she didn’t want to be called a doll, she shouldn’t act like one all the time.

Insert magnanimous restraint.

It was like Cherry came down from her Kingdom and spared Maura. She became the avatar of omniscience. A psalm of absolution. Cherry didn’t rip the hair from Maura’s head, opting instead for ditching the twist in the hotel room on her way to the studio.

Maura wanted to do something. Anything.

She *wanted* to make packing materials out of Cherry.

“I think little girls who don’t know how to dress like grown-ups and can’t even kill themselves right should know when they aren’t wanted and keep their little-girl mouths shut, that’s what I think,” said Cherry.

She *wanted* to do terrible things to her, hurt her, but instead collapsed on the hotel room bed and cried harder as Cherry slammed the door and left. Maura might have stayed right there on the bed, and that’s what a sane person would have done, but this was Maura, and her best moment was when she was taken apart.

Deconstruction in a room of frost.

## twelve

I think, maybe something's wrong.

We pass through a tunnel that isn't so much a tunnel, but nightfall, and the temperature in the passenger car drops hard.

I wonder how much we're supposed to notice.

Clouds of breath fall out of my mouth, and Maura's devilish smile is sullen. Nothing's moving; we're in a world of perpetual stasis.

The train feels less powerful, somehow, for reasons I can't describe.

It, like everything else before, just feels different—has a different taste to it. Surrealistic and eerily empty.

The lamps in our car begin oscillating slowly as we clear the trees and suddenly can see for miles and miles outside the windows. Everything out there, now, is an infinitely dark-blue ocean reflecting moonlight through gentle harbor fog. It's the kind of darkness that's more soft than it is dark; the kind of darkness that makes you shiver because you can see things around you, but only what glows in the plush moonlight above the water.

Even though we can't see them, we know the tracks have become nothing more than old, rusted steel pipes held up by rickety chopsticks for supports. They splinter up from the waves hundreds of feet below and sway back and forth underneath us.

Toothpick shadows on the water.

The tracks curve down, way down, and we're tossed on the floor as the train dips with them. We roll to the front of the car, stopping only because of the sliding door that doesn't open.

A monstrous CRASH OF THUNDER in the night outside.

I think, we're going to die in this train.

602 was Phoenix. 312 was Chicago.

210 was San Antonio. In 1997, it split into 830 and 956 with the increase in population density in the northwestern and valley areas.

In case you've ever wondered why larger cities tend to have smaller area codes, picture a rotary telephone. Back in the 1940s, when the area code system was designed, there was no such thing as a touch-tone phone—all telephones operated via rotary dialing pulse operation. Each number you dialed on a rotary phone sent an equal number of "pulses" to the local exchange. Add up the numbers of the area code and you got the total pulse count.

Larger cities tend to be older cities, and more importantly, cities which have had telephone systems longer than others.

It's a matter of *time*.

It took longer to dial—to complete the pulse count—larger area codes on a rotary dial than smaller ones, because you had to wait for the dial to finish rotating back for each number you dialed. States that had only a single area code were all assigned NPAs with a zero in the middle, as called for by the original 1947 plans. This practice ceased in 1952.

620 was Wichita.

815 was Rockford.

That's all I could think about as I ran through the street.

Not cars barreling through intersections. Not changing stop lights.

Not the trucks constantly switching lanes.

Every time I passed a pay phone on a corner or somewhere, I imagined the last number it dialed.

351, Boston overlay.

I could see them dialing.

971, Metro Portland area.

I saw the world getting farther and farther apart with each cell tower and PBX that went up. Overflowing phone trunks and skyscraper radio towers grounded with copper halo grounding rings.

I barely felt it when I ran into the side of the car coming across the intersection.

My body snapped and bent over and my face bounced off the hood. Over and over, tumbling across the car. My mouth and nose filled up with blood. Down my neck, coloring my collar.

I thought, at least it wasn't the windshield.

Police forensic teams can use a vehicle's skid marks to determine how fast it was going before the driver slammed on the brakes.

The studio was an entire floor of the Knight Building. Actually, it was only one, but it spanned more than that.

Floor sixteen of fifty-two, above the first sky lobby.

Twenty-three minutes to showtime.

"What do you mean, he isn't here? Where is he?" Cherry found I wasn't anywhere to anyone when she got there.

