

NO FURTHER MESSAGES

Stories by Brett Alexander Savory



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FIRST EDITION

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The Following stories are original to this collection:

“Scenario B”

“Water-song”

“Marching the Hate Machines Into the Sun”

All other stories have been previously published. List of copy-right information can be found on page 223.

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For Don

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MESSAGES

This time is no different. This time is exactly the same as the last hundred, the last thousand. Since paper was invented. Maybe before. Different people, but always the same objectives.

Because some words are more important than others. Some words have the power to change history.



Written in red. As always.

She reads the words on the piece of paper, burns it, changes into black clothes, leaves her tiny apartment quickly and returns three hours later, shaking, with blood on her fists.

In the shower, more red as the blood washes off, swirls around the drain, vanishes.

When she steps out of the shower ten minutes later, this is written in lipstick on the bathroom mirror: "Next time, keep it clean."

She wraps a bath towel around herself, walks into her bedroom.

Yeah, keep it clean, she thinks. Like I asked the fat bastard to bleed all over me.



"Joseph—"

"Shut up."

"Joseph, listen—"

"Shut the fuck *up*."

The man in the dark blue suit stares hard at Joseph. Contemplates whether he can risk another interruption. Knows he cannot. Decides he doesn't care, anyway. So he just sits quietly and fiddles with a crease in his pants.

And waits.

Joseph holds a red pen in his right hand, taps it on his big wooden desk. Thinking.

"How did she know?" Joseph says, his voice a cracked rock.

The man in the dark blue suit knows there is no way out of this. He knows he is going to die. In this room. Soon.

"There's no way she could have known about Jennings," he says, knowing it's a stupid thing to say. Pointless. Just going through the motions. He imagines he feels the world slowing down, its creator finished with us, no longer watching, no longer caring what happens.

Joseph nods his head, holds his breath, purses his lips. He pulls a very long knife from a sheath taped to the underside of his desk. Shows it to the man in the dark blue suit.

"That manuscript was very important," Joseph says. "Probably the most important manuscript we would ever have worked with. We've been doing this a long time, you and I. You've never fucked up like this. I don't understand it. And don't try to shift the blame. You're the one who hired Jennings."

The knife catches a flicker of light from a nearby

lamp. Joseph taps it on the desk a few times, like he'd done with his pen. Breathing now. Just breathing. "And you've nothing from the brother, either? Nothing whatsoever?"

The man in the dark blue suit stays quiet. Just offers up a silent prayer to a god he has never believed in, and that he knows with absolute certainty is no longer watching.

A moment later, Joseph leans forward quickly, buries the knife to the hilt in the man's neck.



"So what's it say?"

"What's what say?"

"What do you think? The manuscript. What's it say this time? Staggering earthquake? The second coming of Hitler? Flood, drought, tidal wave, fucking plague of locust? What?"

Emma Philson stares down at her dinner plate. Her hair is still damp from her shower.

"Don't know. Didn't read it." She looks back up. "It's not my job to read them; it's my job to steal them."

The man across from her puts his fork down on his plate, tilts his head, looks at her with disbelief.

"You've never read any of them? The fate of the world right there in your hands and you don't even sneak a bloody peek?"

Emma picks up her knife and fork, cuts into her fish. "I don't want to know."

The man still staring at her with incomprehension is Jim Leeds, her only contact in the organization. The restaurant they're eating at is a five-star in Vancouver. Neither of them is particularly enjoying the dishes

they've ordered. They never do.

"So why do you bother?" Jim says, poking at his mussels.

Emma shrugs. "Your organization pays me very well."

"That's all that matters to you? The money?"

Emma says nothing. She forks a chunk of under-cooked fish into her mouth and grimaces.

"I mean, don't you ever think about how important your work is? Don't you get any satisfaction from knowing that through this manuscript maneuvering—"

"I wish you'd stop calling it that," Emma interrupts, her voice rising. "We kill people and steal their writings."

Jim leans forward, looks at her hard. His fingers curl tight around the glass of red wine in his hand. "Keep. Your. Voice. *Down.*"

He leans back slowly, straightens his tie, sips from his wine, then glowers at his food, pushes his plate away.

Emma stares out the window, all pretence to enjoying a lovely dinner with a colleague vanished.

"They aren't *their* writings anyway, Emma. They're not owned by anyone."

"Jim?" Emma says, leaning forward, lowering her voice to a whisper. "Listen to me, okay? I'm bored. And I'm tired of acting like this shit is somehow beneficial to the human race. Doesn't matter how many people get killed as long as we get our manuscript. As long as these documents make it into the 'right hands,' everyone's happy. Well, fuck that, *I'm* not happy."

Emma leans back, takes a deep breath.

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I don't want to do this anymore, Jim."

Jim doesn't blink, doesn't waver. "But you will, won't you." Statement. Fact.

Emma sighs, looks out the window again, at city lights, at cars, trains, people. She nods slowly.

But Emma knows something Jim doesn't. She lied; she *has* read the manuscript for which she slit the fat man's throat.



Seth Philson fidgets in his seat. Not because he is afraid of flying, not even because he has to piss so bad his teeth are floating; Seth fidgets because he is six-foot-seven and airplane seats are not made for people his height. He squirms around in his aisle seat, cursing the fact that no one with a roomier emergency-exit seat would swap with him. He tries to get comfortable first *with* his little pillow—folding and scrunching it, placing it between his knees and on the back of the seat in front of him—then without it. No dice either way. And no matter which way he tries it, the guy in the seat ahead turns around and glares at him.

Five-foot fuck-all, Seth thinks. *Must be real tough to get comfortable in that seat when you're bloody well swimming in it, eh, shithead?*

More fidgeting. Deep sighing. If he could afford first-class, he'd be up there in a heartbeat, but writing jacket copy for crappy mainstream paperbacks sure isn't going to buy him a ticket up there—he's lucky he can afford this trip to Vancouver at all.

Seth needed a vacation. Seth was having very sharp, very clear images of ripping off his co-workers' heads.

Mountains. Snow. Calming white. A visit with his sister whom he hasn't seen in...how many years has it been? He has no idea.

As the plane taxis up the runway, Seth closes his eyes and pictures the resort he's booked into. He inhales

deeply, exhales slowly. The plane's thrumming engines help with the overall effect, blurring his thoughts, mashing his anger at short people down, down...until he feels the plane lift off, its nose scoop upward.

He looks out the window to his right, across the aisle. The ground slowly gives way to blue sky, dotted with little puffs of cloud.

Pure white.

He keeps his breathing steady until the plane reaches its cruising altitude, waits for the pilot's permission to operate assorted technological gadgets, and reaches down into the thin black bag at his feet.

Seth's gadget of choice is a laptop. Using its word processing program, he writes stories and essays on it that he has never let anyone see. He figures he probably never will. Not because he thinks they're bad, not because he has self-esteem issues, but because those words are his and his alone. They are not written for other people to see, and they are certainly not written for sale. He might well be able to sell his stories, but this doesn't interest him in the least.

What interests him even less is writing jacket copy for other people's shitty writing.

Seth powers up his laptop, waits for his Flying Spaghetti Monster screensaver to come up, then opens his word processor, flicks to File, then Open. Clicks on "magicians_hangnail.rtf." The title page pops up. He scrolls down to the first page, reads the three pages he wrote last night, cues up his cursor, and stares at it for the next five minutes.

Blink. Blink.

"You a writer?"

Guy next to him. Filthy bugger. Messy hair. Uneven beard the color of burnt chestnuts. Sloppy blue eyes too big for his ruddy, round face.

"Nope," Seth says. Goes back to staring at the blinking cursor.

"So, if you don't mind my asking, what's that you're working on?"

Fake cheer: Boy, I sure want to get to know you, even though I really don't give a flying fuck what you're doing or why.

"Short story," Seth says, this time not turning his face away from the cursor.

"But I thought you just said —"

"I'm not a writer. I write things in this little computer here, but I'm not a writer. Writers sell their stories, join workshops to have their work critiqued for improvement. I do neither of those things. I do not consider myself a writer."

"Oh," the filthy guy says. Faces forward again.

Seth stares at the cursor and hopes that when he lands in Vancouver, his sister Emma won't ask him about his writing. He has told her before not to, but she persists — Emma and whatever the hell it is she does for a living. Something that requires her to travel a lot — almost more than Seth, and Seth practically lives on airplanes. Whenever he asks for more information about her job, she asks for more information about his latest short story. And that's where the conversation ends.

Though Seth is wholly unaware of it, a man in a dark blue suit sits three rows back and to the right of him. Ostensibly reading *The Vancouver Sun*, but watching. Waiting for Seth's fingers to connect with the laptop's keys.

Waiting for him to start writing.



"Give me the manuscript. I won't ask again."

"Fuck you, cunt."

The fat man holding the sheaf of papers reeks like a compost heap. Emma's head swims from the stench. She closes her eyes, steadies herself.

Always the same game: One side tracks the writer down, waits for the fugue to begin and end, kills the writer, makes off with the manuscript. The only difference is that the "good" side leaves the manuscript intact, the "bad" side edits it to serve its own agenda. The line between the two is blurry at best. Now, standing here in this disgusting man's shithole apartment, listening to him call her a cunt, Emma has one clear thought: *I want out. This is the last one.* A voice in her head—not her own—telling her to pack it in.

She'll bring it up with Jim tonight at dinner.

"Fuck me, huh?" Emma says, brings her gun out of her holster quickly, trains it on the fat man's face. "Hand it over, and I let you walk. Simple deal."

The man backs up, trips over a phone book on the floor behind him, but doesn't fall. He raises his free hand, warding her off, his bravado leaking out of his pores along with his sweat. "Look...look, please don't shoot. I'm sorry, okay?"

This is the best they have? Emma thinks. *This snivelling mound of flab?*

"I don't want apologies," she says, kicking the phone book out of the way, advancing on the enemy operative. "I want the manuscript."

Back against the wall. No more name-calling, no more false courage: a man caught without his gun. Now just the stench of garbage, sweat rolling down a fat, pimply face, wrinkles like a pit bull. Apologetic. Pathetic.

But Emma has never killed anyone with a gun; its only use for her is intimidation. She pulls a knife from a

sheath behind her back. Steps forward. Slashes at the man's outstretched arm. It cuts the skin, the man cries out, drops his arm. Blood drips onto the plush beige carpet. The fat man's other hand still clenches the manuscript for a moment, then drops it as he uses this hand to try to stop the flow of blood from his arm.

When he looks down at his wound, moves his free hand over to press on it, Emma steps forward quickly, drags the blade across the man's throat and moves out of reach again in one quick motion. Emma hits an artery, takes a heartbeat's worth of spray in the face.

The fat man slumps, gurgles, drops.

Emma wipes her face with her forearm, reaches down, grabs the manuscript.

Normally, she would clean up. Carpet is a bitch, and it would take her most of the night, but normally she'd do it.

But this is the last one, she tells herself.

So she lets him bleed out.



The man in the dark blue suit should have known better than to hire that fat piece of shit Jennings, brother of one of their best. Nepotism and triple-checked referrals are the only way anyone gets in—and this blubbery fuck came highly recommended—but still, the man should have known. Just by looking at him. It wasn't in his eyes: what it takes. To kill without flinching, to kill without knowing why. Could be built like a brick shit house and talk the hardest game in town, but when it came to murdering people for nothing more than a sheaf of paper, you had to see that capability in their eyes.

The man in the dark blue suit had not seen it in Jennings' eyes, but he would have caught shit from every

direction had he fought it, regardless of his experience, his years of moving manuscript.

And now he has to tell Joseph.

And Joseph will not be happy.

Leaving the clean-up crew behind him—hacking arms, legs, and head from the corpse—the man in the dark blue suit turns the incongruously fancy brass knob on the front door of Jennings' hovel, steps out into the hallway.

He does not expect to live out the next twenty-four hours.

But there is one more potential fugue writer to track before he's due back at headquarters, and that might give him something with which to placate his boss.

If he doesn't get a move on, he'll be late for his flight.



Emma sits at her kitchen table, stares at the manuscript in front of her. Black cup of coffee steaming in her right hand. Her left is shaky, fluttering, hovering over the first sheet of the 213-page manuscript.

Sometimes she looks. Most times, she doesn't bother. Not that it's boring—the direct word of God can be called many things, but hardly boring. If that's what these are, that is—writings from God, channelled through ordinary people from every nation on earth.

She thinks that's what they are, but there are other theories: Collective subconscious. Messages from aliens. Mass hallucinations. Whatever you believed, it hardly mattered. What mattered was that people dropped into some other state of mind when they wrote these manuscripts. They blipped out for minutes, hours, sometimes *days* at a time, wrote instructions, stories, parables, poetry, essays, in hundreds of languages. The occasional

predictions were what made it hardest to discount the phenomenon.

Since its discovery, instructions and predictions have made up more and more of each manuscript. Less stories, less fables, less vague lessons. More hard truth, more concrete directions.

As if time were running out.

The coffee slides down Emma's throat, warms her belly, makes her sweat, quickens her pulse ever so slightly. She sets the mug down, turns the first page over, her hand still shaking, but now under relative control.

Three pots of coffee later, she has read the entire manuscript.

Shivers rack her slight frame as she gets up from the table, head spinning, full of information that, in the hands of the other side, could destroy everything. Certain things denoted authenticity, and they were incredibly hard to fake—hard, but not impossible.

The President of the United States, the Prime Ministers of Canada and Britain, leaders all over the world, they sometimes see the originals, sometimes the doctored versions—depending on who died, depending on which side got the upper hand. These world leaders, though aware of this bizarre “automatic writing” phenomenon, do not know where the manuscripts come from. They just arrive, are reviewed for authenticity by staff experts, then are hand-delivered to them.

Emma's organization has tried to warn them of the other side's efforts to tamper with these manuscripts, but their messages are never received. They are always intercepted before they reach anyone on the inside who could be trusted with the information. Or, if they *are* received, they're ignored as having come from an “unreliable source.”

Sometimes, at least, the manuscripts themselves get

through. Untouched, unchanged. But more often than not, they arrive skewed, tainted, adjusted to perpetuate wars and greed.

Surely these leaders think they're doing the will of their respective gods when they follow these words. Certainly they believe what they're doing is right for their people. They really have no reason to believe otherwise. An inexplicable direct line to the Big Guy in the Sky.

But this manuscript...this one absolutely *needs* to arrive untouched. There are too many ways to manipulate what it says, too many gaps in the physical spacing of the handwriting.

What is probably the most important document in history, Emma thinks, *is right here under my arm.* She slips on her coat, makes sure her gun is loaded (this time she *will* use it, if necessary), and heads to the airport to pick up her brother, Seth. She glances at her watch, realizes she will probably be late.

She hopes the flight is a little behind schedule.



But the most important document in history is not under Emma's arm; it is currently being written on Flight 762 to Vancouver, British Columbia.

The man in the dark blue suit watches Seth's mannerisms, knows it should hit him soon—the fugue state he has seen so many times in his career. Seth fits the profile to the proverbial 'T.' Certain types of personalities are more susceptible to the phenomenon: lonely drunkards, societal freaks, geeks—anti-social types, in general. Behavioral experts working for the man in the dark blue suit's organization have computers that calculate probability based on past fugue writers; they crunch numbers, input personal information about as many traceable

humans on earth as possible, extrapolate the data, then tell the operatives who to watch and, subsequently—in nine cases out of ten—who to kill.

Once his name had popped up on their screens, they'd had their eye on Seth Philson for almost as long as they'd had their eye on his sister. But for very different reasons.

The man in the dark blue suit—so uncomfortable in his own skin that he often worries about having his own name pop up on his organization's computers—thinks that most times things just go to shit for no good reason at all, just the natural entropy of the universe. But tonight...tonight, he feels like things might just work out.

He is just about to get up and go to the bathroom when Seth's head nods.

Once.

Twice.

Drops completely, head resting on his chest.

When his head comes up again, this time very slowly, his fingers suddenly move swiftly over the keyboard, writing. Words not his own.

The man in the dark blue suit sits tight, waits to see if it's going to be one of these "flash sessions," as his organization calls them—a few brief insights into whatever power controls fugue writers. These synaptic blips usually produce indecipherable sentences—a bad connection, a cosmic wrong number.

But after fifteen full minutes of constant tapping on the keys, the man knows this one is real. He just hopes it isn't a two- or even three-day marathon, else he'll have nothing with which to assuage Joseph when he breaks the news about Jennings' monumental fuck-up.

He rises to go to the bathroom, squeezes out into the aisle.

He does not turn his head in either direction on his

way; if he had done so, he would have seen, off in the distance, a bright white flash of lightning.

The first of many.

In seat 15C, Seth Philson, gripped by something unknowable, continues to write.



After dinner with Jim—and her abortive attempt to quit her job—Emma drives to the airport through sheets of rain so heavy she thinks the glass will crack, splinter, and cave in before she gets anywhere near the airport.

She calls ahead and Seth's flight is right on time, meaning she'll be late picking him up. Perfect. A great foot to get off on with her brother, whom she's not seen in at least six years. She wonders if she'll tell him about her job this time. If ever there was a time she wanted to tell *someone* about it, get the burden off her chest, now was that time.

But she knows she won't, no matter if it would help bring Seth and her closer. Their mother dead from an early age, and their father off travelling God knew where—apathetic about their existence, as he'd always been—they'd floated off to very different lives, drifting without much thought as to what they would do next. Content to depend on no one. Be with no one.

Emma slows down as the rain turns to marble-sized chunks of hail, drumming off her car roof. The sound is deafening, and Emma feels a headache winding its way through her spine, up into her brain.

She changes lanes. Closes her eyes for a moment.

When she reopens them, the night flashes white, lightning touches down not far ahead, near the airport. Thunder cracks—the loudest she's ever heard it—and something explodes, bursts into flame.

Behind her, in the rear-view mirror, more lightning touches down, slices the dark, burns orange-blue after-images into her retinas. More thunder, more buildings on either side of her exploding, filling the night air with the smell of ozone, the crackling of fire.

Emma slows to a crawl, terrified. She sees the airport, nearly half of it engulfed in flames, rise over the horizon. She watches as a plane coming in for a landing—unable to safely pull up once the airport exploded—bursts apart, lightning cleaving it in two.

She slams on the brakes, pulls the car over to the shoulder, opens the door, steps out onto the tarmac. She hugs herself, shaking in the rain, stares at the destroyed plane in the distance, glances quickly at the flames all around her.

Where are you, Seth? she thinks, looks skyward, her brain unable to move out of shock and into an appropriate panic response.

Through the black rain, she sees a blinking light far off, glances at her watch, knows that Seth must be aboard this plane; the one that just exploded is too early to be his.

She tries to think of an explanation for the destruction around her, but is only capable of thinking one clear, useless thought: *Stay up there, Seth. Please.*

Stay up there.



When the man in the dark blue suit comes out of the bathroom, he immediately notices several passengers looking and pointing out the windows. He returns to his seat, leans across a sleeping woman next to him, peers out the window. Flashes of lightning crisp the night sky. Some of it looks pretty low to the ground, but nothing he hasn't seen before.

NO FURTHER MESSAGES

He shrugs, glances over at Seth—still clattering away—and settles back into his seat. The plane suddenly hits some heavy turbulence. After a few seconds of rocky riding, the captain comes over the speaker, announces that they've hit some turbulence.

Thank you, Dr. Obvious, the man in the dark blue suit thinks.

The captain goes on to say that they'll be starting their descent into Vancouver very soon, asks people to please return to their seats and fasten their seatbelts. What he does not say over the speakers is that in the cockpit there is some tension, as they've just lost radio contact with Vancouver International Airport. But the captain is confident that once they break through the heavier clouds below, radio reception will clear up.

Seth does not fasten his seatbelt. Seth continues to type.

The man watching Seth catches a glimpse of his document. Many different languages are displayed across the screen—some the man can distinguish, others he cannot. Fascinated, he unbuckles his seatbelt, goes out into the aisle, hangs back a few feet, trying not to appear nosy. He reaches up to an overhead compartment, rustles about with a few bags, hoping no one remembers that this isn't where he originally stashed his carry-on luggage. But people are either staring down at the lightning storm, or closing their eyes to catch a few more Zs while the plane descends.

A few more pecks of the laptop's keys, then Seth stops typing, drops instantly into a deep sleep, slumped over his computer. The man in the dark blue suit can only see the bottom half of the last page of the document.

The words are in English, as follows:

Brett Alexander Savory

This is not, and never has been, about you. Any of you.

This is not, and never has been, about good and bad.

This makes no sense to you, I know.

I have taken all who are worthy.

There will be no further messages.

The man in the dark blue suit slumps against one of the seats in the aisle, as if having just had the wind knocked out of him. He has never known religion, never wanted to know it, but he feels, very distinctly, something leave him just then. The word "soul" comes to mind, but he does not feel that this word fits for him.

A burly male flight attendant bustles up behind him, escorts him to his seat, tells him to buckle his seatbelt.

Just then there is a bright flash, taking a snapshot of the turmoil in the sky. A loud thud rocks the aircraft. A fire blazes on the left wing. Another strike and the engine on that side of the airplane flames out.

Seth Philson wakes up to screaming.

Below the black clouds under the plane—clouds that Flight 762 has just broken through—Vancouver International Airport burns.



Emma sits on the hood of her car, drenched, sobbing, waiting for another glimpse of the blinking light to cut through the clouds, hoping the tiny light stays up there, or carries on to another airport to land. Surely, unlike the other plane, Seth's will see the devastation below and have time to pull up.

Over the thunder and drilling rain, she hears a droning engine, searches the sky, sees a bright flash, a sharp crack, and her heart stops, kicks twice in her chest, flutters. The plane breaks through the low-lying clouds.

She raises her right hand to her mouth at the same time that the fire bursts to life in the left engine: a tiny firefly weaving and bobbing far above her.

Unable to do anything but stare, Emma watches, wide-eyed, open-mouthed, as fierce winds batter the plane around in the sky for several torturous minutes. Nearly overhead, it tilts, rights itself, loses altitude, nose dipping, then straightens up again. Now directly above, another lightning strike sears its tail, temporarily blinding her.

Seth, she thinks, a strange calm coming over her. *Where are you going? I'm here, Seth. Right here below you.*

When the plane crashes into a forest about a mile away—continued lightning strikes from the overcharged air missing her by less than a hundred feet—she imagines she feels the earth shudder. Imagines she feels it ripple through her entire body.

She expects an explosion to accompany the plane crash, but there is nothing. Just silence after it disappears over the highest treetop.

She feels something inside her, some part of her, slip away, drift up into the night.



After calmly calling in the plane crash from her cell phone, Emma drives home. As soon as she's a few miles away from the crash site, the weather abruptly clears up. The rain and hail stop, the lightning peters out, the winds grow calm.

The manuscript on Emma's passenger seat—the one she thought would change the world forever if it wound up in the wrong hands—is now blank. Even as she leans over from the driver's side, incredulous, flipping through the hundreds of pages, the words fade before her

eyes.

A conversation she'd had with Jim Leeds at dinner earlier that night, after she told him she wanted to quit her job, comes back to her as she drives:

"So what do you think it is?" Jim asked.

"What do I think what is?" Emma said, still annoyed that Jim was so certain she would keep doing her job, even though she hated it.

"Where do you think they're coming from? The words."

Emma was silent for nearly a full minute. She swilled wine around in her glass.

"I think they're coming from God."

Jim snorted. "God? I didn't know you believed."

"I don't. But I think that's where the words are coming from."



The next day, *The Vancouver Sun* runs a story about the disastrous crash of Flight 762, the obliteration of the airport, and the bizarrely focussed lightning storm that disintegrated every building and airplane within a two-mile radius of the crash site.

There is also a smaller article about reports of disappearances throughout Vancouver. At press time, several hundred other missing-persons reports were coming in from around the world. Police, the paper said, were investigating.

Incredibly, Seth was safe. A little bruised and battered, but otherwise fine. As were all 114 of the other passengers aboard the plane. A "miracle," the *Sun* said.

Seth's laptop, however, was not so lucky; it was lost in the crash.

A week later, sitting across from his sister in her

apartment, eating French toast and sipping coffee, Seth tells his sister what he remembers about the flight.

"I remember getting on the plane, and I remember some guy beside me asking if I was a writer. I told him no. Then I remember getting sleepy. That's it." Seth cuts into a piece of toast, jabs it with his fork, sops up some syrup with it, and pops it into his mouth.

"That's it? Nothing about the crash?"

"Nothing."

Emma gets up from her chair, heads for the shower. She stops at the doorway leading to the bathroom.

"You're staying for...a while, Seth?" she says.

Seth looks up, sees something in his sister's eyes he's never seen before. He thinks it might be loneliness. He thinks he might have some of that right now in his own eyes.

"Yeah," he says. "I'm staying for a while. As long as you need me."

Emma smiles, steps into the bathroom, closes the door quietly.



The man in the dark blue suit dials Emma Philson's number from a phone booth downtown. She sounds breathless when she answers, as if having had to run to grab the receiver before it stopped ringing.

"Hello?"

"Emma Philson?"

A pause. "Who is this?" One hand dries her hair with a towel, the other holds the phone.

"There will be more disappearances," the man says. "More reported each day. Probably millions."

"Who the *hell* is this?"

"All the work we've done—none if it mattered, none

of it changed anything, Ms. Philson. Good or bad, it didn't matter at all. Judgement day has come and gone, and now we're all just walking around, already dead. Just too fucking stupid to lie down."

Perhaps having an idea who this might be, Emma says nothing. Just listens.

"Your brother. He wrote this. On the plane, just before it went down. I was there to steal his manuscript, kill him. He was a fugue writer. I'm surprised you didn't know. Just listen: 'This is not, and never has been, about you. Any of you. This is not, and never has been, about good and bad. This makes no sense to you, I know. I have taken all who are worthy. There will be no further messages.'"

Emma calls the man in the dark blue suit by his real name. Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.

"Yes, it's me," the man says, his voice rusted, hollowed out. "You know, I thought maybe there really was something to this whole good and bad thing. I thought maybe when I called you, there would be no answer. That maybe you'd have disappeared along with the others. Taken...wherever." His voice trails off, and he feels the emptiness inside his chest more acutely now. It squeezes his heart. The man coughs once, looks across the street. His eyes drift up to his boss's office window.

"Hello?" Emma says tentatively. The man hears her as a dead voice in a tin can.

"I'm here," he replies. Breathes deeply, feels his chest tighten more. "There will be no more manuscripts, Emma. It's over. All of it. We were never in control. Whether we believed in them or not, there were always other, bigger forces at work. God, the Devil, or something else entirely, what does it matter in the end?"

No reply.

The man hangs up the phone.

NO FURTHER MESSAGES

Emma listens to the dead line hum for a long time. She is crying and has no idea why.

The man in the dark blue suit crosses the street carefully, making sure to look both ways, climbs three flights of stairs, enters Joseph's office, sits down.

"Joseph—"

"Shut up."

"Joseph, listen—"

"Shut the fuck up."

The man in the dark blue suit stares hard at Joseph. Contemplates whether he can risk another interruption. Knows he cannot. Decides he doesn't care, anyway. So he just sits quietly and fiddles with a crease in his pants.

And waits to die for nothing.

SCENARIO B

Gronk opened the sack of guts and carefully counted spleens, determined not to be cheated again. Elbow-deep in grue, some bastard started pounding on his apartment door. Probably the guy who just delivered the sack. Well, he could wait. Gronk wasn't going to get shafted again. *Three, four...okay, five. All here.*

Gronk walked to the door, unlocked it, opened it just enough so he could peek one eye out. "Alright," he said. "They're all in there. You can go now." He slammed the door shut, locked it, snapped the chain on, walked back toward the sack.

More pounding on the door. "Money, Gronk! You ain't fuckin' paid yet!"

Gronk sighed, walked back to the door. "I'm not opening up again. You'll probably shoot me or something. You're a black-market thug and you're going to shoot me. I know it."

"I won't shoot you. Open the goddamn door."

"Like fuck I will." He tried on the tough words, but they felt alien coming out of his mouth.

"Like fuck you better!" The man kicked the door, old wood rattling on its hinges.