"We don't know any more than you do," her assistants told her.

"Well, I can't fire myself," she started, "so I guess that just leaves you two."

Thrown away; useless like broken condom wrappers.

Cherry fired both of them on the spot without losing an icicle. Her assistants didn't think she was serious at first, so they laughed and watched her eyes carefully, like deer in a hunter's scope.

Midnight blue eye shadow, thicker than cardboard.

Cherry didn't laugh back. "Go on, I don't want to see either of you again. Goddamned losers. I give you an easy task—this was a *simple* task, and you geniuses screwed it up. If the two of you can't keep tabs on one person, I have no use for you," she said.

Something about displacement, Dr. Morgan might have said.

Twenty minutes out, and I wasn't about to stick around for an accident report.

The car jammed on its breaks the second before I broke my nose on its vented muscle-engine hood, and the truck behind the car didn't have enough time to react. The back windshield of the car exploded into the street when the trunk and rear suspension accorded into the back seat.

In the unlikely event you're not wearing a seat belt, the safety glass conveniently located to your front will ensure you're safely contained within the vehicle.

The noise dissipates, and everyone's standing around me.

They're looking at the accident and the ground beside me. At my gun.

I'd forgotten to zip up my duffel coming out of the bank. I scrambled up and grabbed it, arrowing it wildly but steadily at the people gathering around me.

"Get the fuck away from me!" I screamed at them. The crowd inched back away from me like fallout.

They asked if I was okay.

Do I look okay?

I'm cradling my wrist and ribs, and my face is covered in blood. My shirt's not looking any better. I'm blowing bubbles every time I talk.

No, I'm not *okay*.

Fifteen minutes to showtime, the perky, espresso-amped Production Assistant told Cherry.

The peppy thing probably mainlined cappuccino in a bathroom stall somewhere when no one was around.

"David is on his way, I know, because I just checked in with him. He's stuck in traffic near the hotel. Shouldn't be long now." Right through her teeth came a smokescreen of thin air.

Droplets of sweat down her armpits and sides.

Nothing made her nervous, but this did. This shook her.

This was katagelophobia, the fear of ridicule, maybe. The aftereffect to what doctors call the "Social Phobia". An ego-dsytonic cake frosting.

Embarrassment.

Humiliation.

Nothing shook Cherry.

Nothing but this, that is. The fear of being humiliated and humbled, that was her nightmare. What she lived with—what drove her, what kept her sealed off behind pinstriped, double-breasted barbed wire.

That fear was her motivator.

The funny part was, I guess you could say I really was stuck in traffic, in a crash-test-dummy sort of way.

313 was Detroit.

You've never heard profanity like the toxic waste that shot out of Maura's mouth after Cherry left her at the hotel. She had run down to catch Cherry, but Cherry was long gone. Every sexual insult you could come up with was tossed out like hail. Things Cherry did, things her mother did, things Cherry swallowed, things her mother swallowed.

Right up to the sky. Angry with it, even.

People on the sidewalk tried their best not to make eye contact with Maura. She was in a place they'd never be, so they had to quarantine her just so they could keep feeling good about themselves.

Maura ignored them all and rolled around on the concrete curb, bawling and cursing at the same time.

Modesty, out the window. Sanity, in an abandoned prison somewhere in northern Siberia.

I always did get a bit turned on by a girl with a dirty mouth, but even I would have gone soft and floppy after hearing the twisted shit that Maura screamed down the street on the sidewalk.

You'd have thought she was a crazy person, the way she shouted at the missing car.  
Imagine that.

Imagine me and my busted nose taking off again through the gathering crowd as I caught a glimpse of Maura in a taxi, on her way to what was starting to seem like everyone's destination at that point.

Now, the Knight Building had this clock outside, over these massive glass doors that were rimmed with gold-plated steel or iron or something. The glass was a good half-inch thick, and was beveled everywhere you could have beveled a flat piece of glass. The handles on the doors alone were over a foot tall.

Eight minutes to showtime, the clock said.

I clearly remember being chased through the ground lobby by the security guards after I barreled through the ten-foot-tall double-doors. I remember how I kept almost slipping on the blood falling out of my mouth and splattering trails across the checkered marble floor because my shirt wasn't catching it all.