"You'll shoot me," Gronk said. "If I open the door again, you'll shoot me and take back the sack. I know it." Gronk sagged against the door. "I just know you will."

"I'll shoot you if you *don't* open the door. I'm done fuckin' around, so just pay up and I'll go."

Gronk bit his lip.

Another sharp kick at the bottom of the door. Gronk flinched.

"I ain't jokin' around, son. You know how I roll and you know I'll do it. Now *open up!*" The door thrummed with life, the thug's fists pounding up high, his feet bashing down low.

Breaking into a cold sweat, Gronk backed away from the door.

"Alright, that's it, I'm comin' in—you're gonna fuckin' be sorry." The thug threw his bulk against the door. Gronk backed farther away, nearly tripped over the sack of guts, bent down, picked it up, held it tight against his chest.

The thug threw himself against the door again, butting a hole in it with his shoulder, just above and to one side of the chain lock. More low kicks, weakening the hinges, then one final charge and the whole door crashed inward, sending up a plume of dust and crud.

The thug stood on top of the felled door. Gronk stared at him. Big black boots. Black leather jacket, lined with metal studs. Face like pitted concrete. Scarred, bald head, pocked with deep indents. Cigar drooping from his thick, wet lips. He munched on it once, twice.

"Gronk," he growled, raised the gun at his side, levelled it at Gronk's face. "Money or death, ya little shit."

Gronk lifted the sack higher, curved his bony shoulders inward, squeezed his eyes shut, turned his head away, and whispered, "I don't have any money left,

thug."

"Don't call me that. You know my name's Jimmy. Why you gotta call me 'thug'? It's fuckin' juvenile." He bent back the hammer on his gun. "It's nothin' personal, you know? You know what I'm sayin'? I got people *I* gotta pay, too. No hard feelings, alright? Just stand still and take it like a man."

Take a bullet like a man? Gronk thought. *What a ridiculous—*

Jimmy fired and Gronk's right leg exploded in pain. The bullet tore into the flesh on the side of his calf. Gronk bellowed, dropped the sack. Jimmy fired again, missing as Gronk fell over sideways. He landed hard on his elbow. Fresh pain shot through his arm, racing up into his shoulder, covering his head like a hood.

Then, something Gronk hadn't felt in a long, long time suddenly rose in his chest, dulling the pain: Anger. He'd nearly forgotten what it felt like to be severely pissed.

Somewhere far away, Jimmy apologized half-heartedly, walked into Gronk's tiny kitchen, opened his fridge, and rooted around for something to eat. "Fuck, man, what the hell do you *eat*? There's nothin' in here."

Jimmy turned casually and fired again from across the room, this time driving a bullet into Gronk's left hand. He gritted his teeth against the scream that wanted to burn up his throat and tear through his vocal cords. He fell over on his side and bled.

You will not ruin this for me, thug. The words felt honest. Crisp ice chips of truth. But then, just as quickly, as a new wave of pain coursed through his system, those ice chips melted, drowning his courage.

Jimmy slammed through the cupboards, chucking onto the floor a jar of Nutella, a ziplocked bag of pistachios, four crumbled crackers, and a slightly crushed box

of Weetabix. He stomped over to Gronk, loomed over him, pointed the muzzle of his gun directly at his head. "Before you die, I wanna know one thing, freak. What do you do with it all? Huh?" Jimmy poked Gronk's forehead with the muzzle of the gun. "What do you do with those sacks of organs, the crates of limbs? What sick shit do you get up to with that stuff, retard?"

Gronk frowned, chewed on his lip. Now was his chance to come clean, tell someone about what he'd been doing. He was going to die either way, so why not at least get it off his chest? But a hard nugget of resistance had formed in his heart, his throat. He wouldn't give up his secret. Not to this thug.

"I won't tell you."

Jimmy threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, I beg to differ. You will fucking tell me." His breath smelled like sewage and his teeth were long, dark yellow, and crooked. He leaned back and puffed on his stogie, smoke snaking around his greasy head, curling up to the ceiling, then flattening out and drifting into water-stained corners.

And just when Gronk felt that bolt of courage rising again in his chest—his synapses popping and sizzling, that stubborn determination gripping his will, creating a solid path of defiance—Jimmy's shoulders slumped a little. He pointed the gun at Gronk's head again. "Ah, fuck it."

Gronk squeezed his eyes shut.

Jimmy pulled the trigger.

The hammer did not fall. The gun just sat there, jammed, in Jimmy's giant mitt.

Jimmy squeezed the trigger again. Still nothing.

"Cocksucker!" Jimmy roared, pulling the trigger over and again, to no avail.

Gronk thought he should feel happy, elated, perhaps

even graced by God to have been given such a reprieve. Surely, someone Up There was watching over him. But instead of feeling blessed, charmed, or divinely intervened upon, Gronk just felt sad. Because he couldn't save himself. Instead, he had to be saved by events that had nothing whatsoever to do with his actions.

Gronk sighed, and let pain wash over him.

When he was just about to black out, he saw Jimmy—through a surreal haze of smoke, grimy light, and watering eyes—finally give up on the weapon and throw it against the nearest wall.

Finally discharging it.

The bullet made a neat hole right where Jimmy's heart should be; a thin trickle of blood oozed out. Eyes wide, mouth open, Jimmy keeled over.

Thoroughly disappointed in his performance, Gronk frowned and passed out.



When he came to, Gronk tried to wiggle the fingers of his left hand, tried to move his right leg—severe pain in both directions.

Someone must've heard the gunfire and called the cops by now. I gotta get outta here.

Lifting his head from the floor, he looked at the sack. With his savings gone, it was probably the last one he'd ever get his hands on.

In the distance: sirens.

When the police arrived, they found a broken-down door and a dead thug in a pool of blood.

No Gronk.

No sack of guts.



I can't ever go back.

Blood trickled down Gronk's leg and off the tips of his fingers as he struggled down the alleyway behind his apartment building. He held the leak-proof sack in his right hand, slung over his shoulder. It was tied at the top with wire and filled with ice to keep its contents cool.

Gronk's thin brown shirt and dark gray sweatpants were slicked to his skin with sweat. Almost there now. Gronk smiled despite his injuries. Swanny would take care of him. He didn't know for sure, couldn't remember for certain, but he thought maybe Swanny had always taken care of him.

He rounded the alleyway's corner and lurched under a dirty-green, torn-up awning. "Swanson's Knife Shoppe" was stencilled in Army font on the shop's little window. Beneath the words: a crudely drawn picture of a sharpening stone.

Gronk dropped the sack to the cracked pavement and felt alongside the edge of the metal door for the buzzer. He had no idea what time it might be, but hoped to hell Swanny was home. His fingers found the buzzer. He pushed it for ten full seconds.

Footsteps coming down stairs. The door swung open and Swanny stood at the bottom of the staircase. Wearing a dark red bathrobe and light green sandals, her short hair was held back here and there with clips.

"You're beautiful, Swanny." Gronk managed to smile a little. It was the same thing he said every time he came over.

Swanny looked him up and down quickly, alarm registering on her features only very slightly—the hint of a raised eyebrow, a tightening of the lips, the tiniest widening of heavily mascara'd eyes. But that was all.

"Come in," she said. "Hurry."

Gronk grabbed the sack with one hand and hobbled inside. Swanny shut and locked the door behind him.

"Leave the sack here," Swanny said. "I'll come back down for it."

She helped him up the stairs one step at a time, opened her apartment door, and led him through. She retreated down the stairs, grabbed the sack, came up again, dropped it beside her coat rack, locked all five of her deadbolts in quick succession, hooked her three chain locks, and sat down opposite Gronk on a wicker rocking chair.

"Do you want me to help you, or do you want to just bleed to death?" Swanny's arms were folded across her chest. Gronk didn't blame her for her attitude; he'd more than imposed on her these past couple of years. Free food, free money, free rides to and from his secret place.

Free knives.

Gronk leaned back, eyes shut, his head on a small pillow embroidered with elephants. Plastering her walls were framed posters of Harry Houdini and other magicians Gronk had never heard of. A battered old chest sat in one corner of the living room—her trunk of tricks, she called it. A deck of cards was spread out on top of the trunk; a dog-eared book of amateur card tricks sat open next to it.

Swanny believed there was magic in everything.

"You're bleeding on my couch," Swanny said, her tone chilly. Maybe he'd really worn out his welcome this time.

She pursed her lips, disappeared down the darkened hallway, flipped on the bathroom light, returned a minute later with scissors, a washcloth, a length of gauze, and some metal clips. "Leg," she said, moving her chair closer to the couch. Gronk used his good arm to help Swanny prop his bad leg onto her knees. She cut away

his sweatpants, cleaned the bullet wound as best she could, then wrapped the gauze around, cut it, and clipped it securely.

"Hand." She moved her chair a little closer to the couch, but didn't raise her eyes to meet Gronk's. He gently maneuvered his hand to her knees, rested it there, hissing through his teeth. She cleaned and bandaged it, too. "That'll do till you can get treated at a hospital."

Gronk nodded, looked away. "Thanks."

The ensuing silence was more than Gronk could bear. He knew this was the last time he'd be able to lean on Swanny. Felt it in the cold space between them.

"You're not going to die," she said. "At least not yet."

"Swell."

More silence.

"I suppose you need a ride," she said.

"No, I'll walk. Don't worry about it. You've done more than enough for me already—and over the years, too. I don't deserve a friend like you."

"We're not friends, Gronk."

No, I suppose we're not. Not really.

"Well, whatever we are, Swanny, I want to thank you for it. You've been kind when you didn't have to be."

"I've been curious, that's all. You've become mysterious. Still dorky, but mysterious." Swanny cracked a small grin.

"Gee, thanks," Gronk said, and smirked.

The clock in the living room chimed four times. Gronk craned his neck to get a look at it. "Four in the morning?"

"Do you have time to sleep? You should really rest." Swanny crossed her legs, leaned back in the rocking chair. She produced a cigarette seemingly from thin air. Lit it with a match she plucked from the same place. It unnerved Gronk every time she did it. Whenever he

asked her how she managed it, she'd just say, "Magic. I'm entitled to some mystery, too, you know."

"The cops will be looking for me, so yeah, I guess I should lay low for a bit." Gronk winced. Again with the tough-guy talk. Sounded so corny coming from him. Why did he even bother?

Swanny looked like she was trying not to laugh. "I'll get you a blanket, then, ya big criminal." She stood up and disappeared down the hallway again.

Returning with a blanket, she found Gronk already asleep.



In Gronk's old apartment, Detective Jeremy Fintner squatted over the inert body of Jimmy the thug. Other officers meandered about, dusting this, bagging that. Bells had rung in his head when he'd found out the identity of the renter, but he couldn't quite place the name.

Fintner stood, walked to a ratty desk set deep into one corner of the room beside some empty bookshelves, broken hockey sticks and tattered movie posters. He slipped on latex gloves and pulled open the desk's drawer. It squealed in protest, the wood having expanded in the record-breaking heat of the past week.

Inside were photographs. Piles of them. They'd been cut apart and taped together again with other photographs, placing people from one picture with people from another. Fintner flipped through the various pieces, unable to discern any pattern. Some pictured smiling women, relatively recent judging by the hairstyles; others showed teenagers, definitely older, probably from the late '70s or early '80s—rocker-types with studs on their leather jackets, or the names of metal bands stitched into

their jean jackets. Smoking, laughing, hanging out, goofing off. But all of them jumbled about, creating different scenes than the ones in which they originally appeared. Sometimes body parts were cut out and rearranged, creating different people.

When he neared the bottom of the drawer, he flipped to one picture in particular and stopped dead. A photograph of a thin young man.

"Holy shit," Fintner said.

One of the forensic investigators asked him what he'd found.

Fintner tapped the photo lightly and said, "I know this guy." He turned the picture over. The name on the back confirmed it.

He scraped the bottom of the drawer, picking up the last few cut-up pieces of photos—and realized that he recognized someone else in them, too.



When Gronk woke the following morning, he watched Swanny move around the kitchen like a hummingbird, mixing scrambled eggs in a bowl, flitting to the stove to check on the bacon. She put down toast, poured two glasses of orange juice, brewed coffee. A pretty blur bathed in yellow-orange morning light.

"What time is it?" Gronk croaked.

"Time to go to the hospital," Swanny said, grating cheese over the scrambled eggs.

"Yeah, yeah, the hospital, I know. What time is it, Swanny?"

She glanced at the kitchen clock, too far away for Gronk to make out. "Eleven."

Gronk wiped crud out of his eye. "Can you give me a ride?"

Swanny knew he didn't mean to the hospital. She didn't reply.

"Swanny, can you give me a ride?" An impatient edge crept into Gronk's voice.

"Sure, yeah, okay, but you gotta eat something first."

"No time."

The sound of bacon fat popping.

"Besides," Gronk continued, "I thought we weren't friends. Why so much concern about my well-being if we're not friends?"

She turned. "Oh, fuck you, Marcus. You know what? Do whatever the hell you want. You always did before, so why should now be any fucking different?" She slammed the spatula down, turned the stove off, poured herself a cup of black coffee and walked away. When her bedroom door slammed, it knocked a framed photograph off the wall. Glass shattered in the hallway.

Gronk blinked.

He sat up slowly, eyes scrunched tight against the pain. He stood up, limped to the bathroom—careful to avoid the glass—and rifled through the medicine cabinet. He found some extra-strength pills for the pain, took a piss, hobbled into the kitchen.

The toast popped.

He scooped up some scrambled eggs and cheese with the spatula, popped it in his mouth, dumped some piping-hot coffee down his throat—the burn taking his mind off the pain in his limbs for at least a few seconds—and snagged a dry piece of toast, stuffing it in his mouth as he headed back to the hallway.

Picking up the photograph and broken wooden frame from the floor, he glanced quickly at the picture. It was Swanny and some guy Gronk didn't recognize, though faint bells rang in his head. Swanny looked about ten years younger. Neither she nor the guy looked very

happy, but they didn't really look sad, either. They had their arms around each other, so he figured it must be someone close to her. Could have been a brother, a friend, a lover. No way to tell, and the tiny bit of recognition he felt looking at the guy wouldn't focus for him. He flipped the picture over, but nothing was written on the back to give him a clue.

You have many such pictures yourself, don't you, Gronky Boy. Sure you do. Except you don't frame yours; you cut them up and move the pieces around like a jigsaw puzzle, 'cause you're a fucking spaz.

Gronk frowned, shook his head. He bent down and put the photo against the wall. Straightening up, he leaned in close to Swanny's bedroom door and said, "You're beautiful, Swanny."

No reply.

Gronk quietly left the apartment.



Four hours later, Detective Fintner rang the apartment buzzer located beside Swanson's Knife Shoppe. Swanny came downstairs, ready to listen to Gronk's apology. When she opened the door and saw that it was not Gronk, but a detective, her expression hardly changed a bit.

"Sorry to bother you on the weekend like this, Ms. Swanson, but I'm Detective Jeremy Fintner. I'd like to ask you some questions about a murder. It involves someone I believe you know."

Swanny shifted her weight a little, stared down at the detective's shoes.

"His name is Marcus Gronk."

Swanny lifted her eyes a little. Behind the detective, she saw dime-sized blood droplets on the sidewalk.

Neither she nor Gronk had thought to clean them up when he came in last night.

"Why do you think I know Mr. Gronk, detective?" Swanny's voice remained steady, sounding almost bored.

"I came across some photos in his apartment. One of those photos was of you. I remembered seeing you around the neighborhood with your knife-sharpening cart, ringing your bell, trying to drum up business." Fintner attempted a smile, trying to loosen Ms. Swanson up.

Swanny continued staring at the blood on the sidewalk. She didn't look behind her, but she knew there'd be more blood on the stairs, leading right into her apartment.

"And that's the only way you connected us, detective?"

Fintner cocked his head to one side, scratched his cheek and grinned. "Should I have connected you in some other way, Ms. Swanson?"

Swanny raised her eyes to meet Fintner's. "How about the trail of blood leading from the sidewalk right to the front door of my apartment?"

Fintner looked behind him tentatively, peeked around Swanny, then turned a deep, dark red. His hand crept to his holstered gun. "Shit, is he—"

"He's gone. I can take you to him, but you have to promise me you won't hurt him, detective. Do you understand?"



On the bus, Gronk thought for the millionth time about all the places he should have been, could have been, would never go. Looking at all the other people around him, he wondered if any of them ever felt the

same way. Surely they must have. But what do they do about it? How do they deal with the lives they never had?

The bus rumbled along, bouncing over potholes, inexplicably blasting heat out of what was supposed to be its air conditioner. Deeper into the suburbs, deeper into the kind of place where half-built, forgotten subway lines languished, affording failed teachers and historians like Marcus Gronk a glimpse into a life that should have been.

Gronk had written about the abandoned subway line. He'd tried to sell the article to magazines, websites, even to just the local newspaper, but—as with most everything else he created—no one wanted it. So he shelved it, along with a dozen other articles about interesting, lesser-known parts of the city.

Factory Road. Time to get off.

As he stepped off the bus, he wondered briefly if the guts were now too warm to use. He generally assumed it didn't matter much, anyway. Not really. Not for his purposes. Slightly warmer guts would probably work as well as cold guts, but you just never knew. Maybe whatever magic they contained when they were cold leaked out when they got warm. Maybe whatever remnant of the soul was in the organ realized it was no longer attached to its owner and promptly fled the scene.

Sometimes Gronk tried to feel bad about what he was doing. He really tried to feel the indignation that he knew others would feel if they knew what he was trying to create. Sometimes he'd get a very small twinge of it, but as fast as it appeared within him, it was gone.

They'd more likely just be jealous, if anything. Taking control of my life is what I'm doing. Giving myself a second chance when no one else will.

Life is made up of scenes. People created their own scenes, their own realities, every day—through their

choices, skills, talents. In the abstract, they worked towards the life they felt they deserved, trying to create a mirror in the physical world of what was in their mind's eye.

Gronk was no different.

Heading toward the bread bakery under which the forgotten subway line ran, he saw etched into a badly dented and faded sign the familiar logo he'd grown up with as a child. His mother had always bought the same brand of bread. Even now, picking it up in a grocery store and thumbing the logo felt like slipping on a comfortable T-shirt, one that felt smooth against the skin. It brought back memories of a time when he felt his choices still had the power to decide his path.

The pills he'd taken this morning were already wearing off, the pain in his leg far worse than before. He stopped walking and sat down on a wooden bench someone had placed near the graffiti'd sidewalk in better times—perhaps when the factory was still open and there were more businesses on the street. He lifted his pant leg and confirmed his suspicion: his wound was bleeding again. Blood soaked through the sodden gauze. The bullet hadn't hit the bone, but was still lodged pretty deep. Blood came from his hand, too.

Gronk picked up the sack and continued toward the bakery.

Twelve blocks away, Detective Fintner and Swanny got into the detective's car and headed to the same destination.



Gronk limped the final few feet to the bakery's side entrance. The crack in the rotten wooden boards through which Gronk had entered the factory back when he'd

been researching it had needed to be significantly widened. Originally, it had only been large enough for the skinniest of men to get through—clearly not a problem for Gronk’s 130-pound frame—but the sacks and the portable generator had posed the difficulty. He’d broken off a few more boards and brought the wood inside, hoping no errant beat cop would notice and start snooping around. He realized very quickly that his reservations were unfounded: he’d only ever seen a handful of vehicles pass through this part of town on their way somewhere else, and only the most serious cyclist or jogger from the city—probably practicing for a marathon—ever dropped sweat on this sun-blistered asphalt.

Gronk stepped inside.

The grayish light coming through the hole created more shadows than it dispelled. Fishing around in his pocket, Gronk retrieved his Zippo, rolled the wheel with his thumb, squinted his eyes against the sudden flare of light. When the flame died down, he looked around. With his leg next to useless, he waited a few minutes for his vision to adjust. If he fell with no one around to help him, he worried he’d never get up again.

In addition to baking bread and cakes, the bakery once doubled as an ice cream shop, so Gronk had his choice of several different sizes of cooling units. He had settled on one of the larger ones—a walk-in freezer measuring about thirty-six square feet located near the back of the bakery. It was a good fifty or sixty feet away from the entrance. He headed there now, carefully picking his way through fallen bits of drywall, broken glass, and overturned chairs in which sons, daughters, parents, and grandparents once sat lapping ice cream and gnawing on cones from 1910 until the business closed down several years ago.

Sometimes when Gronk crossed this stretch of floor, he imagined he faintly heard *The Subway That Never Was* running beneath his feet. Echoes of his life, of his loves.

Fighting off dizziness, nearly tripping over debris more than once, he finally reached the cooling unit. He set the sack down beside the freezer’s door, then moved around back of the unit to power up the generator he’d installed—more research done, more articles no one bought.

Stumbling around to the front again, he picked up the sack and opened the door. When the foot of his bad leg came down lightly on the cool, smooth-steel surface, he felt something warm squish between the toes. He tried to concentrate on the new information, tried to generate concern about his shoe filling up with blood, but the vapor-proof light overhead showed him his creations in such stark clarity, he immediately forgot what it was he was supposed to be concerned about. His mind drifted, swept away in the icy new climate. He closed his eyes, wavered where he stood. Dropping the sack at his feet, he reached his right arm out where he knew his little wooden chair to be and eased himself into it.

After a few minutes of soaking in the cold, the thrill of possibility threading its way through his body, he opened his eyes, leaned over, opened the sack.

And got to work.



Detective Fintner’s car turned down Factory Road. He stopped a good distance away from the abandoned bakery, but close enough that he could see most of the building.

“That’s the place?” he said. “You’re sure?”

"Definitely," Swanny said from the backseat. "I've driven him out here quite a few times over the past couple of years."

Fintner turned and looked at her, brow furrowed. "Do you know what he does in there?"

Swanny dropped her eyes. "I don't know what he does; I've never asked. I don't want to know." She pulled her eyes up again to meet his. "I prefer it that way."

Fintner nodded. Through the windshield, he quickly assessed the building. Lots of places to hide. He called for backup.

"The cuffs too tight, Ms. Swanson?"

She shook her head. "They're fine."

They passed the rest of the time in silence. Three squad cars arrived quietly. Fintner moved to stand, but then turned again in his seat, his left hand gripping the roof of the car. "Look, I want you to know I really appreciate your cooperation with this."

Swanny stared straight ahead out the windshield. "Remember your promise, detective."

Fintner got out of the car, slammed the door, told one of the backup officers to stay behind with Ms. Swanson. Drawing his gun, he walked toward the bakery.

He passed the decrepit wooden bench on which Gronk had checked his wounds. This time, he did not fail to see where the trail of blood led.



Not expecting company, Gronk hadn't bothered closing the door to the walk-in freezer. When Fintner's eyes adjusted to the relative darkness inside the bakery, he had no trouble seeing exactly where Gronk was.

Gronk sat sideways on a wooden chair near the back of a walk-in freezer unit. Something gleamed in his hand.

Fintner moved slowly closer, motioning the other officers to get out of view.

Gronk calmly sawed into something with a large knife.

"Drop the knife and put your hands slowly above your head," Fintner's voice boomed in the enclosed space.

Gronk turned in his chair. He squinted past Fintner, saw the backup officers behind him. For a moment, Gronk thought it had worked, thought his creations were finally moving, that everything had been worthwhile. His second chance come to life.

Then he heard the sound of shells sliding into shotguns. He blinked, frowned. Looked around the freezer, saw everyone from his new life sitting right where they were a moment ago.

"The knife, Marcus. Put it down. You're under arrest for murder."

Gronk's eyes swam in his head. He found Fintner's face again, but was unable to piece everything together.

"Put the knife down or I will shoot," Fintner said.

Behind him, one of the officers bent over and threw up on his shoes. The others shuffled uncomfortably, but held their positions.

Fintner had been so intent on Gronk, he hadn't really taken in his surroundings. When he did, his mouth opened just a little bit, his gun wavering ever so slightly from Gronk's midsection.

"Jeremy?" Gronk whispered, his knife apparently running on automatic, separating layers of cold flesh while he spoke. "Jeremy Fintner?"

Fintner's eyes watered as his brain finally interpreted the scene. "Stop *sawing*, Marcus! Jesus Christ, just stop!"

Gronk's hand slowed, slowed, stopped. He glanced down at it, as if it weren't his own. "Long time since high

school, huh, Jeremy?" Gronk mumbled. The blood in his shoe had spilled out and pooled around his foot. His face was chalk-white, his cheekbones sunken. Breathing shallow.

"Yes," Fintner said, his mouth dry, stuffed with cotton balls, stuffed with memories from well over twenty years ago. "Long time." His gun hand shook.

Spread out on a small, beautifully sculptured round oak table in the middle of the room were knives of all different sizes. Some covered in blood, others showing no signs of having been used. A sewing kit also sat nearby, all sizes and colors of thread spooled out in disarray. But what kept everyone at bay was the handgun nestled in with the knives. Both the knives and the gun were easily within Gronk's reach.

"Hell of a mid-life crisis, huh Jeremy?" Gronk muttered. "But it's okay. It's okay, Jer, 'cause there's magic in everything." His eyes closed and his head swung side-to-side slowly from his neck like a sunflower too big for its stalk.

"Marcus Gronk, you have the right to remain silent. You have the right to an att—"

"Jeremy, be quiet. Listen to me." Gronk's eyes cleared up just a little, sharpening enough to actually look Fintner directly in the eyes. He put down the knife and held up his one good hand in surrender, said, "I'll come with you wherever you think we need to go. But just wait a minute, okay? Just listen to me." Gronk's gaze wavered again, his face scrunched up in pain. "I promise not to be long."

Fintner kept his gun trained on Gronk; Gronk took this silence as agreement.

One of the younger officers said, "Sir, shouldn't we—"

"Shut up, Officer Garrett."

"Do you know what Scenario A is, Jeremy?" Gronk said.

Fintner shook his head.

"Scenario A is the life you're living right now. The life based on the choices you've made from the day you were capable of making them on your own."

Fintner's eyes shifted to the cadaver to Gronk's left, the one he'd been sawing at when they came upon him. It was one of five poorly sewn-together corpses seated around him with its mid-section exposed.

"Scenario A is the half-built, forgotten subway line that runs beneath our feet—intended to be useful, but never having the chance. Discarded. A failure."

"I'm not really following what you're—"

"Do you know what Scenario B is?"

Outside the freezer, Officer Garrett fingered the trigger of his shotgun. Wound tightly, he weighed his options, looked ready to act where the other officers just looked ready to run. He spoke again, perhaps morally unable to keep his peace. His words were hard, clipped: "Sir, we really should —"

"Scenario B is the life you think you should have had. The one you were denied. Either through the stupidity of your own choices, or..." Gronk coughed, swayed in his chair, looked as though he might fall right out of it. Fintner and his backup tensed, ready to pounce on him if he did. "Or through the fact that you're just plain useless, and any choice you could have made wouldn't have made a single bit of difference anyway."

Pausing, Gronk looked up at Fintner. Beneath his feet, he thought he felt the rumbling of non-existent trains.

Inside Officer Garrett's head, a decision was made. He was unaware of it, but he had started to cry.

"I'm forty-three years old, Jeremy." Gronk continued, the delivery of his words very deliberate. "By thirty I was

supposed to have been a successful novelist or screenwriter or teacher or historian or hockey player or husband or any fucking thing at all. But I'm none of those things. None of them. I just fuck everything up." He nodded toward the piecemeal cadavers. "But this...this is my Scenario B, Jeremy. This is the starting point of the life I should have had. These will be my loved ones and my friends. When I get the combination of pieces right, these people will come to life, surrounding me, proud of my achievements. They will love me exactly how I deserve to be loved." He moved his good arm in the general direction of the table. "They'll be there for me when—"

Officer Garrett stepped forward, lifted his shotgun, and fired at Gronk. The blast scattered a spray of lead across Gronk's chest, blowing him off his chair against the wall. He slumped there, silent.

Garrett, red-faced, tears streaming down his cheeks, screamed down at Gronk's corpse: "You fucking sick piece of shit!" He shuttled another shell into the chamber, raised the barrel to fire again, but Fintner lifted it in time, and the shot sprayed into the ceiling. Fintner ripped the gun out of Garrett's hands, and then the other backup officers stepped in and helped Fintner hold Garrett against the freezer wall.

"He was going for the gun!" Garrett shouted, hysterical.

"Bullshit!" Fintner countered. "He was just—"

"How could you just sit there and listen to that, Fintner?" Garrett was inches away from the detective's face. "Look at this fucking place—it's disgusting!" He pointed to the mix of male and female cadavers propped up at the table. "Do you see what those are? Those are dead people cut into pieces and stitched back together with other people's parts, Fintner. Why the fuck didn't you do something? You just sat there listening to his sob

story, like you were sympathizing, like you understood how—"

Fintner grabbed Garrett by the head with both hands. "Calm down, Garrett," he whispered through his teeth. "Just calm. The fuck. Down. He was dying anyway. He was dying—and I had him covered. You didn't need to do that. He was just talking, trying to explain his life." He turned to face Garrett again. "You didn't need to do that."

Fintner turned and walked out of the freezer.



Detective Fintner walked back to his car, opened the door, slid inside. Took a deep breath, exhaled slowly.

Swanny looked at him in the rearview mirror for a while, studying his face. "You broke your promise, detective."

Fintner said nothing, just started the car and drove.

Swanny nodded, looked out the window.

She thought about the photograph that had fallen off the wall earlier that day when she'd stormed into her bedroom. In it, Marcus Gronk had his arm around his wife, looking neither happy nor sad—a honeymoon picture taken years ago, before the divorce. Before Gronk's life had fallen apart, piece by piece.

When she got out, she would buy a new frame.

APOLOGY

They say Death comes swiftly, but today he's taking his sweet fucking time.

I've been lying here in a pool of my own blood for nearly three hours, with no end in sight. Shotgun to the gut. Hurts more than words can convey, yet here I sit beside a garbage dumpster in a dimly lit alleyway, watching rain dribble out of a nearby drainpipe.

Not that it matters, but my name is Ajay Lackré, and I did nothing to deserve this.

As much fun as bleeding to death is, I'd sure rather be elsewhere, doing something other than this. Many years ago, I came to terms with the fact that my life would essentially amount to nothing meaningful, and was pretty relaxed with the concept, all told. I mean, so what if I never invent anything that revolutionizes the way people do business. Big deal if I never write a *New York Times* best seller. Who gives a rat's ass if I never get married and raise a Harvard graduate.

A blip on the radar. Time swallows us all up anyway.

I know, a defeatist attitude. Shameful. But then, I'm the one who's gutshot, aren't I.

The sky cracks and gives birth to thunder. Boom.

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How anti-climactic. How fucking cliché. Dying in a dark alleyway. In the rain. Beside a dumpster. With the skies unleashing hell.

Pah. Life is made up of such dreary moments.

Fucker cornered me, ambushed me. Accused me of sleeping with his wife, of ruining his life. Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. I'm not accountable to him. Pretty bad attitude, I know, but then you aren't me, and have no idea how I ended up this way. Bitter. Callous. Uncaring. Maybe I had a hellish childhood. Maybe Daddy was a belligerent alcoholic and Mommy a crack-addicted gutterslut. Destined to a life of ridicule and trauma.

Who is woe? Woe is me.

Again: pah. Like I buy any of that shit.

The first trickles of blood connect with the puddle I'm sitting in. I'm completely drenched, shivering. But my life isn't slipping away like it should be. How much longer? Jesus H. You always see those war movies where some poor bugger gets shot in the stomach and he lies there cold, just wanting to close his eyes and drift off, but the guy's buddy keeps slapping his face, trying to keep him awake, 'cause he knows that if his friend goes to sleep, it'll be forever.

Well, there's no one here slapping my face. No one here to give me reason to live, tell me that I gotta hold on for little Timmy, who'll grow up fatherless, and for my lovely wife, who can't raise the boy on her own, so I gotta hang on, I just gotta keep awake, 'cause help's on the way, a medic will be here soon, and everything'll be okay, everything'll be sweet and rosy again, if I can just *hold on, for Christ's sake*.

Not here. Nothing here but falling water from a disinterested sky, a few scattered cardboard boxes, discarded soup cans, and, of course, some squeaking rats. Gotta have the rats. What's a death scene in an alleyway

NO FURTHER MESSAGES

without rats?

So what *did* I have going for me? I had a job that paid well. The job itself was shit. Multinational corporation fucking the weak, sucking up to the strong. The way things get done. No pissing around with lofty morals, pointless ideals, or anything else that might make me stop to think what I'm actually doing. Just money, hand over fist. Big house, fast car, the respect of my peers.

Glorious.

But in the end, fucking street whores just doesn't cut it. Loneliness is every rich man's downfall. You want what's not yours, and you're so used to just taking it, there's not even a moment of indecision. And there shouldn't be.

I have no regrets.

Fuck the bitch I crammed up the ass, and fuck the guy I stole her from.

There is no punishment meted out after death. No heaven, no hell. Not even a limbo or purgatory. All that crap just makes it easier to make it through the day, gives people a reason to get up in the morning and face their daily allotment of bullshit.

Nothing but silence awaits. Silence and maybe the fading memories of what you did with your life.

Same old story, I know. But I'm dying, and it's the only story I've got.

I take a deep breath, and finally things seem darker, the streetlights dimmer, the sounds more like they're underwater. I've lost feeling in one of my arms, and the other feels like a big stick of ice. I lift it, bang it against the wall at my back, try to shatter it. But it just thuds wetly, falls beside me in a muddy puddle.

The rain falls harder, and the sky rips open again with close thunder. Lightning crisps everything in my vision. Snapshots of drabness, mediocrity. Failed potential.

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And even though I'm guarding against it, this, of course, is my weakest moment, so it intrudes, barrels through my crumbling wall of bitterness. Siphons off whatever small piece of humanity might be cowering somewhere deep inside me.

This thought, this fucking non-truth:

I'm sorry.

For everything.

My eyes close and I drift away, seething. Feeling betrayed by my own mind.

The sky opens up once again, but this time there's only silence...

Or at least I hope that's what Ajay thought when I shot him and left him to die in that alleyway.

FRESHETS

Okay, so I'm fucking this guy in the ass, over a chair, you know? Just fucking him hard and fast, like we're —

No, wait a sec. That's not right.

So I'm banging the piss out of this chick, right? Just railing on her, pulling on her tits from behind and really giving it to her, like —

Hang on. That's not right, either.

Alright, so I'm licking this cunt, don't care whose, just some cunt, and there're two of them, these hot lesbos, just really on fire. One's taking my whole cock while I'm lapping her up; the other's got three fingers in my asshole, knuckle-deep, trying to wear me like a glove, and she's pumping in hard, twisting her nipples between her fingers, trying to rip the poor fucking things off, and —

Nah, that ain't happening, either.

Dirty dishes, though, that's for sure. Right over there in the sink. Stacks of them. Filthy. Shit growing on them. Moldy green crap, you know? Nightmare mountain, looming over me, over everything in the kitchen. My tiny kitchen, with its doorless, empty cupboards, wide open, staring at the dishes, hungry, wishing I'd wash them so

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the cupboards could have some sort of purpose.

Yeah, sure, but fuck them. I have more pressing shit to deal with.

Like, hey, where'd these people come from? These fornicating freshets, splayed out all over my living room. My living room where nothing lives. Just a dusty television, which I leave tuned to the nature channel 'cause I like to learn things about other animals.

No pizza boxes, though. You want pizza boxes, go read someone else's choppy-sentenced, no-plot story. This one only has dirty dishes, empty cupboards, a dusty television, wildly bucking males and females in decidedly provocative positions, and me, the poor bastard in the middle of it all, wishing I knew what was happening and why it was happening to me.

For the most part, I just sit on my ratty old cigarette-burn-holed couch and watch. No bag of chips in my lap, though, same as the pizza boxes, so don't even think it. The shit the freshets get up to is not particularly relaxing, and my perpetual erection makes it hard to concentrate on lifting food to my mouth, anyway.

Erection. There, I said it.

But I'm not a man. Can't be a man. I have fantasies about men. Like when I'm fucking that guy over the chair in the corner of the living room, really ripping into him, you know, and —

But it's not true. Fucking cocksucking homos.

And there's Dad talking, there's my brother talking, there's everyone in my life talking.

Some days I pinch the lips of my pussy, slide a finger or two inside and grin, grin like mad, lift my other hand to my tits, heft their weight. Oh, yeah, I'm all about breasts, me. Even the dishes turn away when I'm doing this, shrink into the grimy crusts of their dried-on food-stuffs. Then I feel some other woman's sex toy in me — a

long, fat dildo—and it's sliding in so slowly, just feeling around in there, spelunking, digging for treasure, scoping out the joint, and she's gonna invite some friends over, too, 'cause—

But that's not true, either. Sick-ass lesbos. Just need a good fat sausage up the ass to turn them back to the straight and narrow.

Hi again, Dad.

Hey, best friend.

Howdy, world.

I just sort of float around every day with different genitalia attached to me—man, woman, both, neither, in between, upside down, inside out, on top, below, from behind, whichever way and in whatever body presents itself. I'm a sexual chameleon, baby. Pussy, dick, all the same to me. I have no shame. But then, that's not even me talking. That's the person I want to be. I have yet to discover what I actually am. What do you prefer? Does it matter? Is there even a difference?

Let's ask the dishes. Let's ask the cupboards. Wide-eyed, accusing motherfuckers, all of them. Staring, staring, watching, leaning, looming, dirty and dirty-minded. Not everything is about sex, I tell them. Not everything.

There's a picture on top of the dusty television of someone I don't recognize. The freshets never look at it, never even turn their heads in its direction. Two guys. Smiling. Happy. As if.

One of the guys seems like he's gone. Seems like he hasn't been in this apartment for a long, long time. So long, I can barely remember him. I think the other guy might be me. I look like a discarded beer can—sort of crumpled at the edges, pinched in at the waist and leaning to one side—and many years younger.

I can barely remember him, either.

So there's dead-or-missing guy and empty, young maybe-me. We're quite the couple. I have no idea who could have taken this picture, because no one else exists except me (or the thing that pretends to be me), dead-or-missing guy, and the ever-present host of fabulous freshets.

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language has this to say on the subject:

fresh·et *n.*

A sudden overflow of a stream resulting from a heavy rain or a thaw.

A stream of fresh water that empties into a body of salt water.

The picture on top of the dusty television has thawed, and I'm M./Mme. Saltwater. Pleased to meet you.

On an end table next to one of my frayed and crappy chairs is a pile of bills. The bills do not even come close to competing with the dishes, but they're trying. Yes, sir. Trying hard to loom and be menacing, but achieving only a sort of semi-threatening almost-leer that doesn't do much to stir any sort of fear inside me. I'm far more terrified of the dishes. Dirty dishes were born to terrorize, created to instill a sense of doubt in humans, designed to challenge our control of the situation—whatever situation we're deluded enough to feel that we're in control of.

Far off in one corner of the living room, leaning against a grimy gray wall, are the cupboard's doors. Looking forlorn. So sad. Ripped from their homes, then crammed close to one another against their wills.

Surely there's symbolism in there somewhere, but I can't be bothered to figure it out. I know I must have

ripped the cupboard doors from their hinges for some symbolic reason. I'm such a pretentious twat when it comes to emoting. Fuck it, who am I kidding? I am the doors and the doors represent my disconnection from reality for whatever pathetic, self-centered reasons I feel like telling myself this week.

Because cupboards without doors do not exist. Carpenters do not build such things. They are aberrant. Against nature.

On the television, a fat man talks about zebras, motions to them in the background behind him. Black and white stripes. Something about mating. On television, everything is about sex. And yeah, fat man, black and white stripes. Sure. Like anything is so simple.

I reach inside my disgusting couch, pull out the VCR remote, point it in the general direction of the television, having to lean around a few sets of freshets twisting nipples, reaming assholes, moaning about how good it feels, how it's never been like this before—having to lean around these monsters to shoot my infrared at the screen.

I press Record.

After a few minutes, I rewind the tape and watch zebras run across my screen in Fast Forward. They're gray. Not black and white at all.

Gray. Just like the rest of life, fat man.

Everything is about perspective.

The way I see it, sitting on this beer-stained shit-brown couch, a distinct chunk of myself dead or missing, I'd say I'm about ready to kick these freshets out on their asses, out my door, out of my life. This isn't a porno movie, you fucks. Get out.

Now I'm standing, I'm livid, motioning with my arms, pointing at the door, get out, get out, you've been here too long. No one invited you, anyway. Nobody wants you.

But they ignore me, the lot of them. White and black and brown limbs, flailing, groping. I sit back down on my couch, defeated. Deflated.

There's a video camera on the floor, in front of the television. I get up again, push naked bodies out of my way, collecting sheens of sweat as I go, like stamps or foreign coins.

Picking up the camera, I check to see if there's a tape inside. Of course there is. This isn't the sort of story where the protagonist isn't prepared, boring everyone by running around hunting for a fucking videotape. That story, and the one with the pizza boxes and chip bags, is somewhere else, in some other book, on some other guy's bookshelf.

I press Record on this machine, just like I did on the VCR. This extension of my memory, this chunk of my psyche that will never grow old or become damaged by time. Only accident or violence can smear this recollection of my existence.

Film's rolling. Tape's moving. I'm the director. Let's see if these freshets can stand the glare of the spotlight. Let's see if they can prove their substantiality by not being ghosts, by not being just the boring, filthy furniture of my diseased living room and kitchen. Let's see what these little bastards are really made of.

Rolling, rolling, several minutes of film, from several different angles all around these two-rooms-in-one. I make sure the microphone is working, too, so I'll be able to hear, upon playback, all the promises of love, fidelity, affection, loyalty, monogamy, and other things people should be smart enough not to believe in.

I want to film the dishes and the cupboards and the bills, but I'm afraid of what they'll look like on camera. They're scary enough without adding ten pounds to their weight.

NO FURTHER MESSAGES

I press Stop, fight my way through the fleshy freshies, eject the zebra tape, and pop this new one in.

Press Play.

Somehow the fat man has weaselled his way onto this tape (and, presumably, into my living room). He's pointing behind him at the freshets, smiling, discussing their mating rituals. Now switching his attention to the picture on top of my dusty television.

Dennis, he says. That's the only word I can make out because the live porn in my living room-kitchen is getting out of hand with the moaning and cussing and smacking and biting. Settle down, I want to say. Settle down or get the fuck out.

Dennis.

The camera closes in tight on the picture, and I remember the name. But the tears in this story are with the pizza boxes and all that other crap. Not here, buddy. No tears for dead-or-missing lovers in this recreation of events that may or may not have happened.

Dennis.

Fuck.

I rewind the tape, watch the fat man and the freshets in Fast Forward. Gray and gray and gray, like the zebras. All those limbs thrashing, meshing, melting, crumbling into one another, crushing the flesh hues into a colorless paste of humanity.

How profound.

I feel sick to my stomach. I'm going to vomit all over my shitty couch.

I rewind the tape again, watch it at normal speed. I point at the screen and tell the fat man to piss off. Get off my screen, you fat fuck; just go back to your nature show and leave me out of it.

But the fat man isn't listening. I let the tape run longer than before, and soon the camera zooms in so close to

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Dennis, it's now just his face. I remember touching that face. I remember kissing those lips. I remember wishing my eyes were like his eyes. Sharp. Crisp. Colorless. Gray.

I press Pause now. A new button. Mixing it up a little.

Dennis stares at me, his face filling the screen.

If dishes could laugh, they'd be busting a gut right now. Laughing at my confusion. Laughing at my loss.

Dennis looks like he's trying to say something, like maybe he's going to apologize, or tell me when he's coming back. Or maybe he's trying to open his mouth to tell the freshets to piss off and leave me be.

Dennis would have done that for me.

My Dennis.

The VCR starts chewing the tape up. I hear it munching. Dennis' face crinkles, warbles, flickers.

Disappears.

And that fat fuck from the nature show is suddenly back on the screen. Now he's talking about giraffes.

Somehow, between the last time I checked and now, tears have sprung from my eyes.

More freshets. More overflow.

Why am I crying, Dad?

What about it, bro?

How about you, ma? What's up with me? Why can't I keep hold of anything? My cup constantly runneth over with the shit that's been poured into me.

I stand up, wipe the tears from my cheeks, looking around my living room-kitchen, seeing nothing but gray, nothing but Dennis' cold, crisp eyes in every one of the freshets' heads. Nestled in there, buried deep, gripping the sides of their sockets, refusing to change color.

I'm flitting around the room again, sucking this hole, fucking that one, trying to remember what this all used to be like back when there was more to my life than this. Trying to hold on to all these pairs of drained, gray eyes.

NO FURTHER MESSAGES

But resolution is something else missing from this story. Maybe it's rotting inside the pizza boxes, growing mold. Growing old. Growing tired of being pulled like a simple rabbit out of the writer's hat.

Suddenly, my tongue aching, my dick throbbing, my pussy bleeding, my tits bruised, I feel overwhelmed with warmth, with comfort. Color bleeds back into the room. I close my eyes for a second, take a deep breath, then release it, slowly.

Freshets pop all around me like balloons. Red splashes streak my walls, drench me, splatter the windows.

In a world of red, there can be no black and white. There cannot even be gray.

When I open my eyes, I'm standing at the sink, staring at the dirty dishes. Up close. Watching them watch me.

Turning around, I see there's only one freshet left unpopped. He's naked and standing there amidst all the gore. He flexes his toes, squishes around in the blood. Smiles at me.

He has Dennis' eyes, but he's not Dennis. I don't know who he is. But when I look at him, I feel something close to attraction. The closest thing to attraction I've felt in such a long, long time.

He walks toward me, confident, sure of who he is, sure of who I am. I am unable to do anything but watch him, like I watched the dishes a moment ago. Powerless. Completely at his mercy.

He extends his naked red arms to me, pulls my head close to his, strokes my hair, my neck. I feel Dennis' eyes beside me, in this man's head. Heavy. Concentrated. Fierce.

The way his hand moves against my skin, I know he's thinking about the dishes when he speaks. He's thinking

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about the cupboard doors. He's thinking about me, of what I used to have, of what he's not going to try to replace.

Looking directly into the face of my crisp, gray past, he says something; his lips move, but I don't hear what they say. Not a word.

Just his breath on my neck, smooth, soothing, forgiving.

ANNIVERSARY OF AN UNINTERESTING EVENT

A young man sits in the chair across from me. We're seated at the dining room table. The young man has a black pen and a yellow pad of lined paper in front of him. He leans over, picks up the pen, and writes.



Today's the day. And no one's here but me.

I know they didn't just forget, but it's tempting to delude myself.

How long has it been? Five, six years? I suppose I should keep better track.

Doesn't matter, though, because I always remember the day. And that's more than the rest of them can say. I can't recall the last time everyone gathered together for this anniversary.

I'm the only one who cares.

My brother, the Great Explorer, is probably gallivanting around the world, uncovering pirate's gold or scaling treacherous mountains. What a gem he is. What a wonderful guy to consistently miss this anniversary. You'd think it'd be important to him. You'd think it'd be important to all of them.

My sister, well, she's probably at home with her fuckhead husband and three screaming troglodytes. Three thousand miles away. They drink wine out of crumpled Coke cans, and watch *Happy Days* reruns every Saturday night. Their dog only has two legs—the front ones—and the troglodytes laugh as it drags its ass around the living room. Their mom and dad ignore them, and concentrate on The Fonz working his magic on the jukebox.

Where the wine-out-of-a-Coke-can habit came from, I've no idea. But then, how their dog wound up with only two legs, I've also no idea. No one tells me anything.

My mom? Well, Mom's old and getting older. She thinks Jewish people are taking over the airwaves, tells me to stop watching the news because it's nothing but "Jew propaganda." Good old ma. Her eyesight isn't so good, either—keeps bumping into walls, falling down stairs. It's a wonder she's even still alive. But her hearing's okay, so she could at least call, for fuck's sake. Even though no one lives here anymore, I keep the phone hooked up.

Just in case.

And finally, Dad: where's he? Why isn't he sitting at this table with me? He should be here for this. Should be here to hold my hand. Tell me he remembers, that he's sorry, that everything's going to be okay. But he's not here.

He's not.



The young man sighs, puts the pen down beside the paper, leans back. His eyes glisten. The air is empty around him—he doesn't feel what he hoped he would, doesn't feel much of anything at all these days.

The young man tears off the sheet of yellow paper, places it gently in the middle of the small, round table, pushes his chair back, gets up and leaves the dining room.

One year passes.

The young man enters the dining room again. Pulls out the chair across from me, sits down. The pen and paper are still right where he left them. No one has been here to move them, because no one lives here anymore.

He closes his eyes slowly. When he reopens them, the pen is already moving across the yellow pad.



My father wasn't a very nice man at all. I suppose I can't really blame everyone else for never showing up. I think the last time everyone was together here at this table was—god, it must be nine, ten years ago. So why the hell am I here? Why do I keep coming back?

I ask myself that question every time I jump in my shitty little car to drive up here, this forgotten house, this decayed little room. Why? What's the point in coming back when no one else does? It's not like he was nice to me when he was shitting on the rest of the family. We all got shit on equally. So far as I can remember, he was never nice to anyone—not friends, family, neighbors, or strangers.

But I'm here again, aren't I? And I don't even know what I'm hoping for, writing these stupid, pointless

notes. He can't read them; the only one who reads them is me. I've written five or six of them now, and placed them all in the middle of this table. Words on top of words—letters to a dead man.

I remember three or four years ago my globetrotting brother called me to ask if I was going to the old man's place again that year. He called from fucking Peru. What a dick.

Anyway, I said yeah, I'm going to Dad's, then what I said next I said before I could catch myself—already feeling my face redden before the sentence is completely out of my mouth: "You should come, too, Paul."

He laughs. Hard. Like it's the most ludicrous idea he's ever heard. Like whatever the hell is there for him in Peru is more important than remembering his father. But family never has meant much to Paul. Only airplanes hold meaning for him. Only hotel rooms. Exotic food. Exotic whores. Anything North American is shit; he'll have nothing to do with it. And that includes his family. We're not from Venezuela; we're not from Spain; we're not from Asia. We're from Marthaville, Ontario, Canada. Not a person of ethnic origin for farm field after sprawling farm field.

So he laughs at my suggestion, and I wished he'd been within arms reach so I could strangle him. And I fucking would—I'd wrap my hands around his throat and squeeze until he was dead.

He laughs until he's out of breath, then just as he's about to say something, I hang up.

We haven't spoken since.

I told Mom about the fight. She pretended she couldn't hear me. I told my sister. She laughed and said, "Well, that's Paul, you know." As if she were any different.

Then I told Dad.

NO FURTHER MESSAGES

I told my dead father about the fight. I spoke aloud to this empty room, described the argument word-for-word, then waited for him to take someone's side. Of course, there was only silence—just like when he was alive. He never chose sides between us. The only side he ever took between his three kids was my sister's, if Paul and I were doing something to bug her. But if the trouble was between Paul and I, Dad suddenly lost his voice. He wouldn't take a side, no matter what. He'd just tell us to work it out ourselves. And if there's one thing I hate him for more than any other, it's his inability to choose between his sons.

I can forgive everything else. But never that.

I don't think Paul ever cared, though. If he did, he'd be here now. Writing reams and reams of repressed bullshit on lined yellow paper. Trying to raise the dead.



The young man tears off another sheet of paper, places it in the center of the table with the others.

Sometimes he makes coffee, but most of the time, it's tea. He puts a little bit of milk in the tea, never too much. This is the way his father used to drink it.

Occasionally, the young man looks up from the piece of paper he's writing on, looks right at me. But his eyes just pass through. He complains that no one's here to share this anniversary with him, but I'm here.

I'm sitting right here.

But I guess it's not enough. He wants more than this. And I can't blame him, not even a little. Fathers are very important. Especially to their sons. Daughters can grow up, get married, find another man on which to lean, to depend, to fall in love with. But sons only have their fathers, and sometimes their brothers. But usually, there

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is only one shot to make that kind of connection.

The young man gets up from the table, goes over to the kitchen and makes another pot of tea.

When he pours himself a cup, he does not put in any milk.

While he sips from his cup, I rummage through the small pile of yellow paper in the center of the table, pull one of the earlier sheets from the bottom of the stack. He does not notice.

I lean back and read.



Third year in a row I've come here. Again, there's no one else. Maybe they think what happened was my fault, and they can't bear to be around me. Too harsh a reminder. Or maybe I look too much like him. Probably doesn't bother Paul or my sister, Jill, but my mother—she's pretty far gone, and I'm not sure what she sees when she looks at me now. I just know that whenever I look in the mirror, I see Dad. I don't see Dad's eyes, or eyebrows, or nose, or mouth, or any particular feature—I just see Dad as a whole. Maybe that's why I want to father my brother, straighten him out, force him to settle down.

He flew to Scandinavia this year. Sent me an email from the hotel he's staying at. It read, "Sorry I can't come with you to Dad's house, bro. Lots of business to take care of over here. Hopefully Jill makes the trip out; you really shouldn't be going there on your own. It's not healthy, you know? Anyway, say hi to mum and sis, if they show. Let them know I miss them, and I'll try to visit soon."

I wrote him back a long, hate-filled letter, filled with condemnations about his irresponsible lifestyle, his

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apathy toward the rest of his family. I ripped into him so hard that by the time I was finished, I was crying, hitching in violent sobs, my chest aching like hell. My finger hovered over the Send button, shaking, tears dripping onto my keyboard. But then I highlighted the letter, hit the Delete key, indented once, and wrote simply "Fuck you."

And hit Send.

He did not respond.

I miss Dad so much. Why can't I be the favorite? Why can't he pick me? I'd say I'm waiting here for some kind of sign, but that's not true. Dad never was one to give hints or indications about his intentions, thoughts, feelings. But I also can't believe that he was just some soulless rock carved in the form of a man. Carved in the form of my father.

He must have loved one of us more than the other; love is discriminating and never doled out evenly.

If I could send an email to Dad, I'd tell him to fuck off, too.



I lean forward, put the yellow paper back where I found it. Not that I have to bother, mind, but I like to at least *feel* as though everything is back in its proper place.

The young man is about halfway through his tea, and stares over my right shoulder as he drinks. He looks at nothing on the wall behind me. Fading orange wallpaper looks back at him.

Breaking out of his usual pattern of writing a one-page letter, then drinking tea and leaving until next year, he sets his cup down gently on the table.

Something inside me moves ever so slightly and the telephone rings. He does not answer it. Instead, he very

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deliberately rips another page from the yellow pad of paper, brings it toward him, and positions his pen to write a second page.

The phone stops ringing when his pen touches the first line.



This will be my last visit to Dad's old place. Dad is not here. Dad is not coming back. I never really thought he was, of course, but still, it bears saying aloud: He's not coming back because he's dead, and that means his legs can no longer support his weight. But though weightless, he somehow still sits on my chest. Strangely, it is not an altogether uncomfortable feeling.

But I'm sick of buying tea at the little convenience store around the corner. I'm sick of sitting in this chair, waiting for silence to smother me. I'm sick of wishing someone would come here with me, keep me company, mourn the day. This is Dad's special day more than his birthday ever was. This day signifies everything he was to me, to Paul, to Jill, and even to my mother. It's the day he showed us he was never going to change, never going to apologize for anything he did. There was a sort of sick form of hope rotting inside each of us, holding on, wondering if the day would ever come when he'd take it all back. Ask for forgiveness.

I'm sick of thinking thoughts like this. The weight is too much.

I want to go out like Dad did.

Careful where you tread, son; don't go sayin' things you'll regret later. Sure won't, Dad. I always listened to you when you said dumb shit like that. But I just want to die now. I want to die like you did. Right here in this fucking kitchen. I want you to be *made* to choose between your

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sons, because I know you won't do it on your own. Because you're a coward. Always were. So why don't I choose for you? You can't give me a good reason not to, because you're a completely unreasonable man. But I loved you when no one else did.