The average person can run about twelve miles per hour. I did twenty.

While Maura was already there, arguing with the lady at the front desk about getting let up to the studio, I just sailed past, throwing open the door to the stairs. In the explosion of confusion, with everyone starting to scatter, Maura took her cue and hit the elevator with some future audience members right before it closed.

I thought about what I was going to do. How I'd send my message out to my largest audience yet. This was what I'd waited for, the opportunity to open millions of eyes at once.

To make them believe I could save them.

To make them *want* to be saved.

It was an amazing sight. It was *cinematic*, even. Cherry pulled up her jet-engine lighter and a cigarette just as I opened the door to the maintenance stairwell. One big drag, and she was lost in a slow-motion cloud of carbon monoxide and methyl sulfide burn-off. She forgot about being scared for a moment when the smoke cleared enough for her to see me walking calmly and steadily across the hall toward her.

Sixteen flights, and not even winded.

Her mind went from shaking to blank to blown when she saw me covered with blood and gripping the revolver down by my thigh.

My wicked grin. Sick and enlightened.

Her cigarette smacking the floor and bursting into sparks.

I'm in widescreen.

Two minutes and we're all dead.

Wasted like cellophane wrapping.

Hallelujah, rejoice in the warm comfort of sulfur riverbed deposits. I didn't want to be shielded or protected from any of it anymore. Give me chemicals, I said.

I wanted preservatives.

I wanted filler.

I told myself I'd burn everyone down like they'd burned everything before them. The over-developed forests. The strip-mined mountain ranges.

Their parents and their teachers.

Gods and mythos and cultures thousands of years deep.

We've killed it all, and now, we're killing ourselves and each other.

It's revolution time.

It's time to die and get reborn.

It's time to know you're alive.

The clock said—

Ring, the sound of the elevator doors opening and Maura running for the studio entrance as she ran into the lobby.

The clock said—

I threw Cherry out into the studio by her arm, toward the main stage, and walked out behind her with the barrel of the revolver in her back.

"Jesus fucking Christ, you're fucking insane," Cherry said. "What do you think you're doing? You're crazy as shit!"

I told her to shut up and just walk.

"Like, talking-dogs-and-clowns crazy," she finished. I would have kept my mouth shut if I'd been in her position, but that's just me.

The clock said,

The clock said,

Three.

Two.

One.

## thirteen

All of the lights in our car go out simultaneously.

Like a dozen pair of eyes closing at once.

The glass flower bell lamps are reduced to reflecting only the shine of the moonlight outside. They highlight and deepen everything around us simply by being consumers of light, rather than producers of it. The fluorescent glow coming off the water. The dark ink splotches where shadows fall from trees at the edge of the mountain.

Maura and I try to pick each other up from the floor, but the train takes the curve of the suspended track faster and faster. We can barely stand anymore.

The car tilts again, violently, and Maura hits her head on the edge of one of the wooden dining tables. I'm shaken to the floor unhurt, but Maura's knocked out cold.

Noise.

It's like pennies scratching steel.

It's outside. Underneath us.

I put my ear to the floor and hear only the rumble of the mechanics beneath the train and the scrape of the wheels grinding against the iron tracks.

Maura stirs.

I crawl over to her and shake her hard to wake her, but she doesn't snap out of it.

*Wake up, Maura.*

Maybe I'm the one who's asleep.

The coin-on-metal noise squeals and explodes violently—

Revolution, not evolution, as they say.

So, the gun.

The gun in my hand.

I pointed it at Mr. Talk Show Host, right at him, and the sprouting wet spot on the crotch of his pants. The studio lights shined off the barrel like the Sun bouncing off an oil spill.

No more endangered species.

Close your eyes, they're all dead.

Just like you.

Just like me.

I threw Cherry down onto the crushed velvet guest couch and looked out into the audience.

This wasn't just stunned silence; this was deep-earth-drilled shock. Ice core samples pulled up from somewhere dark and cold they didn't know they had inside them.

Mr. Talk Show Host just stood there, half-expecting some stage manager to let him in on

the joke that wasn't a joke at all. He stood there and waited for Cherry to say something, but all she did was scrunch her eyes closed when I pulled the gun back around to her.

You know the guy, with the chin and the top ten lists.

"David!" The voice behind me faded in through the commotion.

It was Maura. She kept screaming my name to get my attention as the guards dragged her away. I snatched Talk Show Host up by his five-hundred-dollar jacket collar and pulled him out to the edge of the stage. His nose started bleeding seconds after I shoved the barrel into it.

He squirmed and gagged a bit, so I held the gun to him harder to keep him still.

"Please don't kill me," he said.

Whatever.

I told the guards to drop her, and they did without blinking.

We're going to learn a little something about *control*, I said.

Maura looked up at me. "What's going on? Cherry said you—"

"She told you, I know," I said. I don't know *how* I knew, I just did. Maybe it was the tension, like violin strings, in her voice. But I heard what she was going to say before she said it.

I'm an oracle.

"Did you really kill someone, David?" she asked.

Of course I did. "Cherry doesn't know anything. Nothing at all."

"What do you mean, David? What doesn't she know? Come on, tell me—what doesn't she know?" she asked. Big watery olives for eyes. Curious and afraid at the same time.

Really, Maura knew. She didn't want to *believe* she knew, but she did. I thought about that day at the sleep clinic, and how it felt like we were passing thoughts through the air between us rather than just talking. This was no different.

"David, please, God, talk to me. What doesn't Cherry know? I want you to tell me."

"This isn't my blood," I said, pointing to my jacket. "Well, not all of it. I think I broke my nose. You know, suddenly my chest and wrist aren't feeling too good, either. Maybe I should call a doctor."

I looked at Talk Show Host.

"You got a doctor coming on in the second half, don't you?"

I pictured what the inside of the barrel looked like with his trickle of snot and blood dripping down inside of it.

"David, what the fuck are you doing? Let him go, David, come on!" Maura shouted over the audience noise.

They hadn't left, the sensationalism-addicted fucking sheep, sitting there, waiting for whatever I was going to do next.

Is he going to shoot him?

Oh, maybe he'll shoot that girl. Or that other girl.

Will someone in the audience get shot?

Maybe if we're lucky.

Please, please, please, he kept on.

"I am so sorry about this! You know I had nothing to do with this, right?" Cherry was still covering herself. Appeasing the client. Mr. Talk Show Host couldn't have given less of a shit about her, and yet, she kept going.

Not my fault.

Had nothing to do with it. This unfortunate turn of events.

We'll spin it, don't worry about it.

I'll get my team on it *ay-sap*.

"Shut your mouth and sit down," I said to her over my shoulder. I pulled Talk Show Host over the couch and sat Cherry down with my foot in her belly. I *guided* Talk Show Host to the couch with the end of the gun up his nose.

Technically, you don't break what people traditionally think of as bone when you break your nose, you break "cartilage bone", cartilage that has matured over time to harden into bone.

"Stop acting like a child, David," Cherry told me.

I pointed the gun at her face.

"Stand up," I told her.

One of the first things you learn in corporate negotiations is to assert yourself as the dominant before the other person has a chance to. Rarely is it possible to reverse the control of a negotiation once dominant and submissive roles have been set. Sometimes, it's a race to be the top. Sometimes, you win.

Sometimes you don't, and you're the bottom. Only fools ever think they can turn things around once it's over.

Imagine Cherry still trying to gain control and power over the situation as she stood up.

"You're not going to kill anyone, David, because—"

I wondered what kind of reason she could possibly come up with.

"Because right now, your little girlfriend is crying over there, and you'd never hurt her, would you?"

Okay, that was a pretty good reason, yeah.

"You want her to love you, right? No one loves murderers and lunatics, David. You're going to put the gun down and she's going to forgive you, aren't you, doll?" Cherry looked over my shoulder at Maura.

"Shoot the bitch!" Maura yelled back.

I grabbed Cherry and flung her to the front of the stage.

"Turn around," I said. I held the gun to her head for a moment and pulled it down.

Swallow.

I opened the cylinder and gave it a hard spin. My eyes kept locked into Cherry's, I closed the gun without looking at it.

"The cylinder of this gun holds seven bullets. So far today, I have fired three times." I spoke slowly to her as she shook, as she was gradually getting the warm feeling of knowing she wasn't going to get control of the situation, and wrapped my hand around the far end of the cylinder. With my fingers around the gun like that, whatever was or wasn't loaded in the chambers was completely obscured to her.