And now I'm whining...fucking pathetic.

The wine in Coke cans was from you, wasn't it? You started that with Jill, shared it with her and only her, excluding Paul and me. And your travel bug was shown only to Paul. Books about it, National Geographic specials, Discovery Channel. Right? I'm right, aren't I? Fucking prick. What do I get? Huh? What do I fucking get??

The muzzle of a gun in the mouth. That's what I get. And maybe that's what I want. A fucking—

The telephone rings again, startling the young man. He glances at it quickly where it hangs on the wall, pen hovering over the page, vibrating. His eyes are wet with tears. Face red, sweating.

He stares at the phone, frozen. It rings and rings.

What you already know is that the young man staring at the phone is my son; what you don't know is that I did love him. I loved him very much. More than my wife. More than my other son, Paul. More than my daughter, Jill. But I was wearing someone else's skin. It fit poorly, and every crossroad in life to which it brought me showed me two choices—neither of which was good for my family. Neither of which was good for me. So I chose from this other man's list of options. This skin thief. And it was always wrong, no matter what I did, no matter how I felt or what I did to try to create alternate options.

You see it on your anniversary. You see the darkened shadow of your skin. The son you created; the son you forgot. The son you never meant to hurt.

But.

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I'm tired of being the scapegoat. I'm tired of having everything blamed on me—the way he turned out, the way my family turned out. All of it. Tired of hearing that it's all my fault, and no one else did anything wrong. Just heartless, soulless Dad, fucking everything up, making life miserable for everyone. It's a load of shit, and seared into my brain I have a list of transgressions that my family made against me—every button pushed, every boundary crossed that made me blind with rage.

It's a leap of idiot faith to think that when you forget about the dead, the dead forget about you.

The phone keeps ringing; the pen stops vibrating.

It has been so many years, son. Pick up the phone.

The young man sets his pen down. He pushes away from the table, stands up, walks over to the phone. He brings his hand up to the receiver, lifts it gently from its cradle, puts it to his ear.

I hope he hears my voice.

There's something I desperately need to tell him.

JIMMY DALE

Haha. It's that funny, yeh.

People throw it 'round like it's all just a big joke. "Hoho, ole Jimmy, but if you aren't crazy!" or "Hey, there, Jimmy, but you're a right nutter, ain'tcha?!" Haha!

Funny, yeh! Fuckin' hilarious.

But I tell ya what: it's not so funny when it's you what's gone 'round the bend.

You could say, "Well, how d'ya know you've done the loop? Surely crazy folk don't *know* they're crazy."

And that's where you'd be wrong, Jimmy. That's the whole pisser of it all. I know full well I've slipped me gears, but I can't seem to do a damn thing about it.

I used to be a writer, Jimmy, sure I did. Way back when, before I went nuts-like, y'know? Wrote about fuzzy pants and fluffy bunnies and such. Children's books. Then one day I started callin' other people 'Jimmy.' No idea why, just did.

Me wife'd come into the bedroom, askin' if I wanted me tea, for 'twere tea time, to be sure. I'd say, "Hey, look here, now, Jimmy, I don't want no tea right yet, but come back later and I might want some cake."

She'd get a big, dumb smile on 'er face and just walk

away. Wretched old cow, me wife.

Few months later, I'm sure she thought of me as nothin' but a big old hairy tea bag, and I knew she'd love t' get me t' take that bath she'd been naggin' me about for weeks. Sure, right, why not, eh? Free fuckin' tea fer the old biddy, sure as by the gods, yeh. A whole tub full, even! So I finally agree and in I go, SPLOOSH! And the water immediately starts turnin' brown, just like I thought. "Fixin' to make some tea, then, are we, Jimmy?!" I bellowed in 'er face. She looked all confused, like she'd no ken what I were on about.

When she made the tea outta me, I were seventy-six years old. When I bashed 'er head against the side o' the tub and split her skull, I were seventy-seven years old.

"Whoah, what's that now, Jimmy!" I hear you sayin'. "Bashed what? Now why'd ya go and do a thing like that t' your old fat cow of a wife?!"

Simple, ya see. The violence had come and there were no way o' stoppin' it, Jimmy. No way 'tall. It was—and still is—as immutable as old McDougal's Dublin Coddle. When the violence comes, y'either give in to it, or ya take it out on yerself. And Jimmy, it's no fun doin' yerself like that. Believe me, I done it, and all it's got me is locked up, time and again. I been in and out o' these here playgrounds more years than I care to recount. It's far better to do the violence on other people, then hide them away, act like you don't know nothin', whistle at the walls and such, y'know? Just ignore 'em and the pokin' folks eventually go away, so long as you do the hidin' right. Gotta get the hidin' right or they'll keep on at ya and you'll never be rid of 'em.

As I was sayin', the head bashin' came a year after the tea-baggin', and I tell ya it had to be done, Jimmy, it just had to be done. Fuckin' old cow, any road, ya know? What were so special 'bout me tea that she couldn't've

got it from 'erself or someone else? Came to be the only fuckin' thing we e'er talked about.

So that were me first violence. I knew even then, though, that 'er body had to be hid. Ah, such a shame, too, 'er not even gettin' any o' me tea for 'er troubles.



The orderly opened Mr. Dale's door, slowly so as not to alarm him. He poked his head around the padded edge. Mr. Dale was standing, scribbling on the wall with his crayon again. The orderly's shoulders dropped, release of tension.

"Writin' your book again, are ya, Jimmy?" A smile, saccharine, but not condescending. He closed the door behind him.

"Hoho, fuckin' A, Jimmy," Mr. Dale said, and continued scribbling.

"Ah, good, then. Say, listen, I'm just in t' change the sheets, okay?"

Mr. Dale nodded.

"Right so, then," the orderly said and went about his work.

Minutes passed in silence, Mr. Dale scribbling, the orderly swishing about the sheets. Then Mr. Dale said, "Y'ever wonder where the folks went that I done that violence to, Jimmy?" He didn't appear to be directing the question to the orderly, but the swishing stopped and an answer came nonetheless.

"I'd say they'd've gone t'Heaven, most likely, Jimmy."

Mr. Dale nodded. The swishing and scribbling resumed.

"Where, now," Mr. Dale said after a few more minutes, "d'ya s'pose that is, then, Jimmy?"

The orderly always got a kick out of conversations with Mr. Dale, because they always called each other "Jimmy," and it got pretty comical sometimes.

"Now, Jimmy, I'd have to say that Heaven is right straight up there in the sky," the orderly said, smiling wide, dropping a corner of the sheet he'd been folding, pointing straight up. Mr. Dale turned around and followed the orderly's finger.

"Right fool thing t' say, that is," said Mr. Dale. "Fuckin' ground's where they go, ya bloody bollocks."

The orderly's smile widened even more. "Ah, right so, then..." He folded the rest of his sheets, bid Mr. Dale "good day," and left him to his scribbling.



As luck would have it, they make tea outta me here, too. I can't seem to get away from it. Everyone wants me tea. I am a most special kind, 'twould seem, eh? Dunk me in the water and see what comes out. I think I'm gettin' weak, though, 'cause the color they get outta me here ain't near what the old cow were able to produce back home. A good sight lighter in this water, I come.

But *fuckin'* Jimmy and his bloody sheets! I ask him a straightforward question and what's he answer me wi'? Heaven. Fuck that shite. Heaven ain't where they gone. 'Tain't where none of 'ems gone, to be sure. Ground, I said to 'im. They go in the ground. Can't argue wi' that, now, can ya? Go dig 'em up and see. 'Course ya'd have to find 'em first before doin' any diggin', and that, I reckon, would be the tough part. Remember what I said 'bout the importance of hidin' 'em, yeh?

Mind you, they only know 'bout the old cow, not 'bout none of them others I did the violence on. I'd never get outta here if they knew 'bout them, too. Not that I

really expect they'll let me out before I'm dead and rotted, anyhow, but a man's got to keep some secrets for 'imself, ya know, Jimmy. A man wi' no secrets is like a whistle wi'out a ball or some such shite. Secrets keep a man focussed. And the only reason they e'en know about the old cow is 'cause I went and told 'em. Started gettin' lonely for the old place, y'know? I missed old Jimmy and his flappin' sheets. The nurse that gets the tea from me, she's a good lookin' one, alright, and I missed 'er touchin' me old, dead skin, even if 'twere just to get at me tea.

We made a deal once, me and she. I told 'er when I get outta here I'd write 'er love letters every day and we could pretend we was married, but that there would be no more tea extraction. I made sure we was clear on that point—no new wife o' mine'd be allowed t' have at me tea again, I said. Right so, fuckin' leeches, bleedin' me dry. So I'm gonna write 'er love letters. She's a sweet lass, to be sure.

Though I can't say I missed the director o' the place, Mr. Jimmy ArseBiscuits. Aye, sure, it's no 'is real name, but it's all the same t'me. Seems like the kinda man what'd lay a beatin' on 'is wife regular-like, y'know? Bloody heathen. If there were ever anyone deservin' o' the violence, it's that man. But he runs the place, so I've stood off, else he'd be gone.

Then who'd run the playground, eh?



The nurse opened the door quietly—the entire staff had been made aware of Mr. Dale's aversion to sudden movements—and came in with her tray of food and medication.

"Mr. Dale?" she asked, her voice a tremulous whisper. Mr. Dale was slumped in a corner, the stump of

a crayon gripped in his left hand, his right hand limp at his side. He was snoring.

"Mr. Dale?" the nurse whispered a little bit louder. Mr. Dale's bushy gray eyebrows lifted a little at his name. He cracked one eye, then the other. Blinked. Drew in a deep breath. Winked at the nurse.

"Aye, missy," he said, his voice barely a croak, "that's me. Jimmy, so they say, but not t' the likes o' you, I'd guess, eh?"

"It's time for your supper and medicine, Mr. Dale." Her smile was plastic, practiced.

"Shall we still write love letters, then, missus?" Mr. Dale asked, closing one eye again. The question dripped with sarcasm. But it was all getting old. He was so very, very tired these days, his 80th birthday come and gone.

"Why, of course!" the nurse said, a little too emphatically.

Mr. Dale struggled to get up, let the crayon drop unnoticed from his numb left hand. He'd been writing for hours and all for nothing—they came in and scrubbed his walls every other day so that he would not become fixated on one word or sentence and let it devour his every thought. He became extremely unreasonable when he was fixated on something. It had happened before.

A sly little grin further wrinkled his already leathery face. "Y'know," Mr. Dale said, "I could do the violence on ya, missus, if it so took me to do so."

The nurse flushed. "Mr. Dale? The violence? Wha...Why—"

"Don't worry, though, I ne'er would. We're going to write love letters, you and I. Ya can't respond to 'em if you're dead, now, can ya, Jimmy?"

"No, I suppose not, Mr. Dale." Her eyes were wide with fear. She did not appear to be breathing.

"Tell ya what, though," Mr. Dale said. "I'll tell ya a

story the next time you're about drainin' me tea, shall I?" His smile was all teeth.

The nurse couldn't speak, just put the tray down on the bed and left as quickly as she could manage.



So there was the suds, drippin' down me old, hairy back, just me and that nice nurse I was tellin' ya 'bout. Fine, sweet lady, our nurse.

"Ya think I'm an old, hairy tea bag or what, then, Jimmy?" I asked 'er.

"No! No, certainly not, Mr. Dale."

Ah, right so, ya craven bitch, I thought.

"Stealin' all me tea, though, aren't ya? Where's it go once it runs down that hole there at th'end of the tub, now, missus? Eh? Where's it go, and what d'ya use it for? I mean, what use are the last dregs of an old man's tea, any road?"

So, yeh, shut up, then, don't say nothin', I thought. And she didn't neither.

"Me wife used to steal me tea, too, yeh, but then you know how *that* ended, don'tcha." I felt the scrubber in 'er wee, lovely hand stop against me back, then start again after a coupla seconds, but I could feel 'er fear, like it were comin' right through the scrubber and all.

"Y'know, the more ya drain me o' me tea, the less violence I seem t' have in me, missus. Y'reckon that's a good thing, then, yeh?"

Nurse cleared her throat, all ahem-cough-cough-like, and said that it were, indeed, quite a good thing t' be lesser o' the violence.

"Alright," said I just then, "what say we get the rest o' it out right here and now!" I slammed me hands down on the sides of the tub. Bubbles popped and water

splashed. Wee-ha! The sound were real loud in that wee washin' room, and it damn near shocked me out o' me skin.

She coughed again, our nurse, and asked all oh-haha-go-on-wi'-yer-mad-self-like, "What's that you're saying, Mr. Dale? No need for any violence now. We're taking good care of ya, as ya know, and —"

SLAM!

And lo, like a melon 'er little head did split in two between me hands. If it didn't happen right on the edge o' me very own tub, I'd've not believed the site meself. More blood than was in the old cow, that's a right sure. Me tea got a sight darker just then, before I helped meself out and slid 'er body into the tea-stealin' tub. She sloshed around a bit, twitchin' and such, but that quit in a few minutes, and then she just floated around for awhile, bumpin' 'er head gently off the sides o' the tub now and again.

Ah, but now there'll be no love letters, I thought at her.

But e'en so, I think she understood.



The Facility Director brushed past the orderly and into Mr. Dale's room. The walls had been freshly scrubbed, as per the Director's request—he didn't want to have to look at any of the patient's "insane babble."

"Mr. Dale." The Director was tall and well built, intimidating, his voice the rumble of a truck. "Are you aware of what you've done?" He straightened his tie, unable to keep the boredom out of his voice.

Mr. Dale was secured to the bed with straps. He could move nothing of his body more than half an inch. Due to his relative lack of teeth, a muzzle was not deemed nec-

essary.

Thirty seconds passed with no response.

The Director sighed. "Can you hear me, Mr. Dale?"



I could hear th'old wanker, alright, Jesusfuck, but I weren't about to let *him* know that, were I? The old codger sighed again, all oh-for-fuck's-sake-let-us-go-home-now-and-shag-the-missus-then-slap-her-around-some-eh-old-boy.

Well, fuck him, I thought. Sure, I'd rightly miss this place, but I suspected there was others just like it, where maybe they'd let me keep the writin' on me walls and all.

I'd a big plan fer escape that I'd thought up a while back, y'know, and were thinkin' 'bout tryin' it out just then. Then I thought, ah, to hell wi' it, and decided to talk at the bastard.

"Come t' drain me o' more tea, have ya, Mr. Director?" I said, all shark-like, lettin' 'im know I were through playin' about wi' bashin' heads and the like. Then, before he could answer, "I've bashed more skulls than you've lived years, Mr. Director, did you know that, eh? Did ya?"

I tried liftin' me head fer 'is reaction, but the strangler 'round me neck held me a'right firm. Didn't matter. "The only reason I've no bashed that orderly's in is 'cause he calls me by me real name—Jimmy.

"I could tell ya where I hid all the bodies, too, if I'd a mind, but that time has come and gone. It'd do no one any good now, any road."

Silence.

Ah-ha, y'old fucker! I thought. Told ya somethin' ya didn't know, then, have I?

Mr. Director moved a step or two closer, and I could

hear his raspy fuckin' Darth Vader breathin'. His ruddy face came into me view and I smiled up at him, all fuck-you-ya-sad-bastard and such.

"Mr. Dale, you killed one of our nurses today. You split her head open. I assume by your admission of blah blah blah..." Shut the fuck up, thought I. Where's 'e get off wastin' me time, tellin' me shite I already know, eh? Up yours, Mr. Directorfuck, I've had more'n enough outta you for one day, thank ya very much.

So I shut him off and went t' sleep. Just like that. Good night, Director ArseBiscuits, I thought, and winked at him before closing me eyes fer the night.



"...Mr. Dale?"

The orderly shook Mr. Dale by the shoulders, gently slapped his weathered cheeks, repeating his name again and again.

An eyelid cracked.

"Hoho, Jimmy," Mr. Dale whispered. His breath in the orderly's face was fetid, stinking of rot, decay, and yesterday's bangers and mash.

"Ahoy, Jimmy," the orderly smiled back, playing their game, "but you don't look so good this mornin', y'know?"

"Don't I, then?" Mr. Dale asked, curious. "I wonder what's got hold o' me now. What d'ya suppose 'tis, Jimmy?"

Now both eyelids were cracked, but the eyes behind were mere slits as Mr. Dale spoke. He was more tired than he ever recalled being in his whole life. "D'ya s'pose I'm near t'the dyin', then, boy? Ya think ole Jimmy's on his way out, do ya?"

"Ah, no," said the orderly, and leaned back a bit, the

smile now a bit forced. "Can't be that, Jimmy, no way. Not you. Not yet, anyhow."

Mr. Dale chuckled. Sandpaper against brick. He suddenly coughed violently, straining the buckles and belts that held him.

"Shall I loosen these some, then, Mr. Dale?" asked the orderly, starting on the closest hand restraint.

"Nono, Jimmy, we'll have none o' that, now. You'll get into trouble and it won't help 'tall, anyhow. True, I'd me a plan for escapin' a while back, but I'm too far gone in years t' make a break fer it now."

"Right so," said the orderly, nodding gravely.

"What did Mr. Director think o' me fallin' asleep in the middle o' 'is little speech, then, eh?" Mr. Dale asked, grinning.

The orderly laughed. "Ah, yeh! Ya shoulda seem 'im stompin' about and cussin' and such, Jimmy! 'Twere all I could do not to bust out right in front o' 'im!"

Mr. Dale smiled wide. "Yeh, fuck that bastard! Bloody heathen...But say," Mr. Dale said, his voice now more subdued, "ya wasn't too close wi' that nurse, now, was ya, Jimmy? Ya wasn't shaggin' 'er or aught, was ya?"

"Ah, no," said the orderly, "barely knew 'er. Only ever saw 'er comin' or goin'. She'd never stopped t' talk t' the likes o' me."

Mr. Dale wondered if it would have made any difference at all to his lack of remorse if the orderly *had* known the nurse well, perhaps been her boyfriend. But he knew the answer to that.

"I want ya to know somethin', Jimmy, okay?" Mr. Dale said. "Since you're th'only one what e'er treated me wi' the respect I'm deservin' of, t' fuck wi' head-bashin' and all."

The orderly leaned in a bit closer. "Go on, then, Jimmy," he said.

"None o' this shite e'er did me no good," Mr. Dale said. His eyes were locked hard with the orderly's. "I were put in here so I'd do no more violence on anyone, and I can understand that, I s'pose. Sure as shite I'd no like to have what violence I put on other folks put onto me. But it doesn't stop the violence from comin', ya know? Nothin' can, and that's what I'm sayin' to ya, Jimmy. Some things just *are*. D'ya ken what I'm tellin' ya?"

The orderly nodded, brow furrowed in concentration.

"I were a good man fer as long as I were able, Jimmy. That's all any man can ask outta life, I reckon. I wish I'd died before I started wi' the head-bashin', but wishin' won't take none o' it back.

"I s'pose I made life hard fer a lot o' folks, losin' their loved ones to me violence and all..." Mr. Dale looked away from the orderly for a moment, his bottom lip quivered for just a second. Then he looked back to the orderly, a little smile stretching the weathered leather. "Maybe when I get in the ground, I can apologize up close-like to those folks, what d'ya think, Jimmy?"

A tear ran down the orderly's cheek, and he nodded. "Right so, yeh, Jimmy. Right fuckin' so."

Mr. Dale nodded, the smile slipping as he turned his head away again.

A minute passed in silence before the orderly could force the lump back down his throat to speak.

"Jimmy?"

"Yeh," said Mr. Dale softly, still looking at the wall.

"Y'know yer writin's and such, how the Director has 'em scrubbed off the wall every other day, yeh?"

Mr. Dale just sighed in response.

"Well, ya see," continued the orderly, a bit hesitant now, "I been copyin' it all down. Before scrubbin' it."

Mr. Dale snapped his head back to meet the orderly's eyes. The orderly wasn't quite sure about the old man's expression. It was somewhere between shock and delight, best he could make of it.

"Ah, right so," the orderly nodded, "straight from the first day you come 'ere, too. I got it all down in a little black book." He reached into his white coat and brought out the book. "Right from the first day, Jimmy. Right from the first day."

Mr. Dale opened his mouth to speak, wonderment on his face, and instead started coughing again. When it subsided, he regarded the orderly with a look that a father might give his only son in a fit of love.

"By the gods, boy..." Mr. Dale started, and couldn't finish for the tears.

"I copied the first day's writin' down 'cause it were the start of a good story," continued the orderly, "and I hoped ya'd finish it up so's I could see what happened, y'know? I never told ya 'cause I didn't want ya t'know I were stealin' yer words and all." He looked down at his hands then, and, ashamed, put the book gently back into his coat pocket. "After readin' it all, Jimmy, I think I know why ya done what ya done t'all those folks. It's like ya said: some things just *are*, and ya never meant fer none o' it t' happen."

Mr. Dale hitched in a sob, and something like understanding crossed between himself and the orderly that had been copying down his confessions, his life story for the past three years. Tears gathered in the corners of Mr. Dale's eyes and began to stream down his face, never making it to his ears for the deep grooves in the wrinkled parchment of his skin.

"I know it's probably no my place or aught, but for what it's worth, Jimmy...I forgive ya, old boy. I understand, and I forgive ya."

Eyes so wet from crying, Mr. Dale could only try to blink the tears away. The orderly reached out a hand and gently wiped at them. He smiled down at Mr. Dale in a similar fit of love, like a son forgiving his father for a lifetime's worth of hurt, realizing that none of it was his intention.

"What's yer name, Jimmy?" Mr. Dale asked quietly.

"Me name's Alec, Jimmy," said the orderly, and smiled at their game.

"Thank ya, then, Alec. T' fuck wi' head-bashin' and all."

"Right so."

Jimmy Dale stopped breathing, then, tears still drying on his face.

Alec wiped his eyes on his sleeve, pulled the little black book from his coat pocket, opened it to the first page, and began to read aloud.

JEWELS

*Wha –
How did I get here?
Where the hell am I?*

Punched in the face. She sees his lip curl into a sneer before he hits her. His ring—his *wedding* ring—splits her bottom lip. Another shot and her nose crunches, tears spring, blood floods from her nostrils. He yells something at her, but she can't make it out. The blood is swirling in her ears.

Then his hands are around her throat, squeezing the air...

*I am numb.
The crayons on the floor are the only things that connect
me to reality.
How do I know that? Who am I?
All I need are my reds and blacks to draw him...*

...from her lungs. He backhands her across the face and her head hits the wall behind her. Concrete. Stars explode. He doesn't know where her crayons are,

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though, so maybe it's not so bad...

He pushes her back against the wall—her head lolling in semi-consciousness—and drives himself into her again and again, one hand around her throat like a leash, blood dripping from her shattered nose in time with the ticking of the clock on the wall.

*Where are my crayons? I hope he hasn't taken them again.
I promise I won't draw the worms, dear. I wouldn't do that to
you. That would be cruel. You don't deserve that.
But I still have to draw you, okay?
I still need to draw you...*

As he climaxes, he squeezes her throat harder, the dim light coming from the corner of the room gobbled up by blackness and worms. They squirm under her eyelids, blotting out the failing light.

Breathing hard and licking his lips, he pulls out and lets her crumple to the floor...

*How did I get here?
How did I get...?*



The woman sat cross-legged in her apartment, drawing a dead body on the wall.

Her husband's dead body.

Red crayon for the blood, black crayon for the body. They are the only two colors she needs.

A puddle spreads out from her husband's head like a crown, glistening in the shallow bedside light. It looked black, but she knew it was red. The same color as—

her crayon –

—blood. The woman wondered where it had come

from.

She filled in the left leg of the body in her drawing. The black crayon broke in half before she finished.

Can't use broken crayons. Broken crayons don't work.

She reached behind her without looking, never taking her eyes off her drawing, and pulled another crayon from the blood-flecked sandwich bag that held her reds and blacks.

As she filled in the rest of the leg she remembered a time when there was white added to the red and black in her life. But she had known that wouldn't last long. It never did.

She'd drawn and redrawn her lovers' dead bodies on the white wall until nearly the entire room was covered. Slight of form, she could never reach even close to the ceiling in her room, though she desperately wanted to cover every square inch of white with the bodies. Her long, dark hair, tied back with an elastic, flowed nearly to her waist, and was cut straight across at the bangs, framing a thin face, full lips, the proverbial button nose, high cheekbones, olive skin, and soft, gold-flecked green eyes.

Whenever she drew the bodies, she'd bite gently on her bottom lip with her chipped teeth, and a small facial tick near the left corner of her eye would synchronize with the strokes of her crayon. The people that kept her in that room would come in a few times a day and ask her a million questions about the drawings.

Why only red and black, Julie? What did they do to you, Jules? What does drawing them do? How does that help?

Julie never spoke to any of them, though; she would just draw another body on the wall, curl into a ball, and fall asleep, the worms returning to squirm under her eyelids, like they always had.

But she liked it when people called her Jules.

One day she asked for a bright green crayon. She wrote "JEWELS" in big capital letters over the drawings of the bodies, filling one entire wall from end to end, then gave the green crayon back.

She thought of her drawings as jewels after that. She had never seen them as anything, really, until then. They were just art to her, like any other artist's drawings. But once she thought of them as jewels, the name seemed perfect. The drawings were little jewels from her mind. It was fun to draw them, and she was very attached to each one.

Looking behind her at her husband's body, the left leg finished in the drawing and only the head to do, her gaze fell on the steadily congealing puddle. She wondered again where it had come from; didn't notice the splintered bone and gaping hole at the left temple of her husband's head. The clock kept time with the blood still dripping from his wound, like it had done with Julie's nose earlier.

She thought of how much fun it would be to be a clock. Just sitting there all day, ticking and tocking and watching people's lives unfold before your eyes. Detached, but still a distinct part of everything that went on; keeping pace, keeping time, always keeping an eye out...

Julie glanced up at the clock—a German cuckoo with a little birdy that came out every half hour to remind you it was there, watching—and smiled. She stood up and waited for him to come out. It would be half past eight in three minutes.

When the birdie came out of the little brown door, Julie snatched at him and ripped him from his mechanical perch. She sat back down, crossing her legs, and turned around to her baggie of crayons, setting Cuckoo gently inside.

He would watch over them for her.

Men liked to take her crayons and hide them from her. They weren't comfortable with the fact that she wanted to draw them. And once she had drawn someone, she noticed they never came back. She wondered where they went, and why it was such a big deal. She had only drawn them on the wall. What was so bad about that?

She had tried many times to understand this; felt sorry that the men disappeared once she'd drawn them, but decided that no one was worth giving up her art.

The only reason they let her leave the white place all those years ago was because she had stopped drawing for a while; they told her it was wrong to pursue her art. So she tried. For them. Because they seemed like nice enough people.

They were very happy and relieved when she stopped drawing the bodies. Even though she was miserable and wanted her crayons back (the worms under her eyelids were the worst they'd ever been), she let the people take them away. They said it was only until she was completely better, but she knew at that moment that she would need someone to watch over her reds and blacks if she ever got them back. But they were never returned and, when she was finally released, she had to go buy new ones.

She was quite obviously right that her crayons needed protecting, and Cuckoo was perfect for the job. She smiled again at the thought, and looked at him through the plastic crayon bag.

He was on his side, nestled between two red crayons...

...two red slivers of bone that shot up into the air, followed by a gout of blood that brimmed up to the surface of the skin

and streamed down his cheek. He screamed thin and high-pitched like a woman. She hit him with the claw end of the hammer again. More bone crunched, and he fell silent, slowly tipped over, gurgled, twitched...

...and, frowning, she realized someone would need to watch over her husband. He was the only one that had stayed after she'd drawn him. She supposed that had something to do with the rings they wore on their fingers. None of the others had shared rings with her. It was very nice of her husband to want to do that. She knew the rings made a difference. This jewel was special.

Besides, she was sure she could take care of her crayons on her own, though it *would* be nice to have someone watch over both her husband *and* her reds and blacks. But there was only one Cuckoo, and no other would be up to the job, she was certain.

Removing Cuckoo from the crayon baggie, she cupped him gently in her hands and slid her naked form across the floor through her husband's blood and over to his side.