I rested the tip of the barrel on her top lip as gently as I could, so she could speak.

"Let's play fill-in-the-blanks," I said, "No pun intended."

Maura was breaking at that point. She hated Cherry almost as much as I hated her, but I guess the sight of the gun itself, in someone's face like that, almost in someone's mouth, was just too much for her to deal with. She kept turning around and around, cursing and crying. She'd take a step forward, call my name, then go back to bawling incoherently.

"Is this something you can do?" I asked Cherry. She nodded a little nod at the end of my arm and I kept going. "Good. Here we go. Are you ready?"

Cherry nodded quietly again.

I took a beat and said, "Okay. Good. I want you to say whatever answer you think is right.

Here we go, now.

“When I pull the trigger, you’ll have a *blank* in *blank* chance of surviving.”

Shivering silence.

“Cherry, that wasn’t an example exercise. What is the probability of you surviving when I pull the trigger? Come on, you took math in school, you’re in marketing, you should know this.”

She hesitated for a split second and said, “Three in seven?”

“Wrong,” I shouted.

CLICK, the thick, mechanical pulling sound of the trigger.

I don’t have time to react to the wreck.

The grinding metal shrieks underneath the floor hit my ear drum, and by that time, it’s too late to even think about it. It takes a second to break over the tracks, as we tear down the curve on our side. The train derails and chugs right off the side of the mountain, over the rusty iron rails and teetering wooden supports.

Windows explode and flurry everywhere. Everything’s a mess of glass and sparks.

A moment later, and we’re floating down to the ocean.

I think, I can’t wake up.

No matter how hard I try, I’m stuck falling.

The ocean drops, and suddenly there’s a thousand more feet to fall.

Then two thousand.

Then ten thousand, as the bottom gets lower and lower. Sinking, but not sinking.

By now, the train has hit terminal velocity, and it’s a steady free-fall to the water.

Steady for the train, but not for Maura and me. She awakens and crawls over to me, and we take refuge under one of the dining tables. Bracing ourselves stiff and holding each other tightly, we watch the world outside spin and tumble around us.

The mountain.

The water.

The sky and the moon.

Every half-second, there’s a different image outside the windows.

I think, maybe if I close my eyes hard enough—

When nothing happened, and Cherry’s face *wasn’t* blown through the back of her head, Maura collapsed to her knees and screamed as hard as the audience did.

On and off, on and off, Maura was a light switch again.

Shoot her, don’t shoot her, blah blah blah. It was starting to piss me off.

“No, that’s wrong, Cherry,” I said. “The correct answer is *one in two*.”

If it hadn’t been for her tears, I would have mistaken Cherry’s look for curiosity.

“Either you will be dead, or you won’t be,” I finished.

I told her to close her eyes.

This again.

I pressed the gun into her lip harder this time, telling her to nod when she felt the need to answer the next question. Her lip started turning white from the pressure. The gun-barrel coffee ring.

“Do you believe you control your fate? And I don’t mean what you make of your life, but destiny. Fate. The Big Question. Do you control whether you are alive or dead?” I spoke a lit-

tle more quickly that time, as Cherry started getting sick to her stomach and her face started turning a faint shade of pea-green.

She started to shake her head, when I pulled the trigger again.

Cherry flinched hard as the hammer smacked the steel bullet rim.

Still nothing. No explosion, no mess.

A spent shell casing sat in the top chamber. More screams from the audience.

"That was a bit hasty, Cherry. You're just telling me what you think I want to hear. I want you to answer again, and this time, really think about it before you answer."

Imagine Maura's head between her knees, rocking back and forth on the floor.

Cherry whimpered, "What the fuck do you want from me? I don't know what answer you want."

"You're missing the point, Cherry. I want you to understand that this is not something you can control. This isn't something you can put in your day planner or your executive desktop calendar mat. The universe isn't something you can control, because nothing you do matters."

A beat.

"You do not matter. I do not matter. None of us makes one big fuck of a difference. Do you understand this?"

She just held her head down and cried.

"Me,"

All of the deals she'd brokered and negotiated.

"Holding the gun to your head,"

All of the people she'd manipulated and used.

"And you whimpering into the barrel,"

Millions of imaginary dollars passed back and forth.

"Is totally irrelevant."

Not one tiny bit of it made any difference in the world.

Useless.

It all came out, every drop of it, until everyone's flaws were wide open like cracks in the surface of a salt flat.

Cherry's, the notion that her markets and margins mattered.

Maura's, that other people mattered.

Mine, that I couldn't deal with any of it anymore, and was about to blow that waste of an egg's head off magnanimously.

Her eyes were still closed.

She'd heard the snap of the trigger again and didn't open them.

She didn't know what was going to happen until it happened.

Nothing existed around her, outside of her.

Physicists say that if you wait long enough, eventually everything that can happen *will* happen. Some even say that for every possible outcome of a single event, a separate "branching reality" is created to play out that outcome. Everything that can happen—happens, in every moment, in every possible way.

"Not only did you live, Cherry," I told her, "But you died. You were disabled, you were miraculously only scratched when the bullet bounced off your lip, and I was killed when the gun jammed and the bullet exploded in my hand."

How callous.

That's how significant everything was, I told her.

How everything mattered so Goddamned much that the universe just let it all happen anyway.

You flash, and suddenly, you're someone else. In a different reality.

Nothing's real, and nothing matters.

It's all in our heads.

Cherry was left crying on her knees when I went over to lift Maura off of the floor and to her feet. Her lips were dry, and her cheeks were as wet as a riverbed.

Maura said, "I'm scared, David."

I melted a little just then.

"I don't want it to feel like this anymore," she told me. Trembling; feeling what the end felt like. "I don't want to be numb, David. It's like I'm lost, and I don't even care about not knowing where I am."

Despair, noun.

Complete loss of hope; a state of being overcome by a sense of futility or defeat.

There was the hair stuck to her face and caught in the corners of her mouth. There was the film of drying tears on her cheeks, and there was the tattered bandage wrapping around her arm.

Chipped fingernails.

Tiny feet in worn-out sneakers and no socks.

Maura was completely spent from the inside out. I wanted to weep into her veins just so she could keep feeling something.

I took her by the hand and walked her over to Cherry, almost cowering on the floor. This time, Maura held the gun with me. I didn't even cover the gun with my fingers this time.

The end of the gun brushed the hair from Cherry's eyes. More coffee rings, pushed into her forehead.

Maura stood in front of me, surrounded on both sides by my arms, while I told her to keep her eyes open. Cherry still wasn't about to open hers, and I'd stopped caring at that point.

I told her, "You're not lost, Maura. You're right here, and this is happening, and you're doing it."

"You're going to feel this, Maura." I helped hold the gun steady to Cherry's head.

All Cherry knew was what was being said around her; her entire world was made up only of what she could hear and the thoughts in her head. And in all of that blackness, she heard the trigger being squeezed back and the *click, click, click* of the cylinder rotating slowly.

My hands weren't on the gun anymore.

It's like nothing's happening. You just fall and fall and fall.

It's actually pretty serene in a free-fall. Like gravity affects you, but it doesn't.

And after a few seconds, that's how it is in the train car. We feel that slight pulling-up of some invisible force while falling to the bottom of wherever, and things are just quiet murmurs of reality around us.

The sounds of happy, playful children in a room down the hall.

Wind instruments creaking from the floor and walls.

Until this very moment, my dreams are frightening; viciously scary things from which I can't run.

Until now.

I look over at Maura, tight up in a ball under the table with me, and I think.

I think, I love her.

It's something I know, but can't tell her. We're about to die, and I can't just open my mouth and tell her.

Every half-second, the moonlight scrolls across the windows and through the compartment, and every half-second, Maura's eyes shine like I've never seen anything shine in my entire life.

Perfect orbs of silver-and-blue glass.

Silken black hair turned blue in the haze.

I ache with her.

Everything else is just sound. The tinkling bits of glass jumping around; the pops of the broken lamps trying to light up again; beaded curtains knocking on the walls.

The approaching ocean below. Like coffee grounds shifting back and forth in a tin.

We're there together, as fears and pasts and futures melt away, as the only aches left are warm, happy ones, of love and togetherness.

And then, as the train finds the water.

This time, the gun spoke. It spoke loudly enough to crumble empires, and Cherry opened her eyes. It was the first time in history a gun had been fired, it was so Earth-shatteringly loud.