For the first time she noticed the jutting bone and bloody hole above his eye. Smiling, she lowered her hands to the wound—absently wondering where it had come from, but knowing that Cuckoo would surely take care of it—and placed him neatly between two splinters of bone. She tucked him in good and tight so he wouldn't fall out.

Julie looked at her husband's glazed, staring eyes, the worms squirming just beneath the surface of his skin; heard the clock ticking, keeping time; watched Cuckoo settle into his new home; glanced at the unfinished drawing on the wall, the head still needing to be colored in—

Her breath caught in her chest.

NO FURTHER MESSAGES

No. Nononono. I still have to finish him! Is that why he's still here? Will he go away like the rest once I finish his head?

She grabbed at the crayon bag and scuttled on all fours over to the wall again, leaving a trail of blood from the body to the wall.

Hands shaking, heart thumping wildly, eyelids rapidly-blinking, and biting her bottom lip hard enough that blood welled to the surface, she got a black crayon out and continued to color the head in, mumbling prayers she had memorized many, many years ago, not knowing what any of them meant, not understanding their importance.

And with every stroke of the crayon, a memory from a different part of her psyche; one that had been relegated to the shadows, to a dull ache, assuaged by the crayons:

...(stroke)...maybe I should shave my head so they won't have my hair to grab me by anymore...(stroke)...don't smile, honey; your teeth, remember? your teeth...(stroke, and tears well in her eyes)...i am so numb. i feel nothing. i am nothing...(stroke, and half of her husband's head is colored in)...

She looked behind her and, through a film of tears, saw that her husband was still there, and that Cuckoo was holding his post, watching out for him.

She had promised she would not draw the worms, even though she could see them, could feel them wriggling under his skin; under her eyelids. She had promised and she couldn't break that trust.

Draw him, Cuckoo said. Draw the motherfucker. Just how you see him, Julie. Draw him. Just. How. You see him.

She did not know that Cuckoo could talk.

...(STROKE, and she breaks the crayon in half; fumbles for a new one in the baggie)...only eleven years old. Eleven.

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Eleven. But I didn't draw him and he never went away... (STROKE)...Never...(STROKE)...Went...(STROKE)... AWAY!...

...(stroke, and his head is three-quarters filled in)...

She brought the crayon away from the drawing, shaking, her knuckles white, sweat and tears streaming in rivulets, cutting through the dried blood on her face.

"But I promised, then as now...not to draw the worms," Julie whispered, staring at the drawing, imploring Cuckoo where he sat perched on blood and bone.

Just draw what you see, Julie, Cuckoo said. She turned around again and looked at him, then looked at her husband...and saw the worms. Not only under the skin of his face anymore, though. Everywhere. They were bubbling inside him. She could hear them squishing around inside his carcass.

Draw what you see, hon. Draw what you feel.

Cuckoo paused for a moment. The clock stopped ticking.

They aren't jewels, love. They were never jewels...

It was then that Julie realized Cuckoo wasn't here to protect her husband *or* her crayons. Cuckoo was hers; was here to protect *her*.

Cuckoo is mine, she thought, and smiled through her tears...

When she'd bought her new crayons (going through the packages and throwing away all but the reds and blacks), she had remembered when she'd needed to use the green crayon that one day. So she decided to keep one from her new batch, just in case.

Reaching behind her, she fumbled around in the plastic baggie until she felt the green one. It had a different energy to it, and she instantly knew when she'd touched it. Taking a deep breath and closing her eyes, she

NO FURTHER MESSAGES

pulled it out of the bag.

Dropping the black crayon to the floor, she switched the green one to her right hand, raised it to the uncolored part of her husband's drawn head—the part where the hole and the bone splinters and Cuckoo were—and began to fill it in with green, each stroke, again, a memory...

"No more jewels," she muttered.

The clock began ticking again.

"No more Jules, either. I fucking hate that. My name is Julie."

She heard the squelching of the worms behind her, and her husband's voice pleading with her not to draw the worms; she had promised.

You fucking bitch, you said you wouldn't!

Now there were two voices, from two different times in her life. But it didn't matter anymore because she was drawing them: Bright green worms.

She was drawing what she saw, just like Cuckoo said to do.

With every one she created, something clicked back into place in her mind, and she began to remember everything: being pushed down stairs, punched in the ribs, kicked in the teeth, raped, strangled, spat on, pissed on, yelled at for nothing, violated and humiliated in every conceivable fucking way.

She saw it all in her new drawing; saw it all coming to hideous life in the worms. They squirmed on the wall where she'd drawn them, some flopping to the floor and wriggling around in the blood.

Her husband and...the man from many years ago were both screaming now, but the words, if there were any, were unintelligible, overlapped; just a cacophony of vehemence that dissolved to pitiful pleading with every worm that came to life in her drawing.

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She dropped the green crayon, picked up the black one again, and wrote "JULIE" in big capital letters across the drawing of the worms and the blood and the body. When she finished the top stick of the "E," everything stopped.

Complete silence...

She turned around and her husband's body was gone. The blood was gone. The worms were gone.

Cuckoo was gone, too...

...then the clock started ticking, and Julie began to breathe again.

She closed her eyes, curled into a ball on her side, and waited for the worms to start squirming beneath her eyelids...but they did not return this time. She thought maybe they were gone for good.

There was only the clock, the splash of dim light from the lamp, and her slow, measured breathing.

She opened her eyes for a moment and saw the green crayon near the baseboard where she'd dropped it. She reached out, wrapped her fingers around it, brought it close to her chest, closed her eyes again...

And dreamed of Pure. White. Walls.

WATER-SONG

It chokes her and she drowns.

Little bubbles float to the surface. She cries as she drifts down. Sifting through. Her long hair a canopy of sadness over her head.

She breathes water, sucks it down into her stomach. A heavy ball of dread, sinking.

On her way down, she sees the spirits of lovers whose small boat had capsized in a storm. Somehow, she smells the woman's perfume as she floats by, hears the man's last cries for help before he sank below the waves. The couple smiles at her as she drifts lower. Not menacing smiles, not unkind in any way.

Warm, comforting, welcoming.

The shell of the lovers' sunken boat slides into view, like slowly scrolling movie credits. It rests on a ledge of coral. She blinks at the two skeletons inside, bits of cold flesh hanging from their frames. They suddenly stand from their slumped positions and start dancing together. Bones sluggishly shuffling through silt, thick green water, and memories. A soft tango rippling the water.

Further down.

She peers into the gloom below, the sunlight overhead barely reaching her. The water in her belly grows colder. Iced veins. No more bubbles.

With the pain of breathing removed, she feels better. Her mind clears enough for her to think about her husband, who was in the boat with her. She remembers a big wave. No storm, no bad weather beforehand. Just a massive wave that rose from nothing, crushing their little boat to matchsticks.

She tilts her head up, watches silently as the dancing skeleton couple slumps back down into their boat, their water-song finished, heads nodding to the rhythm of the sea.

Deeper yet.

She turns herself around as the grim light fades, leaks upward through swirling eddies. Another outcropping of coral peeks through the blackness, as if spotlighted just for her. She sees another boat, this one much larger, some kind of yacht, perhaps. She can only see the front half of it, but it's much older than the first boat. More sea life has laid claim to it.

Inside, through the portholes, she watches them dance. White as the moon, and glowing just the same. On the deck, too: Foxtrots, tangos, waltzes. Water flowing through and around bone. Mesmerizing.

She is jealous. She wants to dance, too.

Filtering down, her feet finally touch bottom. It is completely pitch, save for a small crease of light just ahead of her.

She is no longer cold. She's warm to her center, thinking of the dancers. Thinking of her husband's strong hand on the small of her back, leading her.

The little fold of light gets closer. It is her husband's hand, reaching out. His arm, then his chest.

His face.

She takes his hand gently and they dance. Slowly, in small circles.

Waiting for the music to begin.

DANNY BOY

Cocooned in a straitjacket and secured to the chair by not one, but two nylon restraints, the boy looked up at the man and smiled.

It was the smile of an innocent babe—wide and guiltless.

"You must be the new Mr. Psychologist," the boy said, his child's voice reminding the man of the boy's age.

Not even shaving yet and already a multiple murderer.

Joel Rossman—who was, indeed, the newly appointed State Psychologist—returned the smile nonetheless and took the little steel chair the sanatorium staff had set next to the boy's big, wooden one.

"Yes I am," he said. "I'm Dr. Rossman. How do you do, Danny?"

"Fine," the boy said.

Rossman couldn't help but smile. Danny looked like a million other mid-western farm boys who'd be starting middle school in the fall: towhead, blue eyes, freckles the color of chestnuts sprinkled across the upturned nose, and baby-fat cheeks.

Except that this sixth-grader would be taking classes right in his cell, strapped to the bed to keep his teacher

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safe. If a teacher could be found, that is, who wanted to risk life and limb to teach Daniel Thomas Mackey.

Rossman took a micro-cassette recorder out of his coat pocket and held it up for the boy to see.

"Can I record this session, Danny?"

"Sure." The boy's eyes brightened.

Rossman nodded and turned on the recorder. "What did you do to deserve having a muzzle put over your mouth, Danny?"

The boy's grin stretched almost to the lobes of his ears. "Bit off the last Mr. Psychologist's nose and spitted it out."

Rossman frowned and moved the recorder closer to the boy. "Why?"

The boy stopped smiling and looked puzzled. "'Cause it's better than chewing them."

Rossman's gut clenched into a ball.

"No, Danny, I didn't mean why did you spit the nose out, I meant why did you bite it off in the first place."

"Oh," the boy said, and looked away for a moment, to the new day's sunlight streaming in through the cell's only window—a 5 by 5-inch square made of Plexiglas that looked out onto the sanatorium's lush grounds. His face grew cloudy, shadows crossing it. He turned his moony face back to the doctor. "I...I dunno. Just did, I guess."

Danny returned his gaze to the bright little square in the wall, his only window to the world for the past nine months.

Rossman followed the boy's eyes, trying to imagine what it must be like for Danny, what thoughts would be going around in such a young boy's mind...A young boy that had murdered his entire immediate family—his brother, two sisters, grandfather, both parents.

Rossman had taken the case because of its unprece-

dented nature. No one this young had ever committed a crime of this nature before. And it wasn't just the fact that he'd murdered six people, it was some of the methods he'd employed...It was too intriguing to pass up.

"Danny," Rossman began, deciding to switch tracks, since motive for his aggression didn't seem to be getting them anywhere, "what happened to your mother?"

Danny didn't even flinch, kept staring out the window.

"She's dead, Mr. Psychologist."

"How did she die, Danny?"

The boy shrugged.

Rossman waited.

"Danny?"

Danny was somewhere else, his eyes glazing over, tears forming on his lower eyelids, dropping when they got too heavy, splashing on the rough material of his straitjacket. Then he started singing. Lightly. His voice so small Rossman could barely make it out.

"Oh Danny Booooooy, the piiiipes, the piiiipes are caliiiiing..."

Danny sniffled, his shoulders and arms struggling against the restraints, trying to bring his hands up to his face. He looked at the doctor, pleadingly.

Rossman wasn't going to wipe the boy's tears for him. Little boy or not, he was a murderer.

Danny slumped a little more in his chair in defeat, scrunching his face up at the doctor's reluctance.

"Can't bite ya like this, now can I?" He rolled his eyes, feigning exasperation.

Rossman ignored him.

"Danny, was that a song your mother used to sing to you?"

"Mama's dead, Mr. Psychol—"

"I know, Danny, I know your mother's dead."

Rossman waited a heartbeat.

"You killed her."

Danny shifted positions in his seat, uncrossing his legs, crossing them the other way, right over left. He stared at the doctor. Rossman began to feel uncomfortable.

"Look, um, Danny..." he started. He felt his face flush. The boy's eyes ripped away his calm like the layers of an onion. He gathered himself a little more and began again.

"Danny, what did you do to your mother?"

The boy just continued to stare, his gaze ever more intent. The knowledge in those eyes belied the boy's years. They were the eyes of a killer, no doubt, unforgiving, unrelenting, but beneath were still the eyes of a frightened child, unsure what to do, unsure how to communicate his reasoning, his feelings.

Suddenly the eyes softened.

"Didn't do nothin' to her, Mr. Joel."

Mr. Joel, Rossman thought, grinning a little. *Better than "Mr. Psychologist," anyway...*

"Danny, my last name is Rossman. My first name is Joel. So you should probably call me Mr. Rossman, okay?"

The boy nodded, tiny bubbles forming on his bottom lip.

"Okay, Mr. Rossman, so long as ya know I like Mr. Joel better."

Rossman laughed. Danny was acting like a normal eleven-year-old. The blood drained a little from his face, his heartbeat settled. He took a deep breath. "Okay, Danny," he continued, wanting to take advantage of the mood swing, "who *did* do something to your mother?"

"From glen to gleeeeeeen and down the mountain siiiiiide...The summer's goooone and all the leaves are

falliiiiing..."

Danny was singing again.

"But come ye baaaaaaack when—"

"—summer's in the meadow," Rossman took up the thread, interrupting the boy. "Or when the valley's hushed and white with snow...I'll be here in sunshine and in shadow..."

Danny's mouth hung open, eyes wide, teary. "How d'you know my song, Mr. Joel?"

Rossman finished slowly, "Oh Danny Boy, oh Danny Boy, I love you so."

Silence.

Danny suddenly began twisting and turning violently in his chair, trying to get free, trying to get at the doctor, feet kicking out, face turning red, veins bulging.

"You fucking cocksucker!!" Spittle flew from the boy's thin lips as he screamed. The chair tipped backward, nearly fell over. "That's my DADDY'S song, you...!" The boy scrunched his face up, a ripe, red tomato, ready to burst. "...BASTARD!!"

Oh Danny Boy...

He flailed, cursed some more, wrenched his body side-to-side. An orderly opened and peeked through the tiny slot in the door, looking panicked, probably expecting to find, despite its impossibility, a piece of the new psychologist sitting detached from the rest of him on the floor in a puddle of blood.

The young man was fumbling for his keys, but Rossman held up a hand, still staring at the boy—

...all the flow'rs are dying, Danny.

—his eyes never leaving the display of rage in front of him. The orderly just stood there, gawking through the slot, dumbfounded. Finally Rossman had to tear his eyes from the boy. He glared at the orderly, mouthed, "Go away!"

The orderly's eyes hardened and he shook his head side-to-side, then the slot flapped shut, the key still fumbling in the lock...and Danny finally tipped over in his chair, frothing and bellowing incoherently, hitting his head against the wall behind him, and—

—swimming, floating, sinking in his...house.

Danny. Boy wonder. Baddest motherfucker in town, baby. Like Han Solo or somethin'.

"Danny, you little shit!"

Yeah, and here comes Dad. Biggest loser in town, baby.

Stormin' in as always, thumpin' across the carpet, trackin' mud. Man on a mission, chump. Fuckin' man on a—

Stars. Univers-eriffic!!

"Danny Boy, you little bastard."

Cracking an eye to see. Other is bleeding, running red, painting the world. Weird perspective you got here, Danny Boy. Floor-level view. Dog's eye to the world, baby. Wonder what these seats go for, huh? Wonder what—

"Where's your mother, Danny? Where is she?"

Dad's head's gonna pop, chum. Watch it 'splode in bright red and orange, bits of skull creepin' in! Wee! Wonder what tickets would be for that show, then, eh?! Don't matter no how, no one's gettin' my floor-level view, man. Fuck that. I've earned these here seats...Oh, hey, here comes—

Ah, Jesus, wish I could see better. Screamin' again in the kitchen, like it's somethin' fun to do (nothin' better!) on a Sunday afternoon, huh? Ha! Ma Laura.

(flittering pictures of mother, MAMA, burning, falling into puddles of blood, falling into—)

Oh, God, what a show this is. I can smell Dad's anger. I'm breathing it. Just breathing it. Gotta sit up to check out the show. Always in the kitchen. Always somethin' fun to watch in that fucking kitchen. If not on TV, then 'least I got me some REAL home entertainment. Always got me some—

NO FURTHER MESSAGES

(BANG!)

...(tea kettle whistling, metal clattering to the floor, maybe a pot or a pan, then silence)...

Feet, stomping across the carpet again, gonna wear a hole in it, Dad, but Dad don't care, Dad's holding a gun.

Ma's dead.

Ma's dead.

No tea today, Danny Boy. No more piano lessons, chum. End of the road. Ma used to brush my hair –

(standing up, dizzy, room spinning, bloody vision)

(BANG!)

Dad's upstairs now. Sis is screaming.

(walking, wishing that wasn't ma in the kitchen, she used to let me eat Count Chocula right out the fuckin' box when no one else's ma's would let their kids have it even WITH the milk! The fucker, the goddamn –)

Dad's killing everyone. His head 'sploded, after all, Danny Boy. Wonder what the scalpers would get for tix to those seats, eh? Haha. Ha.

Not so funny, though, now, friends. Not so –

(BANG! BANG! BANG!!)

Thudding upstairs, like dominoes, three blind mice, see how they die. See how they would have run if they weren't dead. What am I talking about?

(falling against the wall, slumping down in the corner)

Grandpa's whispering something, I can hear his raspy (dead) voice, can smell an oily gun barrel, can feel his old man's too-wet lips on mine, kissing me, always wanting to kiss me. Gross, I said to ma. I love grampy and all, but it's just GROSS, ya know? I mean –

Dad's coming down the stairs. Who's he think he is, for chrissakes? Clint Eastwood? Fucking Billy the Kid? Fucking Bruce Willis? Fucking Terminator? Fucking fucking fuck –

"I don't want the gun, Dad."

"No time for that, son. No time for bein' a baby about it.

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Only one bullet left. Either you or me. Who's it gonna be, son? Who do you think should die this fine day?"

(she used to clean me up when I was younger, when I was done making mud pies in the yard after the rain; she used to pack me into my snowsuit, wrapping the scarf ever-so-gently around my neck, tying it in a loose knot and smiling, handing me my lunch pail, then send me off to school, sneaking some Almighty Count Choco in a little Tupperware container; she used to –)

"Son, now come on, stay with me, here."

(Dad is –)

"No time for thought, we have to act on this now."

(covered in –)

"You or me, son, one bullet."

How is he so calm? Calm? Balm? Lip balm. "Gimme some Chapstick, please, Dad, my lips hurt, I need –"

(my family's blood.)

"Come on, now, son," he says, growing impatient, like we don't have all the time in the world to die.

"Ma would have given me some lip balm, Dad," I'm sayin', and Dad's wonderin' what I'm talkin' about, like it's so weird to want Chapstick for your lips, or somethin'.

He killed my mother, the motherfucker. Han'll beat his ass. Baddest space pirate around, baby. Fuckin' A. Solo'll kick your ass direct, Dad. Don't mess with Danny B –

(BANG!)

Dad shot me.

We're all dead. Squirming around, crawling down the stairs in agony, heads shattered, bleeding, sisters, brother, grampy, ma in the kitchen reaching for the Count Chocula, a big smile on her face, a bullet hole in her neck, blood pumping out, splashing in my bowl, splashing my bad eye, my glasses, but still smiling, always smiling, my ma...

Dead.

Dead...

NO FURTHER MESSAGES

*And if I am dead, and dead I well may be
You'll come and find the place where I am lying
And kneel and say an "Ave" there for me
And I shall hear tho' soft you tread above me
And all my grave will warmer sweeter be
And you will call and tell me that you love me
And I shall sleep in peace 'til you come to me...*

"—Oh Danny Boy, oh Danny Boy," the boy whispered through bloody lips, the orderly pulling his chair into its proper sitting position. "...I love you so."



"He sang it to me every night before I went to sleep," Danny said.

Rossman shivered.

Danny'd been given some more sedatives and had his straps tightened. An orderly had been posted just at the end of the hall instead of all the way down at the front desk, in case there was more trouble.

"It musta been him that killed 'em all, Mr. Psychologist. Musta been Daddy."

Danny had told Rossman all about what happened in his dream when his head hit the wall. He said it jogged his memory and he remembered everything now.

Rossman didn't know what to make of the story.

In the official report, the neighbors had called the police upon hearing shots. When the police arrived, Danny was found holding the gun, bloody from head to foot, standing over his father, crying.

Danny's brother had been drawing cartoons in his room, headphones on, listening to music, when he was shot in the back. One of his sisters had died halfway down the stairs, gunshot at point-blank range to the

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chest. His other sister died instantly while drying her hair in the bathroom after a shower, gunshot to the face. Grandpa was asleep in the spare room. Shot in the back of the head. Danny's mother, Laura, was found in the kitchen shot in the head, then stabbed repeatedly and left riddled with various knives, pencils, cutlery, anything sharp that was within the boy's reach, apparently.

Danny's father, James, had been shot in the stomach with the last bullet in the six-shooter, then sliced open from neck to crotch and stuffed with TV guides, men's magazines (that had apparently been hidden under the living room sofa, as the cushions were overturned), little army soldiers, dinky cars, action figures, and other assorted toys and books.

When the police approached Danny, guns drawn, he had the barrel of the gun shoved in his mouth and was pulling the trigger, the hammer falling on the empty chambers over and over again. Danny noticed them and removed the barrel from his mouth, aiming it impotently at the officers, a vapid look on his face, clicking away at both of them.

They could only blink as the surrealism of the scene sunk in...

From a psychologist's point of view, this was easy—the boy was initially in great shock and had forgotten what he'd done. The events he'd dreamed and retold were obviously just something his overwrought mind had made up to rationalize his actions. The question was: what triggered this? What would make a boy of his age do something like this? And why had the aggression not subsided? When he'd come out of his initial fugue at the scene of the crime, he'd battled the police officers tooth and nail as they tried to put him into a patrol car. He'd bashed his head against the window repeatedly, trying to get out, screaming that he wanted his mother, that he

wanted his father. Spewing obscenities and kicking the backs of the seats in the car.

He hadn't settled down until they'd started him on the drugs, always needing to be sedated and accompanied by several officers in case the drugs began to wear off. His will, his aggression seeming to shrug off everything administered into his system.

No one knew what to do about the boy.

Rossman roused himself from his meandering thoughts and noticed Danny was staring intently at his feet, moving his slippers back and forth slowly in the air, as if they were a curiosity of some sort, like he'd never seen them before. Brow furrowed, little beads of sweat forming on his upper lip and forehead, he was whispering under his breath again. It sounded like more snatches of "Danny Boy."

"Danny," Rossman said gently, "was it your daddy that sang that song to you, then?"

Danny ignored him, riveted by his blue and white sneakers. He giggled a little.

Rossman fiddled with his watch and waited.

Growing impatient, he finally asked again, "Danny, was it your —"

The boy's head snapped up and he locked eyes with the psychologist. "You already asked me about this, Mr. Joel, and I *told* you it was my daddy's song."

Rossman swallowed, ready for a repeat performance of Danny's earlier tantrum. But it didn't happen. Danny's face softened and his eyes glazed over in memory.

Rossman was saying something else, but Danny couldn't hear him now, could only see his lips moving. Danny chuckled. It looked funny to see him like that, probably saying important things that Danny should be listening to so he could get better, because he knew he'd been a bad boy. He shouldn't have hurt that psychologist

and those police officers and those orderlies and his own —

No, can't think of that. What Daddy did was wrong and he didn't like to remember that stuff because it made him think bad things about his daddy when he only wanted to think good things. 'Cause Daddy was a good man. He used to sing to Danny and read him stories and tickle his feet to make him laugh. All those things were better than the few bad things he'd done to his family. Danny knew that Daddy would be in Heaven because he knew that only really bad people went to Hell, and his daddy wasn't a bad person. Not really, anyway. Maybe a little confused sometimes, but certainly not bad.

Danny didn't care, though, right now, 'cause Daddy was tickling his feet again and that was all that mattered. That was all that ever mattered.

Every night when Danny was getting ready for bed, Daddy would come into his room, sit on the edge of the bed and —

— tickle my feet, he's ticklingticklingtickling! "Hahaaaah!"

Such a nice voice, my daddy, so sweet. I love it when he looks at me like this and sings. I'm his Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling...He loves me so, does my daddy, and I love him, too.

Most of the time he's like this. Why can't he stay like this? Why does he have to get so mad sometimes?

(Oh Danny Boy...)

I know he doesn't mean it when he gets angry and hurts someone. He always apologizes, so it's okay, and it's good because —

"Hahahahaaaah! Quit tickling, Daddy!! I can't breathe!

Keep singing, though, it's so nice..."

Quiet in the house, everyone else is asleep already. I wonder if Mommy will buy more Count Chocula tomorrow. I

sure hope so...I 'specially like the marshmallows. They're crunchy, but I thought marshmallows were supposed to be soft. Oh, well, don't matter, they're still good, and Mommy lets me eat them as much as I want, and she looks so...(yawn!)...happy when...

"Mmm, so tired, Daddy...So...tired. Keep singing, okay? I love you, Daddy."

("I love you, too, Danny Boy.")

...

Rossman couldn't get Danny to snap out of it. He tried shaking him by the shoulders, but the boy's head just lolled about on his shoulders like an infant's. The doctor banged heavily on the steel door, opened the little slot and bellowed for the orderly.

...

So tired...

Daddy's blue eyes were changing. Danny blinked twice to try to clear his vision. Daddy wasn't tickling his feet or singing anymore. But he wasn't changing into Angry Daddy yet, or at least it didn't look like it. What was going on?

The blue of Daddy's eyes swirled in a circular motion, like something was stirring them up. Sort of like a milkshake or something.

The bed changed into a metal chair and Daddy floated a few feet away on it. Danny looked down and his racing car bed was now a big, wooden chair, and he was strapped into it.

He started struggling, looking at his daddy, wondering what was happening. The blue swirling out from his eyes was painting the room, washing it in its subdued hues, dulling down noises, dulling down reactions, sensory input, everything.

Daddy started singing.

...

Two orderlies burst through the door and rushed over to Danny. He was staring straight at Dr. Rossman,

terror in his eyes, sweat cascading down his face. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. His eyes widened even more.

Rossman was locked by the boy's gaze. Unable to move, he drained himself into the terror, into the look on Danny's face.

What is he seeing? Rossman thought. *My God, what is he SEEING?*

Danny started to convulse.

...

Daddy finished his song.

"Oh, keep going, that was great!" I said, but I noticed Daddy had his gun again. He never sang when he had his gun.

He was pointing it straight at me. The one I found in the drawer in his office. That was the same day I found his magazines in the couch. I can see ma in the barrel, and grampy, too. My sisters and brother are deeper inside the gun, but I can see everyone.

"Ma would have given me, would have given me, would have given me..." I'm sayin', and Dad's wonderin' what I'm talkin' about. Like he doesn't know. It feels funny to say things over and over again. It starts to sound like nothing. Like the words never meant anything to begin with.

He killed my mother.

Haven't I done all this before? What's the point in doing it all again?

"I love you, Danny Boy, and everyone's happy you did what you did. It was the best thing for everyone."

Dad's freaking me out. What's he talking about? I'm scared, Dad, I'm really, really scared...

"I..." Dad's crying, the barrel of the gun wavering, family members screaming and falling out of the barrel onto the floor. I wish there were floorboards so they could squeeze through them and escape. Escape Dad. Escape his fucking –

"I never meant to hurt any of you," he says, bringing the

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gun back up, level with my face. I think it's time to scream. Dad's going to kill me.

"Only one bullet left. Either you or me. Who's it gonna be, son? Who do you think should die this fine day?"

I remember everything Dad ever did to us in that instant. I remember our fear and loathing. I remember words, phrases from different times in our lives, spoken by all of us, thought by all of us: "We'd be better off dead."

The images and thoughts form into a solid emotion, and it shoots outta my eyes like a laser bolt. Yeah, like a badass laser bolt from Han Solo's blaster or somethin'. I'm not sure if it hits Dad or someone else, but somebody picked it up, I know that.

"You did the best thing for everyone, Danny Boy...I'm proud of you, son."

Dad's singing again. I love it when he sings. He has such a beautiful voice...