Fifty thousand megatons. Jet engines and meteorites and nuclear weapons. Field artillery.

I'm dead, she thought.

And then, pain. Hard pain *deep* in her right ear.

Maura held the gun less than half an inch from Cherry's ear when she fired it. The explosion didn't just hurt Cherry's eardrum, it destroyed it.

The *tympanic membrane*, they call it.

It amplifies sound waves through the middle ear, across the malleus and incus, and to the stapes and a "foot plate" in contact with the fluid of the inner ear. The tympanic membrane, typically strong, also acts as a measure of protection against severe trauma to the middle ear.

Tell that to the blood that drained out of Cherry's ear and down her neck.

All the little messes we leave behind.

The edge of her ear was singed when the firing pin struck the primer and blew sparks out of the gap at the front of the cylinder. Cherry bent over in pain, cupping her burnt and busted ear with both hands.

She couldn't even speak. Just wails and moans.

Maura was this perfect little A-frame of a person, still holding the gun as it smoked. She couldn't speak, either. You've never seen something so beautiful.

Frail.

But strong. Maybe stronger than she'd ever been. Ever felt. Ever wanted to be. For the first time in her entire life, Maura knew what control tasted like.

I gave that to her. My gift.

"No control, Cherry," I said. "Everything that can happen, will happen, but in all likelihood, you will only either be dead or alive. Maura didn't shoot you, like maybe you deserved to be shot.

"In this reality," I said, "the universe gave you *permission* to live."

You're only alive because I didn't kill you, I told her.

Over the panic of the audience, you couldn't hear the gun hit the floor. The crowd went

nuts when the gun finally went off, and the incoming pack of police officers were lost in the scrambling-for-their-lives mob of audience members.

A stagehand had used the emergency phone in the hallway across the stage. That phone was patched into the front security desk, where a call was sent across town to police dispatchers. It took sixteen minutes and thirty-seven seconds from the beginning of the first call for help for the police to arrive.

I heard them shouting through the crowd when they stormed the studio.

Guns drawn, tactical two-by-two formations.

Maura looked over my shoulder and said, "The cops are here. Shit. I wonder why *they're* here."

I turned to look at them and turned right back around to Maura.

"If I had to do something dangerous to get us out of here," she began, "how would you feel about that?"

The rush is always better when you're being chased, I thought.

Maura jumped down and picked the gun up off the floor. She handed it to me right as the uniforms got through the scrambling crowd, and I pulled her in close to me. Her hand lifted my hand—and the gun in it—to her temple, and she screamed at the officers.

"Oh, God, get back!" she shouted. The officers stopped dead in their tracks.

Please.

Don't let him shoot me.

Never mind that the bleeding bag of shit on the ground was all my fault. That is, unless you saw me blow out that chick's eardrum.

I coughed, and sent a light spattering of blood across Maura's neck. The look on the policemen's faces, staring at blood so dark it looked black on this ghoulishly pale girl's skin, was worth the price of admission alone.

It almost made them forget about the gun to her head.

It only took a second: the officers hesitated, and the crowd enveloped them again. And like some top-secret KGB spies, we vanished with the swarm. Well, as much we could.

"Sorry about that, David," Maura said. Her shoelaces made slapping noises on the floor every time she took a step.

As she ran in front of me, I heard something oddly familiar.

Like some half-forgotten daydream.

Maura said, as she turned around, "If you do something dangerous and unexpected, you don't have time to be scared."

Anything, as long as it's exciting, I thought.

*This was getting back to zero.*

And before we knew it, we'd made it to the lobby. Because nothing is impossible when you're invisible.

Because, it might just be possible to assume the reality you want.

Because, I can't prove anything's real anymore.

Because, zero feels pretty Goddamned good.

I turned to Maura.

Kiss.

## fourteen

The water fills the cabin in between heartbeats, and Maura and I are overwhelmed.

*Gasp—*

A breath shared between us consumes gallons of water.

The temperature of the water defies imagination. It's so cold that the only things keeping the ocean from freezing over are the rolling waves larger than redwoods.

Like wind through netting, heat escapes from our bodies faster than we could imagine.

Nothing so frigid.

Tiny bubbles of disturbance and chaos scramble to the surface.

Ice-water solaces and murky endings.