"And I shall hear tho' soft you tread above me. And all my grave will warmer sweeter be. And you will call and tell me that you love me. And I shall sleep in peace 'til you come to me."

Daddy's smiling, and I can feel myself dying. Dead. Trapped now in the barrel of his gun with my family and Count Chocula. And I suddenly remember him telling me one night after tickling my feet that a boy becomes a man when the tickling stops being fun and instead becomes an annoyance. But I love Daddy so much that I know that will never happen with him.

I love Daddy so much.

I love Daddy –

(BANG!)

so much.

SLIPKNOT

Slipknot spoke: You can't kill me, 'cause I'm already inside you.

Shadows dripped. Silhouettes of emotions stretched themselves languidly against the pitch background of Edward Curtis' dreamscape. They wrapped themselves in his psyche, dispelled myth, eschewed logic, creating a template for their work.

Once the canvas was created, the medium was selected. It was always the same: guilt. It sucked the black from the darkest part of his heart and vomited its core between his flashing synapses. *Guilt.*

You can't fucking kill me....

"I do not want to kill you," Edward whispered in his sleep.

Like ink from the tip of a quill, the shadows dribbled through his thoughts, blanketing them, suffusing them with their intent. Then the deep recesses of shadow-forms pulled away from Edward's mind en masse. He inhaled sharply. The cloaking pools of black left him exposed, shivering, cold sweat beading on his forehead, an image behind his eyelids of a half-drunk bottle of red wine sitting on an old oak table, the crimson liquid

swimming in and out of focus, making him nauseous.

Edward opened his eyes and the bottle continued to float in his vision for a few seconds before dissipating, droplets splashing across his ceiling, dripping onto his bed.

Like shadows.



"Aw, Grampa!" the boy wailed, "ya can't stop there!"

The bottle between the boy and his grandfather shimmered in the flickering shadows thrown by the fireplace behind the old man. The boy slammed his little fist on the oak table in frustration. "Come on! Tell the rest! No fair!"

Grampa chuckled, jowls jiggling, bright red cheeks plumping with the motion, like a Butterball on Thanksgiving Day. "No more, my boy. You're getting scared, and besides, it's bedtime for wee little chumblyies like you."

Chumbly.

That's what Gramps always called little Eddie. The old man had made up the story many years ago about a bear that wore fuzzy pants and had a wobbly oven and a farting toaster. Pretty bizarre, Eddie thought. He didn't much care for the story of Chumbly Bear, but he liked the name for some reason. It had a nice ring when Grandpa said it.

"But you stopped at the best *paaart!*" Eddie whined, stretching out the last word like toffee.

Grampa chuckled again, shaking the table ever-so-slightly with his big belly as it rubbed up against the old oak. "There *is* no best part of a Chumbly story, Eddie." He leaned forward slowly, chair creaking beneath his weight, eyes dancing. "It's *all* the best part."

Something in the wine bottle moved.

Eyes flying wide open, an electric bolt shot up Eddie's spine. "What was *that!*?" The boy jumped out of his chair and stood behind it, staring, jaw agape, at the bottle.

Grampa sat back in his chair, and looked at the bottle. His eyes glazed over a little, scaring young Eddie. "Gramps? Gramps, are you okay?"

Grampa snapped out of it, his eyes lighting on Eddie's, dancing again. "Yes, boy, yes, just fine, just...fine," he said, studying the bottle as though it were some curiosity he'd found at an antique shop. "It's just that..." He trailed off again, this time grinning a little as if remembering the punch line of a favorite joke. Eddie came around the chair and sat back down, slowly, never taking his eyes off the bottle.

"What, Grampa? What is it? What's..." He raised an arm and pointed at the bottle. "...inside?"

Grampa's grin widened. He cleared his throat. "Why, it's the bear, son."

A chill crept up Eddie's spine. He mouthed the words along with Grampa as he spoke them:

"Chumbly Bear," Gramps said, the smile failing to touch his eyes now, a haunted look replacing it as he remembered the events of over forty years past. "But I thought he was long gone, the old bugger." He tried to laugh a little then, but the sound caught in his throat.

Eddie frowned. "But Chumbly's just a dumb old story bear. How can...*that* be him?"

The thing in the bottle spun around slowly at the boy's words, the glint from the firelight dancing into the crimson waves, washing vague drafts of fear through the boy, stabs of memory through the old man. The indiscernible shape bobbed in sync with the rise and fall of the tips of the flames from the fire, hypnotically, mesmerizing.

"Don't know, Eddie," Gramps whispered, barely opening his mouth. "I hoped by telling stories about him, it'd keep him away for good."

Gramps fell back into silence.

Eddie wanted to ask Gramps what he was talking about. When had he seen the bear before? It didn't even *look* like a bear, so how did he know it was Chumbly? Why did he not want the bear to come back? What had happened?

The thing inside the bottle spun around a few more times, then disappeared in a glint of firelight and a ripple of wine.



Edward brushed his teeth in the bathroom mirror and thought about his dream.

You can't kill me, 'cause I'm already inside you.

Memories of Gramps and his childhood, listening to the old man tell his Chumbly Bear stories by the fireplace, flitted through his mind like a broken, too-bright strobe light, the images uneven, unnatural.

Wine and shadows, he thought. *Something dancing in the bottle. Something I can't kill. But I do not want to kill it. I don't know how I know that, but I do.*

Slipknot hunkered down in Edward's mind and listened. Just...listened. Being the bear had been fun, sure. But being Slipknot was *oh* so much better. In every way. It did not want to lose that. Not now. Not after all this time.

Edward leaned over, spit into the sink, rinsed, stood back up...and caught a flicker in the upper right-hand corner of the mirror. Something black. Churning. Twisting. *Mulching*.

Dancing.

Slipknot could not resist a titter.

More memories surfaced — these ones like old, forgotten pictures in a photo album, like the dregs of a long-cold cup of coffee sliding down the throat.

Edward grimaced.

Gramps had shot himself in the face with a double-barrelled shotgun two months after that last Chumbly story when he'd been scared by the return of the bear...or whatever the hell it was...moving around in the wine bottle. Both parents gone before he was old enough to walk — father killed in a car accident, mother run off with another man — he'd been given over to his grandfather, so little Eddie had been the one to find poor Gramps, brains smeared all over the fireplace and oak table, blood splashes streaking across the wine bottle and ceiling, dripping. Dripping like the shadows sometimes dripped in his dreams.

A voice from the bottle, a swirling in the boy's ears, weaving a tapestry of shadows across thought, whispered gently in his ear as he gazed down at Gramps' cooling corpse: *You can't kill me...*

Edward had screamed then, and run out of the house shouting for help.

But that was over twenty years ago.

The flickering thing in the high corner of the mirror spread itself out and pulsed in time with Edward's heartbeat. Edward stared, transfixed. The toothbrush dropped from his limp fingers. Then he heard the voice again, this time so close to his ear he imagined he could feel the slight rush of air as the sentence formed, each word like a crumbling tombstone half-in, half-out of the shadow of a tree, caught between this world and the next: *I'm inside you.*

Then the walls dissolved in Edward's vision, and he was no longer in his bathroom...

"Shoot the boy," the man said.

Philip Curtis flinched. "I can't, Smithy, he's my only son." The gun wavered, came down by the man's side. "How do you expect me to –"

"Shoot him or I'll shoot you both." Cold fact.

"But Smithy, there's gotta be –"

"No, there ain't nothin' else you can do," Smithy interrupted, raising both arms, gun in each hand, and pointed them at Philip and his son. "You got yourself into this, now you gotta do what you can to get out. And if you're thinkin' you can squeeze off a shot in my direction before I kill you both...well, if I was you, I'd stop thinkin' like that, Phil. It ain't gonna happen. You know it ain't. Now FUCKING shoot him. I'm countin' to five.

"One."

Sweat popped out on Philip's forehead. His son, James Curtis – just married, new father – shook his head back and forth, eyes glued to the guns in Smithy's hands, one part of him praying Smithy would pull the triggers and just end it all, the other part praying his father would raise his own pistol and at least try to save their lives.

"Two."

"Look, Smithy, I'm sorry, alright!? We gotta be able to work this out. Why are you doing this? Why do you have to –"

"Three."

Philip Curtis started to cry. James' insides clenched tight as a drum, heart lurching in his throat. Philip raised the gun to his son's face.

"Dad, what are you DOING? Shoot HIM! At least TRY, for God's sake!"

"Four." Smithy smiled, waited a beat, took a breath, and moved the muscles in his face that would form the word "five."

Edward, tears glistening in his eyes, fell over in his bathroom, bashing the side of his face against the tub and

curling up into a ball. He cupped his hands over his ears and squeezed his eyes shut, mouthed the word along with James.

"Five."

Smithy only got half the word out before Philip's bullet ripped through James' skull, spraying thick clumps of brain and blood against the nearby trees.

James crumpled.

Philip dropped the gun, fell to his knees, head in hands, sobbing.

Smithy turned around, silent, and made his way through the forest, back to his car.

Edward opened his eyes, the fluorescent light of the bathroom too bright, blinding. He said one word, the sound dropping like stone from between his dry, cracked lips: "Dad."



Slipknot waited until Edward had gone to bed before slipping out again from behind the bathroom mirror.

It would rend this one like it had the last, and the one before that, and on down through history. Sometimes it wished it wasn't restricted to just one family, that it could fuck with others, turn their lives inside out, torment them in whatever ways caught its fancy that generation. But rules were rules, and these were rules of the universe, so there was no one to appeal to.

Smithy had been a long-time friend of the Curtis', and was Slipknot's first and only human host. In its true form – the form it was in now, that of shadow – it was not as limited as when it was the bear or the human. It had forgotten the other forms it'd assumed/created over the many, many years with the Curtis', but it knew, and never allowed itself to lose sight of the fact, that they

were all, essentially, human creations.

Guilt took all forms, and Slipknot's was only to portray them. Though, in its boredom of late, Slipknot had deigned to help things along their way a little. After all, as there was no one to appeal to about the rules, it stood to reason that there was no one to answer to, either.

Edward often dreamed about his guilt, and Slipknot fed off it, intertwined it with the rest of the family's, splashed it across the ceiling and let it drip down. Slipknot increased the tentative connection with Edward as he slept, and listened hard...Edward was dreaming of it again.

And Slipknot was hungry.



In the dream, Edward was taking his twelve-year-old son, Stephen, to a hockey game for his twelfth birthday.

"Woo-hoo! Go Canucks!" Stephen shouted, his little boy's voice lost in the roar of the crowd.

The noise was driving spikes into Edward's brain. The pounding headache/near-migraine was threading through his skull, chipping bits off, and by Christ he wished Stephen would just watch the game and shut the fuck up.

"Dad, did you see Ohlund rip that shot through Hasek?! Holy cats! What a blast he's got! Incredible! Dad, did ya see it?! Dad?"

Edward gritted his teeth, more cracks in his head. The Canucks had scored on the Buffalo Sabres and this Vancouver crowd was going nuts—a jackhammer at the base of his skull. He'd never had a headache this bad in his life. He'd taken aspirin for it before they'd left for the game, but—

"Ha-HO!" Stephen leaped out of his seat with the rest

of the capacity crowd and started clapping and hollering. The Canucks had popped another one in. "Dad, Bertuzzi roofed one! Did ya see it?! Wow!"

Shut the fuck up, he thought. *Just SHUT UP*. Yes, I fucking saw it. Edward leaned forward in his seat with his head in his hands, rubbing his temples.

"You okay, Dad?"

"Leave me alone, Stephen," Edward said, eyes shut, a tear slipping down his cheek from the pain. "Just...watch the game and let me be for a bit, okay?"

"But what's wrong?" Stephen shouted over the noise of the crowd.

I knew the little shit wouldn't shut his trap. He can't just fucking leave me alone, can he? He has to know what's wrong. He has to shout the question right in my goddamned ear. Has to —

"Dad, can you hear me?! Are you alright?!"

Edward knew he was close to snapping. Teetering on the brink. One more word and he knew—

"Dad, is it your head? Is it—"

Slipknot pushed just then...only a little bit, but he pushed. Just enough.

Edward swung around in his seat, lifted his son up to his face by the arms. Stephen dangled like a broken puppet, eyes wide, suddenly terrified. "Yes, Stephen, my FUCKING head is killing me, you little bastard!" The words came from his mouth, but he had no idea where the thoughts that had formed them came from. "My head is pounding like hell, and your constant shouting and bellowing in my fucking ear isn't exactly helping, ALRIGHT?!"

"B-B-But...Dad, I—"

Slipknot shoved a bit more and grinned as the words tumbled from Edward's mouth. "You were an accident, anyway, Stephen," Edward said, and dropped his son

back into his seat, utter disdain on his face.

The Canucks came close again, hitting a post, and the drill probed deeper into Edward's mind, stirring Slipknot up even more.

A big, fat Sabres fan — a Mike Peca jersey pasted to his sweaty back — leaned over in his seat one aisle up from theirs and threatened Edward, telling him to lay off the kid. Edward ignored him.

Stephen's face had gone slack at the word "accident," but Edward simply could not stop. "We didn't want you. No one wants you. You were an accident. Just a fucking stupid accident."

Edward felt something release from inside him. The headache started to fade, slowly, in increments. Waves of nausea passed over him and he fell clumsily into his seat. He started to cry.

The Canucks slammed their third straight goal through Hasek and the crowd erupted. Stephen remained seated, staring at nothing, wishing he were dead.

Edward woke from the dream, sweating, head pounding. His sheets were soaked through. Breath coming in raspy, choking gulps, he looked up to the ceiling and saw the shadows stretching themselves along the ceiling again, pulsing in time with his breathing. He had only ever seen this in dream before, but now it was real. Dripping onto his sheets. Slithering between the folds of his crumpled quilt. The hushed whisper, *I'm inside you*, slinking through his mind like a back-alley whore. *You can't kill me 'cause I'm already inside you.*

The shadows seeped under the covers and into Edward's pores. Flitting images and vague feelings of broken promises and forgotten dreams: the back of Dad's head splashed across trees, the dull thump of his body hitting the leafy ground; Chumbly twisting in his red

wine prison; Gramps with his brains splattered all over the oak table and mantelpiece; Edward's wife leaving him after two years of marriage, lurid scenes of the infidelity that had caused it; Stephen at the hockey game, the flat, stone look of worthlessness, of being loved by no one.

"I do not want to kill you," Edward mumbled, dream becoming reality, the words untrue, but practiced, ingrained nonetheless. Guilt tightened, became a machine, thrust forward, immutable. Parts of it became a hard, cold stone in his chest. Other parts swam through his veins, burning, congealing, solidifying. Frozen Pompeii, an ashen statue of grief and guilt.

Then Slipknot told Edward his name.

"Slipknot," Edward whispered, the beginning sibilant like a razor deep and hard across his tongue, the word itself a poisonous miasma drifting through his psyche, ripping out memories like talons tearing at clumps of soil.

When the pain had subsided and only a dull throb remained, Edward slept, and dreamed about Stephen.



Stephen walked through the front door of his house to see his father standing in the hall, a gun pointed at his son's head. He dropped his overnight bag on the floor and tried to think of something to say.

Edward felt the knot tighten. He was sweating from everywhere a human being can sweat from, his entire body drenched, the exposed parts — arms, hands, face — glistening. His whole frame trembled, but his gun hand was steady. He could feel Slipknot racing around inside him, shooting random images of betrayal, regret, and loss through his mind. With each image, each impression, the

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trigger bent back that much further.

In his son's face, he saw Gramps, saw his father, saw himself...and squeezed a little more.

He tried to say he was sorry, that Stephen wasn't an accident, that he'd wanted him, loved him, still loved him, would always love him. But Slipknot pulled tighter, securing itself against the accumulated guilt/betrayal of the centuries before him. More images seared synapses, burned grooves through rational thought. Images two, three hundred years old of people Edward did not know, but knew were his blood. Their faces sliced through his will, their deeds crushing it to dust.

The hammer of the gun cocked back slowly as the pressure on the trigger increased. Shades of gray wrapped in shadows in the shape of tears rolled down Edward's cheeks.

Slipknot smiled, and waited patiently for the back of the boy's head to open up all over the screen door.

Finally, Stephen found words. Words he had no right saying. Words he didn't understand, and had no idea from where they'd come. "Pull the slipknot, Dad." His eyes were locked with his father's, somehow, perhaps through the song of their blood, sharing the visions. "Pull it."

Some rules are universal, and with no one to appeal to, they sometimes change on their own, or bend to the will of one stronger.

"Pull it. Pull the knot."

Edward flinched at the words—

you can't fucking kill me

—shook more violently yet, his gun hand finally becoming affected. The disease within him screamed—

I'm already inside you

—pressed harder at Edward, but Edward understood his son's words, and he let it all go.

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He just *let*.

It.

Go.

Stephen watched his father raise the gun to his own head, the hand holding the weapon now steady again. Something flickered momentarily beneath the skin of Edward's face, something black and seething, something trying like mad to get out.

Stephen Curtis closed his eyes.

SILICA

*In loving memory of Chris Hamlin (1973–1999).
Best friends forever.*

The tinkling of broken glass.

I heard it, but didn't know where it was coming from. It was like thin shards of glass being ground to dust, grating against something. Sand, maybe. Silica sand. Isn't that what glass is made from?

Silica.

It underlay every other noise I heard, as though someone was constantly sprinkling glass-dust near my ears. Faint. Insistent. On especially bad days, the suspiration of tiny glass motes became the shattering of full windowpanes, to the point where I couldn't see straight or even think.

In dreams, when the sound was at its dullest, my mind conjured the same image: a sliver of glass with sand flowing from its sharpest point like a runnel. Behind it and below it, only darkness, floating.

Sometimes I heard Silica's gentle breathing creeping into my subconscious as she lay beside me, dreaming her own dreams. The combination of the sand/glass and her breathing induced in me something approaching panic, and I always woke in a sheen of sweat, my ragged

breathing matching hers in time, a metronome of our dichotomous realities.

She slept so peacefully, my Silica.

I think she was the source of the sound because when she left me a few years ago it stopped. When she came back last New Year's Eve, it returned and seemed to have grown louder. I did not tell her about the glass sounds because I didn't think she would understand, and I did not want to risk losing her again.

Last week I woke up standing in front of the bedroom window that looks out at the backyard. I watched the tire-swing move gently back and forth in the soft August breeze, as the creaking sound of rope against wood fell counterpoint to the sand and glass in my head. Ever-so-faintly, beneath the creaking, the sand, and the wind, there was my love's breathing. I reached up with my left hand and put my fingers against the glass. Upon contact all sound ceased...except Silica's breathing. I removed my hand and the sounds returned slowly, filtering back into my head.

I looked out the window again and saw a small figure there. A child, about eight years old. I glanced over at the clock on my bedside table: 3:19 AM. Where were the child's parents? What was she doing out at this hour, alone? I returned my eyes to the figure and she looked up at me, the breeze blowing her straight brown hair about her head like something alive. She smiled softly at me, glass eyes searching mine. She mouthed one word that I couldn't make out the first time. There was too much noise for me to concentrate. I put my hand on the glass and everything stopped again, save for my wife's breathing.

The child mouthed the word again, and this time I understood it: *Daddy*.

My breath caught. The child's glass eyes glittered

faintly in the meager light from the thumbnail moon. A slow, knowing smile slithered onto her face, and she kicked off with both feet in the dirt beneath the tire, swinging gently, eyes still locked to mine.

I closed my eyes, then, and thought of fire making heat, making glass, making death.

Making peace.

"Steven?"

Silica was propped up on one elbow, rubbing her eyes. "Steven, is everything alright? What are you doing over by the window, honey?"

The little girl had stopped swinging now and looked in my direction again. Not at my eyes, this time, but at my hand, where it still lay flat against the pane, keeping things quiet.

I watched that little girl die. I watched her burn to death in that house. I watched her flesh boil, watched it char in slow motion right in front of me. Her eyes bubbled and popped, running down her cheeks...like sand on glass.

"Steven? Hon, you're scaring me, what's wrong?"

Her screams floated through the glass, visible, living tendrils of pain, chewed up by the smoke and flames. My hand against the window, eyes holding nothing, feeling nothing, Silica pulling my other hand, pleading for me to come. The fire! Do you want to die with her? Do you?! There's nothing we can do! she screamed. They both screamed.

...And the child's eyes were replaced with glass.

"Steven!" Silica shook me, tried pulling me away from the window.

Again.

The child's gaze switched from my hand to my eyes, glass shards boring into my skull, cracking it, my thoughts crumbling, losing cohesion.

My little girl is dead.

"Daddy..."

Her voice drifted in through the open window, carrying the weight of her death, carrying the accusation.

Silica stopped pulling on me, noticing the position of my hand on the glass, following my gaze to the tire-swing that had been our daughter's favorite play spot.

"Oh, Steven, there's nothing you could have done," she whispered, wrapping her arms around me from behind, resting her head on my back. "You know that, don't you?"

Jocelyn, my sweet, dead little girl, frowned at my wife's—her mother's—words.

You could have saved me, Daddy. You could have...

Tears blurred my vision. I tried to speak, but I couldn't get around the lump in my throat, the pain in my heart.

Finally:

"Silica...let go of me."

Silica lifted her head slowly from my back, her hands fluttering as they left my body. "What did you call me, Steven?"

I ignored her. She knew her name.

"Look at her, Silica," I said quietly, tears slipping into the corners of my mouth, spreading out along my lips, salty, "So beautiful...and look what we did to her."

She asked again what I had called her. I don't understand why she ignored our daughter. She was right there, on the tire-swing, the way she was before she died, and all my wife could think about was her own name.

"Who is Silica, Steven?"

I could feel her coldness at my back. I knew by the tone of her voice that if I turned around and looked, her arms would be crossed, her left cheek twitching a little, like it always did when she was mad. I didn't have time for that; my daughter needed me. But I wanted Silica to see.

"Honey, look at Jocelyn."

Jocelyn's face was slowly melting. My hand was hot on the glass, burning up. She started to scream. She lost her grip on the tire-swing's ropes and fell over into the dirt, twitching and gurgling, skin sloughing off her bones. She twisted her head in my direction once more from her position on the ground, beetles, earwigs, and cockroaches crawling in her open mouth, her beautiful face pitted from flame and belching smoke from holes in her cheeks. Her eyes turned to sand, then, and the sound of a million sheets of glass shattering exploded in my head.

I dropped to my knees, clenching my head, my left hand sizzling against my scalp from the heat of the fire.

Silica bent to cradle me, asking what was wrong, if I was alright, should she call 911, ohgodwhat'shappening, and still, fucking *still* asking who Silica was, all of it coming in a flood of near incoherence.

You could have saved me, Daddy. You could have...She pulled you away from the window, just like she pulled you away from me now, Daddy. And it happened again. Why do I have to keep dying for you?

Silica's arms were around me again, and I could feel their coldness, like glass, like sand...

After Jocelyn died, she left me. My wife left me, without a word. Every night I lay in bed and all I could hear was her breathing, right beside me.

On New Year's Eve, when she returned, she brought our daughter with her...every night outside the window, playing in her swing, the glass in her eyes, the glass that separated me from her.

"Silica?" I whispered, the sound of shattering glass finally receding, only the gentle swish of my daughter's hair as she swung back and forth on the tire, in my mind...and, of course, Silica's breathing.

"I'm here, Steven," she said, rocking me mechanically under the windowsill. "I'm here."

"Silica, why didn't you let me save her?" I had never asked this question. It had never occurred to me before. "Why did you pull me away from the window? I could have saved her, Silica. Jocelyn *says* I could have. She tells me every night. But you pulled me away, you...pulled me...*from* her..."

Silica was silent. Nothing. She stopped rocking me. "Why do you call me Silica, Steven?"

"That's your name," I answered, simply.

"My name is Linda, Steven. *Linda*."

Sand slipped off the point of the sliver of glass in my mind. Silica sand. I suddenly felt very tired and I closed my eyes, thinking of Jocelyn as a baby, watching her grow up in fast-forward in my mind's eye, remembering vividly each birthday, her first words, her first steps, the way she hid under the stairs when she heard me coming, thinking every time that I didn't know where she was, then leaping out at me when I got to the bottom, screaming, "PoppaPoppaGotcha!!" and hugging me fiercely, ragged breathing in my ear from her excitement.

I remembered every time she fell from her tire-swing, cutting a knee or scraping an elbow, and always getting right back into the tire because it was her favorite thing, her favorite place.

I wondered if Silica really understood that she was gone forever.

I opened my eyes and looked up at my wife. She gazed down at me, her own eyes empty, hollow, hard, and cold.

Glass...

"Silica, I'm tired. Can you help me to bed, please?"

She lifted me up and rested my top half on the bed, then swung my legs over to follow. I closed my eyes and

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thought again of fire making heat, making glass, making death.

Making peace.



When I heard Silica's breathing become measured, I got quietly out of bed, went downstairs, found a hammer, a handful of nails, and a packet of matches, then returned to our room, the tinkling of glass in my head getting louder with every step.

When I started pounding the nails into the wood of the window frame, Silica stirred.

"Steven? What...what are you doing?"

I pounded two more nails in, adding to the four or five I'd managed to do before Silica woke, and turned around to look at her. There was fear in her eyes, and I think she knew then she was going to die.

I turned from her without answer, struck a match, and lit the bottom of the window's curtains. Flames raced hungrily up the flimsy material, bathing the room in its soft, orange glow within seconds.

I walked out of the room, closed the door behind me and, using the remaining five or six nails in my hand, quickly nailed it shut like I had the window.

Silica screamed.

On my way down the stairs I heard her thumping her weight against the door, yelling for me to let her out, pounding her fists, her feet, terrified.

I dropped the hammer on the stairs, walked around to the back of the house toward the tire-swing.

As I sat down in the tire, closed my eyes, listened to the screams, and the crackling of fire, I reached up to grasp the ropes—

—and felt Jocelyn lean into me, her cheek against mine,

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arms around my neck, soft breath in my ear —

"Daddy," she whispered gently...and I opened my eyes...

The bedroom window exploded outward and Silica fell, on fire and still screaming, until she hit the cobbled stone walkway three floors below, where her body shattered into myriad shards of twinkling glass.

I pushed my daughter gently from my chest and looked at her perfect face, pallid in the moonlight; her perfect long, brown hair blowing gently around her shoulders in the light breeze filtering in through the trees; her perfect eyes, no longer glass, but the deep, deep blue of the darkest waters on earth.

I closed my eyes, feeling numb, pulling my dead daughter against me and pushing off against the dirt with both feet—swinging, just...*swinging*...

I held Jocelyn tight, feeling her tears on my skin, and listened for Silica's breathing somewhere in the blanket of crackling, popping wood and roaring flame, but heard nothing.

And for the last time, I thought of fire making heat, making glass, making death.

Making peace.

A DIAMOND OF SKIN AND LOVE

Cutting.

Carving the skin of her face.

When the epidermis parted around the blade, the man could smell burnt leaves and rotting fruit. He inhaled the scents. *This is the way love smells*, he thought.

Neat little squares, each one inch by one inch, chin to scalp, ear to ear.

The man inhaled deeply again. Love burned his nostrils, his heart. Freed him.

And it would free David, too.



“What the fuck are you doing!?”

The man in the middle of the room looked up, capped and slipped the Xacto knife back into his pants pocket. “David, I wasn’t expecting you yet.” He sounded rather annoyed. There was a woman lying spread-eagled on the floor beneath him.

David Lipscombe, the woman’s husband, looked more than a little nonplussed at the situation before him. He dropped the briefcase he was carrying. It *thunked* to the floor, startling his cat, FatBastard, into near movement. The black brief teetered, tilted, and fell on the gray, obscenely overweight feline, who still did not move.

“What have you done to her, John?!”

FatBastard meowed, disgruntled that David had raised his voice.

John Decourcy stood up from his kneeling position over the woman’s face. He spit something red and glistening from his mouth, picked his teeth absently with one bloody finger.

“Oh, relax, David. Like you give a fuck about her, anyway.”

David blinked. Twice.

“Besides,” John added. “She’s still alive.”