Hands and knees and outlines of faces drifting through the deep.

I think, hold on tight. I know Maura hears me, because I can hear her, how she feels safe and calm as we sink deeper toward the bottom.

Sinking, our hearts like sand. Heavy and solid and complete. Unable to drown, but become a deep part of the other's survival instead.

It's not happiness. Something more transcendental and deep, inside us where we know those things we just *know*.

We wait for the bottom, but this ocean has none. The train is long and far gone, and now, it's just the two of us drifting forever in a dark, crystalline, comforting underwater garden.

And we're together.

The lobby was no match for us.

The incoming cops jumping out of the main elevators? Amateurs.

Maura and I, we were professionals. Sleek and smooth, finished in satin camouflage. We couldn't be caught as we ran into the stairs around the corner and down the hall. We couldn't even be seen.

And then, we were on the roof.

Just like that.

Funny, the way you remember shit sometimes.

I remember pushing Maura up six flights of stairs before taking off into an elevator on the first vacant floor we could find. I remember listening—recalled the *sounds* the floors clicking up under a buzzing fluorescent light, and how Maura seemed to glow underneath it.

I remember racing out of the elevator at the top floor and I remember the piercing noise the roof exit made when I shot through it, dragging Maura behind me.

I remember,

I remember looking down over fifty-two stories at the street below.

Acrophobia, the fear of heights.

"Well, this was a spectacular idea, David. Where the fuck are we going to go now?" Maura asked.

"Just fucking brilliant," she told me.

Goddamned.

Mother fucking.

Brilliant.

I've always liked girls with dirty mouths.

"And why the fuck are you standing on the ledge? Get your ass down and figure something out!" Not so much panicked as not into the idea of spending twenty-five years in prison talking to her brand new *life partner*.

Om I can fly if I believe I can.

"Come up here with me," I said.

"I don't like heights, David, and that's not going to get us anywhere. The cops *know* we're here somewhere. After what I did to Cherry, not that she didn't deserve it, I mean, but after that—"

"Just be quiet and get up here."

And she did.

I looked down, way down over the ledge.

Ants.

Flecks of pepper.

Tiny dots of paint.

I felt Maura's hand tugging at my fingers.

The sky.

A fading cerulean blue.

Perfect and complete and serene. Like something separated it, made it a different place from the world we were looking down on. Not broken or corroded, not some diseased and decaying pool of polystyrene landfills and sporty family caravans.

There were famous people floating in the sky.

Elephants and giraffes and lobsters.

Cumulonimbus breaths of freedom and release.

"I love you, Maura," I said.

Walls came down, and I was standing on the ledge of the Knight Building.

"Say it like you mean it," she told me.

"I don't know why it was so hard to tell you, but I do. I'm sorry it took so long," I said.

"I know." A pindrop of a voice. This was a place for tears, it felt like, but there were none.

Her smile crept across her face, and I melted a little more inside. We stopped breathing for a moment and just listened—

Really listened—

To the sound of the wind curving across our ears. Birds taking off from adjacent buildings' windowsills. Maura's dress snapping back and forth.

"If you would have asked me a year ago, I would have said everything would always be a mess," I explained. "I would have said there would always be noise, and there would never be any rest. You're the greatest thing in the universe, even if none of it—"

She got the point, she said.

Maura let out the longest, smoothest sigh anyone could have.

“There are those places to which only your heart can travel, and then there is little that matters.” It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard in my entire life.

“My mother said that once,” Maura said.

Hand in hand, we leaned over the edge and slowly began to pitch into the strong winds.

She’s there, and I’m there, and now, I’m falling.

And falling.

And falling.

## fifteen

Flash up to white.

I don't remember hitting the ground.

It's just—

It's just the shore, in my head, as far as I can even think.

The beach shifting with every lap of every wave.

Warm sand covering all of the crevasses and folds in my toes.

An impossibly high cerulean blue dome so far above me, you'd think I'd never touch it. But I can, because this is my place. It exists because I do.

Here.

And nowhere else, because this is all there is.

I'm what you might call happy, but it's not so much happiness as it is released and content.

All of the dreams and all of the commotion are gone, and there's a sunset now, starting just over the curve of the ocean on the horizon.

Purple and indigo bleeding into the fast-fading cerulean.

And that's all there is.