FatBastard finally slithered out from beneath the briefcase, letting it fall flat on the hardwood floor. Another *thunk*. Another meow. A ruffling of fur. The giant cat waddled over toward Kristi.

David’s face crinkled up.

Oh, God, John thought, *here come the waterworks*.

John crisped the creases in his Armani suit. “Oh, for the love of Christ on his rickety crutch, David, please don’t cry. Don’t make it worse than it has to be, okay? Try to understand that this was necessary. Think about it for a minute—really *think* about it—and you’ll see that I’m right.” He was exasperated, impatient that David was upset by the prone figure of his wife lying in an expanding puddle of her own blood, breathing so shallowly it was nearly indiscernible, her face a patchwork of skin squares, blood interstices delineating the precisely cut sections.

"You..." David started. Choked. Gulp in air. Fought back tears. Swallowed the lump in his throat. Tried again. "You sick fucking...good Jesus. Why? Why would—"

John sighed, rolled his eyes, already tired of the game. He knew this would happen. Of course this was happening—it was David. What else could he expect?

FatBastard pawed one of Kristi's flesh squares free from her right cheek. It sloughed off, stuck to his paw, one nail stuck through it like a subcutaneous shish kebob. Epidermis on a stick.

John glanced at the blood on his hands. Grimaced. He bent over, picked the cat up, eliciting a rather resigned mewl from the beast, and wiped his hands on its fur. He stroked its ears, scratched its chin, leaving blood trails through the pelt. FatBastard purred contentedly and gazed up at John with nothing but pure, oblivious love.

Kristi's chunk of skin still dangled from the cat's nail. John chuckled, set the cat back down. More ruffling of fur, the curling of its mammoth tail into a question mark, giving form to David's swirling thoughts. Fatty wandered away, the chunk of gristly skin now forgotten, slapping lightly against the wooden floor with each soft step.

Dumb fucking cat, John thought. As if in response, the cat—just before it disappeared down the hallway leading to the kitchen—turned back and mewed vacantly one last time, slipped a little on the blood-slicked skin as it rounded the corner, shook it off its paw, sniffed it, licked it, then batted it against the wall, just above the baseboard where it stuck like the world's smallest abstract, blood frame oozing around it.

"Look, David," John began, gesturing with his blood-fur hands, "you didn't love her and you know it. You *think* you did, and you like to pretend and *tell* yourself

you did, but you and I both know the truth. So don't start whining about it, okay?"

David made a few more pathetic fishy gurgling noises, mouth flapping open and shut, open and shut. Adam's apple bobbing up and down.

Flashes of memory seared David's brain: his and Kristi's first hesitant kiss, so gentle, so sweet, heart pounding, the taste of tangy salt-sweat on her upper lip; their lovemaking, taking her from behind, her favorite way; the time she snorted milk out her nose in laughter at one of his oh-so-clever quips; how he squeezed her hand twice and smiled when their fingers were locked, as if to say *I'm here, love, and everything is going to be alright*.

None of it meant a damned thing to him, he realized. None of it. Like a bad movie full of cardboard actors and cheap props. A movie no one would ever watch.

John took a few steps to his left, toward the chair, neatly sidestepping the halo of blood around Kristi's now piecemeal facial features. His expression as he stepped over the body was of someone perturbed by the fact that their maid had missed a spot while polishing the floors.

The diamond was not beautiful to him just yet. *But the cut is good*, he thought. *The cut is very clean*.

He sat down in one of David's big, puffy chairs, the arms far too high for any properly proportioned human being to comfortably use them. David claimed the elevation of the arms was to increase blood-flow to the head, though why that would be anyone's priority when buying chairs, John didn't know. "You know, David, you really need to get new chairs." He picked a sliver of gristle from between his two front teeth.

Looking at her now, John was certain he'd done the right thing. *She's multi-faceted*, he thought. *She's a diamond cut to no one's specifications but her own. Pure. She's our diamond, mine and David's, and only we can cut her now*.

David, in shock, aware of the events before him, but still not quite certain how to react to them, looked from John to Kristi for some sort of explanation. The flashing memories died out slowly, only an occasional sudden burst here and there. He closed his eyes tightly for a moment, stars strewn across the blackness inside his head. When he reopened them, Kristi was different somehow, sort of wavering at the edges. He waited for his vision to readjust, but nothing changed. *She's a diamond*, he thought. *Pure. Sparkling. And only we can cut her now.* David did not know where the thought had come from, but it calmed him, regulated his breathing, cleared his vision.

He noticed there was more than just the one skin square that FatBastard had made off with missing from his wife's face. John was picking Kristi's face-flesh from his teeth. Somehow, this did not disturb David.

John was right. No matter how he tried, he couldn't quite generate the anger he knew he was supposed to be feeling. Actually, she looked sort of peaceful just lying there, precisely diced and ready to serve. *Hors d'oeuvre, monsieur?*

John stroked his goatee, glanced over at Kristi. "Honey? You still there, sweetie pie?"

When he'd looked directly into her eyes while he'd been cutting her, he'd fancied he could see scenes from the life they could have

(should have)

had split into diamond chips, each scene connected but angling away from the other. He remembered thinking, *It's not quite the way I would have cut it, but it doesn't matter, because only we can cut her now. David and I. We deserve it for everything we've lost trying to love her.*

And the cut is good, don't forget. Crisp, clean, flawless.

"Sugar," John continued, "David's here. Don't die

just yet, okay?"

Silence.

John and David waited, looked at Kristi, then at each other, then back to Kristi. "Sweetie?"

A muffled gurgle. A slight shuffling. The thick *squelch* of soft, crushed skull against hard, blood-drenched wooden floor as she tried to reposition her head, tried to lift it to see her husband, or maybe to see John. Maybe just to see where the cat had run off to with that piece of her face.

"Good," John said, "you're conscious."

David—unaware, unloved husband, unwitting diamond cutter—took a few tentative steps toward her, stood above her. A noise dry-clicked in his throat. He moistened his palate and spoke. "Kristi, it's David. Can you open your eyes and look at me, please? If you can, I mean..."

Kristi twitched a little.

FatBastard stumbled back into the room, jumped into John's lap and snuggled near the crook of his elbow. John smiled sweetly at the dough-headed thing and stroked its matted fur, the blood caked and crunching a bit in places where it had already fully dried.

"Dave—" Kristi coughed, the surface disruption causing one of the side cutlets to slip down against her ear. It stopped when it came up against her big, dangling bunny earrings. The grooves and etchings slowly filled up with blood.

"Dave," she said a bit clearer, stronger this time, opening her eyes to look at her husband, "where's...my kitty?"

Suddenly it all made sense.

Suddenly everything became clear to David.

He looked to John, who was still stroking the bloody butterball in his lap. John just nodded, smiled, sucked his

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teeth and swallowed. He had known before David, had been the one to see through the fog of years spent in routine, in habit, in an elaborate, drawn-out lie.

She's our diamond, David thought, eyes locked to John's. *Ours to cut.*

John stood up, gently cradling the gray/red cat, walked to Kristi, leaned over and placed the purring monstrosity on her chest. He straightened up, looked at David again. This time they both nodded. They kneeled then, each on one knee as if about to propose to the shattered woman whose blood-halo from the fissure in her skull grew with every minute, both desperate for her attention, but each for their own reasons.

John Decourcy, the man who had always been in love with her—a love so pure, so strong that he'd never had the courage to admit to it—took her left hand in his.

David Lipscombe, her husband, the man who had never loved her and didn't know why, took her right.

True, silent communion.

They lifted her arms and placed her hands on FatBastard's back. The cat purred, and the two men watched the woman's hand caress the animal with the love that both of them had wanted to give and receive, but had somehow ended up with neither. The cat continued to purr, as oblivious as always, content even when the hands stopped stroking a few seconds later.

Cold. Dead.

John looked up at David, both men dry-eyed, the tired smiles of long-out-of-work clowns on their faces.

John stood up. "I'm glad you understand, David. I'm glad Kristi understood, too. I think even FatBastard understands."

David stood up. "We'll do it properly. The remaining cuts have to be clean, crisp, sharp."

John straightened the creases in his suit pants again

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and nodded. "She deserves that. We'll finish her before she gets cold."

Both men looked down at Kristi's dead, staring eyes. Light refracted off them, splitting into a million bright shards.

John pulled the Xacto knife from his pocket, reached across Kristi's corpse, and handed it to David. "I'll get a knife from the kitchen."

**based on characters created by Sandra Kasturi, Jason Taniguchi, and Russell Martin. Used with permission.*

SUBLIMINAL VERSES

Just beneath the surface.

They run through everything. Verses. Spoken by everyone, but in a language that no one understands. They dip into the collective subconscious, rise out of it again, dripping wet with dread. They course through our every sentence, infected with misery.

Ever since communication between human beings became possible, these verses have existed, riding just below the skin of our lives: a plague of verbal violence. The HIV of communication.

Subliminal verses have no geographic borders, do not know skin color, do not understand religion. They are their own God, answering to no one. And we embrace them, we let them flourish within us, provide them with a home, a warm bed, three square meals a day, and a companion with which to share the night.

They are the verses of history, defined by our experience, created by our deceit, our mistrust of one another. They grow black and gnarled with age, crumpled at the edges, burned and charred. Threaded through every word we speak, integral to the system. A parchment of oral disease.

When we argue with each other, the subliminal verses glow bright with purpose. When we strike one another in anger, they pulse, quicken. When we kill, they shine bright as stars. Beyond words, they are our breath, our blood.

Like a sickness, they spread from body to body, informing our decisions, blinding rational thought, becoming the purest of rages.

And we welcome them. We breathe them willingly into the song of our lives.

They are a handshake between God and the Devil. The fog that wraps around our hearts and squeezes. Their weight is the weight of all that has come before, and is just as inescapable, irreversible.

The only mystery is that of the speaker: Who created the verses? When? For what purpose? Mention has been made of God, of the Devil. But neither of these is a suitable candidate, because the verses are gray. Neither black nor white, they serve no one and so can be controlled by no one.



A man in a rumpled, charcoal suit sits on a bus, looks out the window, watches humanity slip by, catches glimpses of the subliminal verses flitting from person to person. Furrowed brows, sharp words, impatience—a hatred boiling inside blackened hearts beating sluggishly in screaming chests. Everything slowing down, hardening. Crystallizing.

This man is the First Man, seeing and hearing what no one else can. He is sad, knowing what will happen to the world, knowing where it is headed. Knowing that there is no way to change it.

But he did not intend this.

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When he woke up on the morning of his birth, thoughts of nothing but the most basic of primal needs spun in his tiny head. Nothing else spoke to him. Nothing else breathed between the spaces of these thoughts. Nature abhors a vacuum, and a hollow needed filling. So there was an opening. And he let them in. These songs of disaster.

The chaos of creation unfolded inside his chest, unfurled in his mind. And with every day that passed, he heard the voice of this chaos more and more clearly. Until one day, when he was old enough, he opened his mouth.

And let it all out.

The man on the bus stands up and pulls the cord. There is a *ding*, a sign lights up in front of the bus driver, letting him know that a passenger has requested a stop. The man shuffles to the front of the bus. Tears spilling from his eyelids, shoulders shaking, the man gets off the bus, walks to the nearest convenience store, buys some cheese and crackers, and walks home.

Alone. Always.

An apology to the world.

THE COLLECTIVE

Black dress shoes slapping wet concrete. A train whistle; gun shot; dog bark; police and ambulance sirens wailing. None of it registers. Only the slapping of the shoes on the pavement, and now the little white darts of hatred nestling, writhing, dreaming of release behind the eyes.

Brown eyes, blue eyes, green eyes, orange eyes, pink eyes—it does not matter. It is anonymous. Crimes perpetrated by The Collective.

And now there is a gun in my mouth.

I look up into the face that is attached to the neck that is attached to the shoulder that is attached to the arm that is outstretched and attached to the hand that holds the gun that is in my mouth. It is a fluid connection—one that I make in my mind over and over again.

I blink sweat away; my forehead is a broken dam.

The man who holds the gun so steadily, unflinchingly in my mouth is no one I know, yet I know many people like him.

I have done bad things in my life. I have been alive twenty-seven years and I have done more than twenty-seven bad things. I have done more than twice that many

bad things. I wonder if this man who holds the gun in my mouth knows about any of these things or if he just happened to randomly pick my sweating face to cram his weapon into.

Perhaps he does this every night of the week to someone different. Maybe he does not like his day job very much. Maybe someone there makes him feel out of control.

Staring into his eyes I can see that he does not recognize me; I can see that he does not hate *me* in particular, and that he has no idea about the far-more-than-twenty-seven bad things I have done in my life.

I think he hates doing what he is doing right now. I do not believe he enjoys holding guns in people's mouths. So I wonder what his motives are. I wonder why I am on my knees in a puddle in a basement garage next to my car, the keys still clenched in my hand, listening to the overhead broken water pipe dripping, listening to the police and ambulance sirens—the police who won't get here in time to stop this, and the ambulance that will be useless because of it.

This man is a member of The Collective. The Collective isn't dangerous; only its members are. You tend to think more about society's ills when you have a gun in your face.

When this man finally pulls the trigger, I know it will not hurt; there won't be enough time between the act of pulling the trigger and my death for there to be pain. So it is not pain that I am afraid of.

Since I have done awful things in my life—some worse than what this man is about to do—I know I have this coming to achieve at least partial balance in the cosmic scheme of things. I am not afraid of death. I think—now that I am down on my knees in a puddle waiting to die and have some time to reflect on it—that I

have been waiting for it for many years.

What scares me is the fact that this man's face will not tell me why he's doing it. I am scared of not knowing why I'm going to die. If only there was a twitch in his cheek muscles, a shifting of his focus, something, anything to give me a clue...But there is nothing. He bores straight into my skull with his glare, and I can feel his pulse throbbing in a vein at the back of my head.

Maybe he does not know the exact things I have done, but I think he may know the kind of man that I am. I do not think I can hide that. I do not think any man can. You try to mask it, but some people see right through you, no matter what you do.

And really, I am very stupid—I should have seen this coming. Someone, somewhere is always watching you, and with a network as immense as The Collective, I do not know why I thought I would be different.

There is no such thing as a random act of violence.

I peeled the skin off a man's face once. It was not anything like peeling an orange. It was disgusting, but not disgusting enough that I didn't do it again to another man, in a different apartment. I told myself that he was enjoying it, that he was screaming with pleasure.

That was one of the bad things I did.

Another time, I thought about ramming my cock down my niece's throat. That felt worse than ripping off a man's face. That made me feel dirty on the inside as well as the outside.

So many things that I should not have done, and now I have a gun in my mouth. The man has cocked the weapon and is muttering something under his breath. I cannot make out what he is saying. Whatever it is, it must be about me. Everything is about me. I am the center of my own, this man's, and everyone else's universe.

This is the way everybody thinks.

Time is slowing, winding down to the point where, when I lift my eyes to the dripping water pipe, I watch the droplets form and it seems to take an hour. Each one is one full hour, its descent is twice that, and when the third one finally hits the puddle beneath it, I hear the report of a gun. Suddenly I am lying on my back and I can feel that my face is gone. The man has pulled the trigger. I cannot see him anymore.

For a moment I wonder where he went. Then I hear his black dress shoes slapping the wet concrete, walking away.

The back of my head is opened up wide. The concrete is cool and makes me think of ice cream.

The man must have known those things I was thinking about my niece. If so, I wonder why he only shot me once.

Now I'm back on my knees, watching the ripples from the last drop of water edge out from the center of the puddle. I blink sweat away and take a deep breath.

Not dead, just daydreaming.

I wonder what the man from The Collective will do with my corpse when he finally does pull the trigger. Is there a special cleanup crew that comes around to dispose of Those Who Could Not Be Collected?

Though I have done more than twenty-seven bad things in my life, I think, perhaps, this man has done more.

I would really like to scratch my chin. It is itchy. But I do not think the man will let me.

If I could do everything over again, I would do four times the bad things I've done. This man with the gun cannot change that, though I think maybe that is what he is trying to do. He thinks I will waste these final moments wishing I could take back those awful things. He does not know me as well as he thinks he does.

I would only like to take back one. And you already know what that is, so I won't say it again.

The itch under my chin is getting worse, and I am nearly to the point now where I might risk asking the man from The Collective if he wouldn't mind scratching it for me.

Drip-drip. Itch-itch. Insanity is repetition.

I'll bet he wants me to beg. That must be it. He is waiting for me to cry and grovel. He wants me to confess, come clean. Purge my soul before he stamps my ticket. God will forgive me for everything. Detail it all, lay it out in black and white, paint me a picture, spill your guts, let Jesus take the pain away, tell me how you love to watch people die, the lights winking out one by one by one by one in their eyes, so many lights, dampened, candles in the wind, and how you'd peel my skin off and boil it if I gave you half the chance, because oh, yes sir, most certainly I would, and how I thought about my cock in my niece's mouth, and how I need a shower, only the dirt never comes off when you think things like that, it sticks and makes you itch and itch and you can't scratch because you look up into the face that is attached to the neck that is attached to the shoulder that is attached to the arm that is outstretched and attached to the hand that holds the gun that is in your mouth.

It is a fluid connection—one that you make in your mind over and again.

But I will not confess.

Not to you, Jesus, or anyone else. What I have done is mine. The Collective cannot take it from me, even though I do not deserve to have it. I hold onto it because it defines me. Death has no scythe as long as I am defined.

We judge ourselves and live life accordingly, then let others clean up the mess. But the cleanup crew might miss a spot and I'll be forever imprinted, stained, given

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my own star on this cement walk of fame as the brightest and boldest of his era. A smudge will mark my place, and no one will ever know what I have done. My secret will become me.

So I hope the man from The Collective's purpose is not to make me confess, because if it is, I will be on my knees and he will be on his feet until we both ache in every muscle. He will wish he was home, reading the newspaper in a nice, soft chair; I will wish I had been the one who had made his chair for him, and who had written all the stories in the newspaper he was reading, created the ink the words were printed with, the paper they were written on.

I do not want to be a smudge. I want to redefine myself through this man. I want to become a part of his organization. I want to join the herd. If The Collective is every one of us, then I am already part of it; I am already doing what it wants me to. These thoughts are no longer my own, and I cannot know if they ever were.

I am a shiny star and I am about to die.

The man's trigger finger is perhaps as itchy as my chin now. My ears twitch and I hear the stiff, tiny tendons in his finger creak as he starts to gently squeeze the trigger.

And I know I said it before but there is no such thing as a random act of violence. This is what I deserve. Twenty-seven times twenty-seven times twenty-seven times twenty-seven and I am judged. There is no way to take any of it back.

If I am—by my own will or not—part of The Collective, then this man should know my thoughts. So listen to me: my atrocities define me; your gun and your judgements cannot change that. I am exactly who you need me to be. Though you may deny it, you created me, so you are intrinsic to my definition.

Brett Alexander Savory

The barrel of the gun slides backward; the sight gently knocks against my top row of teeth on its way out, and my mouth clicks shut.

The man walks away. Black dress shoes slapping wet concrete.

I stand up, listen to my knees snap and pop, blink once, and wipe at my forehead with my coat sleeve.

Feeling the keys in my hand, I open the driver's side door and get in. I turn the car on, flick on the windshield wipers and watch them for awhile, then drive home, counting to twenty-seven over and again until the numbers mean nothing, until the words that make up the numbers mean even less.

By the time I get home, I have forgotten what numbers and letters are altogether. I need a new way to communicate. I want to show The Collective that I understand. Now that I know the language of the organization, I am confident in my abilities to get my point across.

I am certain they will understand what I mean.

I walk in my front door, drop the keys on the hall table, go to the desk in my office, retrieve the pistol, sit in my office chair, review once again in my head exactly what is that I want to tell them, slide the barrel between my teeth.

And begin to speak.

THE TIME BETWEEN LIGHTS

Sometimes it's hard to see clearly. Sometimes things just slip right by.

There is a time between lights—that time when the light of day has failed, and the streetlights have not yet come on—when things go unseen, unnoticed, unknown. Everything seems somehow quieter. The world becomes slightly muffled. Not only the sounds but the sights, as well. More things hide in the time between lights than in full darkness. Not a lot of people know this.

The only reason I know this is that I'm one of the things that hides.



It's really not that hard once you know how to do it. You just stick close to the walls and the ground. The twilight seems to join things. I'm sure there's some sort of scientific explanation for it, but I'm not interested. Besides, not everything that goes unseen in the time

between lights can be explained by science.

When I first hid between the lights, I didn't see anything that you wouldn't see. I saw people, buildings, cars. The next few times I hid, it was the same. But the fifth time, I saw other people. People I knew didn't belong there. And they saw me, too. They were the only ones who *could* see me. I didn't know how they could because by that fifth time I had become rather adept at the art and felt very confident in my abilities to remain hidden.

I was hunkered down in an alleyway, waiting for someone, anyone, to fuck with. Stuffed behind a big blue garbage bin, I watched the street, phasing myself between the lights. It was fun to play like that sometimes. People walking by who chanced a glance down the alley would occasionally do double takes, thinking they might have seen something—a piece of paper or a candy wrapper blowing in the breeze, perhaps—flitting around the garbage bin, but when they looked closer, there was nothing there. A bit confused but logically convinced it was a “trick of the light,” they walk on, the incident completely forgotten by the time they reach the next block.

Let me assure you, though: the light plays no tricks. Everything between the lights is very clear, once you're inside.

New York is the best place to play between the lights because there are so many alleyways—the drawback is that not many people willingly venture into them, which spoils the game somewhat. I've played in other cities—Toronto, San Francisco, Chicago—but New York is the most fun, so I decided to stay and perfect the art here.

A woman walked by while I flitted about the garbage bin. Tall, slender, blonde hair, business suit. Miss No Nonsense, you could tell by her gait—probably on her way home from some high-powered corporate job. That's

another thing: you become quite an observer of human behavior once you watch things from between the lights. Things you would normally never notice about someone are projected to the forefront. Most of the time, these things are important to the game. It's easier to scare them, confuse them, when these personality cockroaches are pushed out into the light.

The woman turned her head quickly to the right and scanned the alleyway. I settled back down beside the garbage bin and quickly phased myself in and out twice, just enough to catch her eye during her scan. She did the double take, her step faltered, and then she did something people don't usually do. She actually stopped.

Maybe I was losing my touch. Could she see me?

I made sure I was completely hidden, then studied her where she stood. Her brow was crinkled. She was motionless. But now that I was looking closely, I could see she wasn't looking at me. She seemed to be looking over my right shoulder. I turned my head, following her gaze. That's when I saw them for the first time.

Two men, standing near the back of the alley. One was framed by the door that led into the kitchen of the Sun-Lee Chinese restaurant; the other squatted at the standing one's feet, back hunched, one arm resting on his knees, the other dangling at his side, knuckle dragging on the littered ground. But they weren't looking at the woman, they were looking at me.

They wore long, black wool coats, and their limbs and bodies were severely elongated. The standing one must have been seven feet tall, his hands coming down to his knees, and the hunkered one would likely have been even taller than his counterpart when standing up. Their eyes were little white marbles. Faces expressionless.

When I looked back to the woman, she was gone, presumably walked on hurriedly, frightened. I turned again

and looked to the two men. They were walking toward me. Now I saw their boots, their stretched feet. The marbles in their heads tracked me as I stood up. I backed out into the street, bumped into a passer-by who swore at me when I slipped out of hiding. I struggled to keep from phasing myself into the streetlights. I craned my head up and saw above me that they'd just come on, their hum making it harder for me to hide.

I glanced back to the men in the black wool overcoats. They were flitting like strobe lights, and my tenuous grasp on the time between lights faltered with their every step. One of them smiled wide and I saw inside his mouth. There was nothing. No teeth, no tongue, just gaping emptiness. Lips stretched and curled up at the corners, wrinkles under the marbles—but still merely an inference of a genuine smile.

Then they were gone, winking out like stars on the cusp of dawn, and I was suddenly standing in plain view of everyone on the street. Someone else nudged me as I fully appeared. I stumbled and leaned against the nearby light post...and felt something whisper through me.

I shuddered and walked home, sticking close to the streetlights.



When I went in again, this the sixth time, I saw more of them. A different alley, but the same kinds of people. Same black wool coats, same white marble eyes, same hollow mouths. Walking the streets, noticing them everywhere, I forgot about my own childish games, and began to wonder about these twilight people. Was I intruding on them? Did they see me as some sort of interloper? Was the time between lights supposed to be theirs and theirs alone?

By the tenth time I phased into their realm, I was seeing more of them than of ordinary people. It was as though the regular people were blinking out one by one, being replaced. This suspicion was confirmed one day when I watched a group of teenagers slowly fade away right before my eyes, while behind me a group of the black-coated men appeared and began walking toward me. I shifted out of phase and swore to myself I would stop doing it, would just forget about this mystery and exist wholly in my own world with my own people. But just as I shifted and the glare from a streetlight shone through my spectacles, I caught the whisper of a word: "Eleven."

I had to go in one more time.

The next day, I chose some deserted docks, waited for the sun to slip beneath the tops of the skyline, and phased myself between the lights.

The moment I dropped through, the men in the black wool coats surrounded me. Every one of them had their vacant mouths open, their marble eyes trained on me. Some of them wore black top hats. I had never seen this kind before—all the others just had slick black hair pasted to their heads.

One of the ones with a top hat stepped through the crowd, parting his brothers gently. He stood in front of me, reached a foot-long bony hand to my face and caressed my cheek. He smelled of burnt leaves and charred wood. When he spoke, the blackness writhed inside his mouth.

"Why do you come here?" he said.

I couldn't speak. Wind whipped the water, lapping it against the docks. The massive ship anchored there groaned.

"Why do you return?"

I glanced quickly at the others in the top hats. They

only stared like the rest of them.

"This is our place," he continued. "Not yours. It has never been yours."

What could I say?

"I know," I said. And I did. Just then I felt a surging wave of shame for my intrusion into a realm that was not my own, could never be my own.

"I'm sorry," I said, and meant it sincerely, though the words felt weightless coming from my mouth.

Another top hat stepped forward, put his hand gently on the first one's shoulder; the first one looked at the hand, looked at the face. A small bird flying overhead shadowed him briefly; he frowned, nodded once, then stepped aside.

"We are the ones people have forgotten," the second top hat said. His voice was sad, quiet, nearly lost to the waves slapping at the ship. "Have people forgotten you?"

I was stunned into silence. The question dug trenches in my synapses and all other thought was obliterated.

"No, of course not," I said, and took a step backward from the piercing marble eyes. "I just..." I began, but could get no further. The waves seemed to be slapping against my head now. Pounding. Crashing.

"Who knows you?" said the second top hat. And immediately on its heels: "Yes, who?" said the first one.

Inside me, I felt drawers opening, doors unlocking, steps crumbling, falling away to splintered slivers. *Who knows me?*

No one.

"No one," I said, and with those two words everything shattered. It felt as though my skull had split in distinct halves. I fell to my knees, then on to my side in the dirt. Top hats crowded my tearing vision, a city skyline of rigid rooftops, yawning crevasses, flickering,

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blinking, confused office lights.

"No one," I mumbled through numb lips, and closed my eyes, shutting out the lights, the skyline, the waves, everything.

Everything but those two words.



When I woke up, it was nighttime. Solid night.

Nowhere to hide.

I was lying on my back, sprawled out—featureless sky above me, hard-packed dirt beneath.

When I sat up, memories shot at me, drove spiked nails into my head. I glanced around for the top hats, but there was no one. Wind, water, waves. That was all.

I tried to remember who I was, where I'd come from, who I might be married to, who my children might be, the job that, perhaps, I was late for, the house I may have left unlocked.

Nothing.

Wind.

Water.

Waves.

It suddenly struck me that it takes the first two to make the third.

I stood, brushed myself off, walked slowly, my boots crunching, to where the ship was anchored in the water.

Waves sloshed and sprinkled me, tiny showers. Misted spray of far away memories: *We are the ones people have forgotten.*

Who knows you?

No one does. No one knows me. I don't even know me. I have been forgotten.

I am *of* the forgotten.

I leaned carefully over the side of the metal dock, saw

Brett Alexander Savory

the moon reflected. Then the moon saw me, defined me.

I saw myself.

And I smiled.

I leaned back, took one deep breath—all I needed to understand—nodded, spun slowly on my heel, felt my long wool coat flutter around my ankles in the breeze.

As I walked toward the city skyline, I brought my hands up to my head to feel the smoothness of the top hat.

And burned inside for the time between lights.

RUNNING BENEATH THE SKIN

The bullet tore a thin strip of flesh from his cheekbone, drove into the brick wall behind him.

He turned a corner, cut swaths through steaming sewer grates—smoky ghosts wrapping around his skinny legs. Dissipating.

Gone.

More bullets flew past his ears as he ducked around another corner, legs pumping hard, breath coming in thick rasps from his lungs. He didn't know this section of town, so it was just a matter of time.

Always just a matter of time.

Voices. Loud, harsh. Guttural bursts exploding from thin lips, wide mouths: Find him, fuck him up. The words didn't matter; their speakers did. The men who spoke these words could run hard and for a very long time. The man they were chasing could not match their endurance.

Gas lamps swam by on his left, shining, flickering, watching the man run. Lighting his way. Chasing away

the shadows he wanted to hide in.

The man heard more shots behind him, wished for a dumpster, a garbage can, another brick wall, anything to hide behind. Make the game more challenging. Then one of the bullets slammed into the back of his right knee. He gritted his teeth, but continued running.

Another bullet caught him in the left shoulder. He plunged ahead, driven forward by the momentum, lurching to one side, nearly losing his balance. But his left knee held him, and he kept running.

More shouting. Now coming from two directions.

He turned another corner, saw four of the men that were chasing him standing there, weapons raised, aimed in his direction. He stopped, stumbled backward, teeth clenched tight against the pain in his leg and shoulder. Three more men stood the way he had just come, grinning, their mouths black holes in their faces.

The shouting stopped.

Nowhere to go.

Seven distinct cocking sounds, as bullets entered chambers.

The man took one deep breath, held it. Closed his eyes.

The night burst open with sound and muzzled fire. The man crumpled. Red seeped out from under him, glistening in dim gaslight.



Hospital green.

Walls rippled when he opened his eyes. Fluorescent ceiling lights swam. He looked to his right. The woman in the bed beside him wavered, floated on crisp white sheets.

The man rubbed his eyes, heard a door open, whisper

closed. Heard a voice, looked up, saw a young woman at the foot of the bed. A nurse. Her mouth moved, but the man heard no words. She held a clipboard, her eyes sweeping it, her mouth moving again. Her brow crinkled, frustrated she was getting no answers to her questions.

The nurse was beautiful and the man would have answered her questions, had he heard them, had he been capable of hearing anything but his own blood pumping in his ears.

She turned the clipboard around to face the man; she pointed to it, held it closer to his face. Her arm stretching toward him undulated, the clipboard bobbing slowly in her hand. The man blinked twice, rubbed his eyes again and tried to focus. He was tired, and wanted only for more rest, but he also wanted to help the nurse, wanted to help this lovely woman with whatever information she needed.

Seeing the man squint, obviously making an effort, the nurse moved around to his right to give him a better look at the chart. The place where her finger pointed showed a scrawled name—the product of some rushed doctor’s nearly-illegible scribbling. He blinked a couple more times and was finally able to make out the name: Henry Kylo.

Far away sounds filtered into the man’s ears. Mumbly in a tin can. He shook his head, clearing the cobwebs. The sounds swirled around in his head, formed words to match the nurse’s red, red lips. She was asking if he was Henry Kylo, was this his name on the chart.

The man put a hand to his head, glanced at the woman in the bed next to him. She had almost stopped floating on her sheets, was now staring at him hard, frowning. The man looked up at the nurse, smiled as best he could, and said, his voice a jumble of cracked rocks,

“Yes, that’s me.”

The nurse mouthed more words to him, lost again to the pounding in his ears. Henry shook his head to let her know he couldn’t hear her. She smiled in understanding, reached down and patted his hand. She was warm. Very warm. Henry wanted to move his other hand on top of hers, to feel the smooth skin there. He tried, but nothing happened. He looked down and saw the sling they’d put his arm in. His leg, too, was bandaged.

He wanted to tell the nurse that they’d made a mistake: He didn’t need to be here. The sling and bandages were unnecessary. Some kind of pedestrian had probably brought him in, or at least called an ambulance to take him away. But they were wasting good hospital supplies on him when they could be used for people who really needed them—perhaps like the woman next to him.

Henry looked again at this woman, and her frown had softened. The lines in her forehead smoothed out to show that she approved of the nurse’s job, approved of compassion shown to another human being.

But she didn’t know Henry. Didn’t know what Henry was. If she did, the frown lines would most certainly reappear.

The doctors usually discharged Henry pretty quickly once they realized what he was, but the doctor who’d scribbled Henry’s name on his chart so illegibly might have been in too big a rush to figure it out, or maybe too new to his job to notice the signs. At any rate, the nurse would figure it out soon enough and then, once he was able to walk again, he’d be released.

Quietly.

The way the hospital staff looked at him—and others like him—was always with disgust. When they removed the casts, the bandages, the IVs, or whatever other point-

less machines they had him hooked up to, they'd ask two security guards to walk him down the hall of this hospital—or one of the other three in the city—the automatic doors would slide open, and they'd stand there silent, waiting for him to leave. Just staring. Afraid to touch him. Pushing him out into the cold with their eyes, with their fear.

Henry was used to it, and knew that this time would be no different...

The nurse patted his hand again, then released it, smiled once more, and walked out the door. The woman beside him looked away, focused on the mounted TV across the room, high up on the wall.

Henry tried to move his injured leg, but, as with his arm, no dice. He'd have to wait probably another hour, maybe two before he could walk with any degree of comfort again.

Just once he wanted to walk out of a hospital without being escorted; just once he wanted to leave of his own accord, even if the outside he was walking back to was the same cold place it had always been for him.

With his good hand, Henry touched the bandage on his face where the first bullet had grazed his cheekbone. He knew by now it would be nearly healed. By the time the program currently on TV had ended, the wound in his shoulder would be closed up, scar tissue already evident. Then, maybe another hour or so after that, his knee would operate as it always had—smoothly, and without a hint of pain.



When Henry was finally discharged from the hospital several hours later—amidst the requisite complement of security guards, and exactly the amount of disgust he

had anticipated from the attending doctor—he walked straight home to his one-bedroom apartment, where the phone was ringing.

"Hello?"

"Henry. Milo."

Henry's old friend Milo figured that the flesh beneath his skin was now about 90% lead, give or take. Milo had been at this game a long, long time. The game was Milo and Henry's connection. Their only real connection to anyone else.

"Caught another few slugs tonight, brother," Milo said. "What about you? Examined yourself yet?"

"Not yet, just got home."

"No way you'll ever catch up to me, you know that, right?" Milo chuckled.

"I don't want to catch up to you, Milo."

"Sure you don't. So why not just stay home, play it safe?"

Henry stayed quiet.

"That's what I thought." Milo chuckled again—this time with less heart.

Another few seconds passed before Milo broke the silence: "How long's it been?"

"Since I examined myself?" Henry said. "Couple of weeks."

"What's the matter—afraid to check?"

Fucking Milo. Always on Henry's ass about the same goddamned thing.

"Listen, why don't you lay off me for a while, alright, Milo? Today wasn't the greatest day I've ever had, and I don't need your shit making it worse. Don't you have anything better to do? Christ."

"You know I don't. Neither of us do."

Henry sighed, looked out his living room window. Snow had begun to fall—big fat flakes that stuck to the

window, melted, vanished. No lights on in his apartment yet, so the lone gas lamp outside his apartment building shone in, illuminating his sparse furnishings with a sickly yellow glow.

As if somehow sensing Henry's line of thought, Milo said, "You know what you need? You need a woman's touch over there, my friend. Someone to bring some fucking *life* to that shitty little hole you call home."

"I'm hanging up now, Milo."

"Alright, alright, but check yourself out, chicken shit!" Milo blurted, knowing Henry meant his threat. "And let me know what—"

Henry hung up.

He crossed his living room, touched the base of a lamp. Slightly less sickly yellow light flooded out of it, suffused the room. Henry touched the lamp's base twice more, until the light was closer to white than yellow.

More than just sparse: Stark. Empty. Hollow. Gutted. A home to match his personality. But that was Milo talking. Henry knew better. Tried to convince himself of better, anyway.

Shower. Maybe some TV, then bed. Fuck the examination. It could wait.

Henry hung his leather on the coat rack near the front door, made his way to the bathroom. Past piles of mystery novels stacked halfway to the ceiling; past a computer that he never used on a desk at which he never sat; past two loaded Magnums on the computer desk that he rarely took out with him on *The Run*; past pizza boxes empty but for the crusts of each slice, turned rock-hard, forgotten.

Henry flicked a switch on the inside of the bathroom doorway; a fluorescent light above the sink flickered, shot to life.

He pulled his shirt over his head as he walked in,

dropped his pants around his ankles, stepped out of them. He took his underwear off, then stood up straight, turned to his left, saw himself in the mirror. Nearly every inch of his torso held scar tissue; his legs more of the same. There seemed to be only small patches of skin left unmarked.

No way I'm even close, Henry thought. *Not a chance I'm anywhere near Milo's percentage.*

Fingers trembling, heart thudding in his chest, Henry brought his hands up from his sides, placed them gently on his chest...and moved them around there in slow circles. He rubbed around his nipples, pushed in near his armpits, squeezed the flesh around what remained of his ribs, sank his fingers deep into the soft meat of his stomach. Both arms, pressing, concentrating, trying to feel as deeply within his body as possible. It was a crude manner of examination for the information he was trying to obtain, but it was all he and others like him had.

Down to his legs, pushing, kneading, prodding around the knees. To his calves, the tops of his feet. Standing back up, checking his groin, buttocks, up to his neck, his hands roaming over his scalp as if washing his hair in the shower. But feeling gently, listening to the song of his skin.

Steel-jacketed lead.

Not pulsing through his veins, but replacing them, replacing flesh, tissue, organs—everything but bone. And even a good portion of that had been shattered, replaced by rows of bullets or clumps of shot.

Everything but skin. The skin remained, though forever changed.

Scarred.

The bullets in his body pushed flush to one another inside him. When he pressed on his abdomen, he felt them clinking together. They rippled under the skin of

his forearms, writhed in his thighs.

Henry *had* caught up to Milo—had likely surpassed him. He estimated about ninety-five percent, maybe more. His head was the least-affected part of him, as most of the bullets were aimed at his body, and because the natural instinct to duck away from higher shots was hard to resist. If he'd been able to control that reaction, he'd probably be near 100%.

And then...

But no one knew what happened then, because no one in living memory had reached 100%. Maybe no one had *ever* done it.

Henry showered, dressed quickly, flicked on the TV, and stared out the window again at the steadily falling snow. He gathered his thoughts, then dialed Milo's number.

Milo picked up almost immediately. "Well?"

"Ninety-five," Henry said, sweat on his brow, his hands slick. His voice was edged with a nervous tremor that Milo caught.

"Ninety-fucking-five," Milo whispered, and whistled low. "Holy shit, man."

"Yeah. I know."

"Another good Run, bro, and you might be there. You might just do it...And before me, too, you cocksucker."

Henry grinned.

"So...belief?" Milo asked. "Which crackpot theory you subscribe to these days, my man? Spiritual transcendence? Transformation into a god of steel? Eternity in some kind of bullet-time Valhalla? Or maybe you finally show up on God's radar and he strikes you down for the freak of nature that you are. Any or all of the above?"

Henry thought for a moment, chewed his lip. "I don't know, Milo. I have no clue."

The snow blew hard against Henry's window,

whipping up a white storm of flakes that mesmerized him as he stared outside, lost in thought.

"Still there, dipshit?"

"Yeah...yeah, still here, Milo. Gotta go. See you at tomorrow's Run."

On TV, the news had just started. The weatherman called for four inches of snow tonight, another two tomorrow afternoon. Harsh, blowing winds. Wind chill creating a deep freeze to smash all previous records.

Henry, a frozen metal statue, running. Just for the sake of running.

And Milo running to be noticed.

Running to get on God's radar.



There were rules, just like in any other game:

You couldn't just pump shots into yourself—that was seen as suicide. And like many other religions, kept you from the divine. The hunters wouldn't shoot if you stood there and waited for their shotguns to blossom, their handguns to light the night; you had to run, you had to be sport, or they wouldn't play the game. And this was the only arena in which the game was played. No time for common murderers; no time for cops: Jail time held you up, kept you from The Run. Kept you from the goal.

As for shooting each other, that was nearly as bad as shooting yourself. This was and always had been about ceremony. Tradition. The hunters hunt; the runners run. The path to enlightenment—to further evolution, some thought—was paved with bullets.

For as far back as anyone could remember, this had been the way of things.

Tonight, shadows moving quickly against a backdrop of random white, like the snow on a TV screen. Same

running crew as always. Same hunters, too, save for a few new faces on both sides. Young faces—fathers teaching their sons.

Different parts of town attracted different kinds of runners and hunters. But with one thing in common the world over: All operated below the collective conscience. For most intents and purposes—invisible.

Everyone in this Run thought the gas lamps in this part of town—north of the railway tracks that cut through the town's middle—made for the best ambience; the electric streetlights to the south side of the tracks were too garish. Too modern. The game was old, had history; it deserved respect.

Henry and Milo sprinted side by side, two swaths of black cut out of the fabric of the storm. Henry had brought his Magnums this time—to present a danger. To keep interest up. Prevent boredom: hunters' flesh was not nearly as bullet-friendly as runners'.

A shotgun blast cracked nearby. Three hunters spread out, settled in behind dumpsters in the alleyway Milo and Henry had entered, coming in off a main street. The wind cut to a minimum here. Henry recognized the area—it was the same part of town he'd fallen in last night. He and Milo hunkered down behind some trash bins, caught their breath, listened for movement from the dumpsters.

"Fuckers hemmed me in last night," Henry whispered, pointing behind them to the corner where he'd gone down in a quick-flash spray of red.

"Tired of the chase?" Milo said.

"Must have been, yeah. Though I like to think I provide a reasonable challenge, you know?"

Another shotgun blast crisped the night, lit up the graffiti-strewn brick walls around them.

"That's why tonight," Henry said, cocked his

Magnum, "we piss them off a little." He stood up fully, in plain sight, popped off a round in the direction of the closest dumpster, where one of the hunters' feet was visible through the blowing snow. Henry's shot pulped it.

The hunter fell to the side, propped against the wall. Screamed his lungs out. Henry ducked behind the trash bin again, leaned to his right, just enough to see his target's head through the heavy snow.

Fired.

A clump of bone and gristle slapped against the brick wall, silencing the screams.

Words of anger filtered out from behind the other two dumpsters. It wasn't often that the runners fought back.

"That did it," Milo said.

A shotgun exploded from behind one of the dumpsters; machine gun fire opened up from the other. Anguished wails and screams of hate filled the thin spaces of silence between metallic staccato.

Hearing the bullets whistling above his head from where he crouched behind the trash bins, Henry realized his opportunity, took a quick breath, closed his eyes...and popped his head up.

Three bullets in quick succession whistled into his cranium. The first two slammed out the back, but the third stuck hard. Two more sliced through his neck, butted up against several others already lodged there. Henry fell backward, exposed to the gunfire, unconscious. One more found its home in his chest as he lay there, then the firing stopped.

Milo, grinning, moved to pick Henry up.

The two hunters ignored Milo—he was too easy a target now—and shuffled to the dumpster where their friend had fallen. Low, muffled curses whipped by wind found Milo's ears.

The hunters picked up their dead friend—each to an arm—and dragged him backward out of the alley, his booted feet leaving trails through the snow.

“Good haul, man,” Milo said, hoisting Henry up and over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry. “With any luck, I’ll take a few in the back on the way outta here.”

Milo trudged through the deep snow of the alley, past the three dumpsters where the hunters had been, walking in the grooves left by the dead hunter’s boots. He squinted against the wind, was nearly blinded by the street lamp’s glaring reflection off the crisp, fresh snow. At the mouth of the alleyway, down and to his right, Milo spotted a dark shape, a man, lying on the ground, most of his head pulverized, a misshapen, bleeding lump in the darkness.

Oh fuck, he thought. He looked up from the hunter Henry had shot, saw the man’s two friends coming toward him. Scowls under hoods.

The closest one stopped in front of Milo, blocking his way; the other one stood behind the first, at his shoulder, glaring, stone-faced. The first one spoke: “This ain’t how the game is played, friend.” Then he pointed to Henry, a dead-weight sack slung over Milo’s shoulder, still out cold and leaving a trail of blood in the snow behind them: “He killed my friend; now I’ll kill his.”

“Whoa, now, hang on a minute, fellas,” Milo said. “Henry was just trying to liven things up a little, you know? Keep you interested. I’m sure he didn’t mean to—”

Something metal glinted in the whitewashed gaslight, catching Milo’s eye. He looked down. The hunter had pulled a machete from a sheath.

Milo backed up a step, shook his head once.

The machete swung, slicing through snowflakes, through air, through Milo’s windpipe, his vertebrae.

Three crumpled heaps now, lying still in the dark. Bleeding.



Three hours later, when the sun tinged the sky dark red, a passerby noticed the three bodies in the street. Only one was still breathing. The passerby called 911; an ambulance picked Henry up, took him to the closest hospital. Upon examination, the paramedics quickly figured out what he was, had seen a few of his kind during the course of their job, but since there was no clear directive about how to handle them, they just treated them like they were normal people in need of assistance. Let someone else worry about them once they got to the hospital.

Henry started waking up a little during the bumpy ride. And even though he was barely conscious, he could still feel the paramedics’ stares, their hatred, their fear, flowing from them in waves.

He wondered briefly what his percentage was like now—was it enough? He guessed not, because, if it had been, shouldn’t...*something* have already happened? He wondered, too, if maybe Milo had been taken in another ambulance. Maybe Henry would see him at the hospital.

Henry closed his eyes, wished he were outside again, feeling the night’s fat snowflakes falling gently on his lips.



Again—hospital green.

And again, the same nurse. Only this time warmer, due to familiarity.

“You here again?” she said, smiled a little, leaning

over Henry, fluffing his pillow.

Henry's mouth felt stuffed with cotton; his head, packed with burnt chestnuts. "Sure looks that way. Not for long, though, I suspect, once the doctors get wind of it. I'll be trotted out again, just like last time, security guards and all."

The nurse said nothing, just kept smiling.

Looking up at her pretty face, Henry suddenly remembered something Milo had said on the phone last night: *You need a woman's touch over there, my friend. Someone to bring some fucking life to that shitty little hole you call home.*

And he decided to give it a shot...before his head cleared some more and he was capable of talking himself out of it.

"What's your name?" Henry said, blushing, feeling like a complete fool. "Mine's Henry."

"I know what your name is," the nurse said. "The chart, remember?"

"Oh...oh yeah. Forgot," Henry said, shuffled his hands and feet uncomfortably under his sheets.

A few seconds passed, then Henry asked where Milo was; he couldn't stand the unanswered question hanging in the air—like it always did whenever he actually worked up the nerve to talk to a woman.

"Who?" The nurse's brow furrowing.

"Milo. There wasn't another guy with me when I was found on the street? Tall guy. Skinny as fuck. Long black hair."

"No one else came in. I can double-check, but as far as I know, they just found you out there—the two others they found near you were...dead."

The nurse waited a beat, swallowed, averted her eyes from Henry's. "I'm sorry, Henry."

Inside Henry, metal shifted. Bullets and shot moved

slowly, piecing themselves together. Like a puzzle.

"I, uh...I have to go now," he said. Some base instinct taking over. A need to be home. To be warm.

Henry swung the sheets back from his legs, got to his feet. Staggered, nearly fell. The nurse caught him, steadied him.

"Henry, your head. Jesus. You can't just walk out of here with—"

"Goddamnit, you *know* I'll be fine!" he shouted in the nurse's face. "You *know* what I am, that I'll heal in a handful of hours, and be back out on the street, running through back alleys, eating bullets, chewing shot, lucky if they take off my head and end it for good, hoping that it all actually fucking *means* something!"

Henry took a breath, put a hand to his head—the walls swam and rippled. "Only now I'll be running alone," he said quietly, pushed the nurse away from him.

Walked out the door.

The nurse followed him, trying to convince him to go back to bed, stay and talk for a while. Just until he calmed down. But he kept walking. Wouldn't even look at her.

She gave up at the front door, where it was clear she wasn't going to stop him, no matter what she said. She watched Henry from the hospital's window. Watched him stumble slowly out into the blowing snow. Trip. Fall. Collapse on his side.

She cursed under her breath, threw her coat on, ran through the double doors, across the parking lot. She knelt down, tried pulling him to his feet, but he was too heavy.

"What's your address, Henry?" she shouted over the noise of the wind. "Come on, Henry! What's your home address?"

He mumbled it between ragged breaths.

The nurse stood up, left him lying in the snow, ran

out to the sidewalk, flagged down a cab. The cabby pulled over; she approached the driver's side and explained the situation. The cabby put on his hazard lights, jumped out of the car, moved to help the nurse.

Together, they lifted Henry to his feet, shuffled him through the snow and ice to the back door of the cab. The nurse ran inside the hospital, fished around for some bills in her purse, came back out, paid the cabby, told him Henry's address.

The car pulled away from the curb, soon lost in a white sheet of snow.



It snowed for another three days straight, then cleared up suddenly to usher in sunny, blue skies. But colder now. Much colder.

Henry shivered in his apartment. Not only had the temperature dropped, but his bedroom radiator had given up, shut down. He was too tired to move out into the marginally warmer living room, so he wound the blankets around him as tightly as he could to keep in the heat. But no matter how many blankets he curled around himself, or how snugly he wrapped them around his frame, the cold still got in.

The cold of ice on steel.

His teeth chattered. He swam in and out of consciousness. Several times he had hallucinated the nurse from the hospital coming to see him, stroking his brow, telling him it would be alright. He just needed to rest to get through this. Just needed to sleep a while longer.

Sometimes in the night, he dreamed of Milo: Milo standing at the foot of his bed, smiling. Just smiling. Snow in his hair. Then he'd walk out of the room, disappear, and Henry would wake up.. Cold and alone. With

pieces of the metal puzzle inside him still shifting around. Faster than at the hospital, steadily picking up speed.

In the chill of dawn, when the apartment seemed at its coldest, Henry felt he knew what the pieces of the puzzle were doing. They were moving within him to touch each other, form something. But what—and for what purpose—he had no clue.

He believed in nothing. Expected nothing. God was something that Milo had been after, not Henry.

The only thing Henry wanted now was to close his curtains. Since the storm had subsided, the sun streamed through his bedroom window. Too bright for Henry's eyes, which now glinted in the light. He didn't know it, couldn't see it, but they'd turned from deep brown to metallic silver.

The day after the storm had passed, Henry felt the puzzle inside him slowing, calming.

Milo came to visit him one last time, late that night. He stood at the foot of the bed, as he always did. Only this time, before he left, he walked over to Henry's bedroom window and closed the curtains.



The nurse knocked on the door.

No answer.

She knocked harder. Still nothing.

She fretted about whether or not to keep trying, questioned why she was even here at all. Decided to forget about knocking again and just try the knob.

It turned, clicked. The door swung open gently.

The apartment air was frigid. The nurse shivered and pulled the gray scarf around her neck tighter.

She walked in slowly, called out, "Henry? Henry, you

home?"

Silence.

"I knocked, but—" she poked her head around a corner, looked in the kitchen which branched off from the living room. Nothing. "—there was no answer, and the door was unlocked, so I came in. Hope that's okay..."

The bathroom light shone bright in the relative gloom of the apartment.

"Henry?"

No one in the bathroom. Only one more room in the place.

The bedroom door stood slightly ajar. The nurse pushed on it softly, peeking inside. The curtains were closed. It was hard to make out anything but shadows layered on shadows. The nurse whispered Henry's name once more as she walked through the door, but her stomach had already begun to sink. It was so quiet. No hiss from the radiator. The sound of the refrigerator running didn't make it to this side of the apartment.

No breathing sounds came from the bed.

"Oh, God," the nurse said, putting a hand to her mouth. "Henry..."

He lay still on the bed. Bundled in blankets. Only his head uncovered. His medium-length dark hair, threaded with gray, hung in strings to the sides of his face. Unwashed for days.

For a brief moment, the nurse thought maybe he wasn't dead. His cheeks seemed rosy in the dim light. She moved forward, tentatively put a hand on his forehead. He was warm. Not only warm—burning up. But somehow there was no life in him. No breath. Just this wall of heat, emanating from his body.

The nurse's heart sank.

And that's when she noticed his eyes: Steel gray. Wide open, staring at the ceiling. His face expressionless.

A tear slipped from one of her eyes. Dropped to Henry's bed, sank into the fabric.

She stood like that for a long while, looking down at him, feeling the warmth still coming from his body in waves, as if something inside were generating it. Gears spinning. Clockwork winding itself up.

Then she told him her name, and quietly left his apartment.

The following morning, a dark, heavy shape, unlike anything this world has seen before, rose from Henry's bed, moved around the room as if waking from a deep sleep.

Outside Henry's bedroom window, a single snowflake drifted down, stuck against the pane, melted.

Vanished.

The first of a new storm.

MARCHING THE HATE MACHINES INTO THE SUN

My wife says: "Come on, Cam, we'll be late."

I say, "What's the damn rush? Fashionably late and all that, right?" Fiddle with my tie. My socks droop around my ankles under my suit pants. Not tight enough. Can't stand that feeling. Never could.

My wife, you don't need to know her name, she says, "Not to this party. Can't be late. You know how these people are." Straightens folds in her thin black dress, smooths down wrinkles. Presses her lips together in the bathroom mirror, evening out glossy, dark red lipstick.

These people, she says.

These people are rich. These people are wealthy beyond compare. These are our kind of people.

When our limo arrives, we're still in the house, fussing about with our clothes. I lean out the window, call to our driver (can't remember his name) to wait, we'll be down in a few minutes.

Brett Alexander Savory

The driver nods, leans against the limo, lights a smoke.

My wife stands in the bedroom doorway, head cocked to one side. Impatient.

In my rush, I wrench my tie up too tight around my throat. Choke for a second, loosen it. Shake my head side to side, trying to get comfortable inside the stiff Bloomingdale's shirt.

"Come on, come on," she says.

"Yes, I'm coming, I'm coming. Christ."

She says nothing, just walks down the spiral staircase. The front door opens, slams shut. High heels crunch gravel. I hear her talking to the limo driver. Her sibilants drift up to me through the bedroom window.

Hike my socks up, put on my shoes. Halfway down the staircase, the socks start to pool again.

The limo driver sees me emerge through the front door, drops his cigarette, mashes it underfoot. I slip in the backseat next to my wife.

"Are we going to have fun tonight, dear?"

"We're going to have a great time tonight, darling."

I can't remember who says which sentence.



Jeremy Hapstead rattles on about his golf game. Whiskey sloshes around in his glass as he speaks. I nod appropriately. When he's finished impressing me, he wanders off, corners someone else. Whiskey sloshes around some more, this time flying out over the edges, dripping on the plush carpeting. The man Jeremy's trying to impress wears the same disinterested expression I wore moments ago. But Jeremy doesn't care. He only needs to feel as though he's doing his best to impress. He is a Hapstead after all.

I don't even know whose house we're at, only that it's a very large and well-decorated house. Some rock star or actor or politician.

I see my wife across the room. She's talking to someone who might be the President of some country or other. Never was very good at remembering faces.

She swishes the wine in her glass around and around. Always counter-clockwise. A nervous habit, and one which I find distinctly irritating. She laughs at something President Whatever says. Tilts her head back and everything.

My socks have pooled completely around my ankles again. I want to scream. Instead, I walk over to the bartender, ask for a bottle of his best imported beer. He hands me a brand I'm unfamiliar with.

"Such a fine evening tonight," he says.

"Thank Christ for air conditioning," I say, tip back my bottle and drain half of it in one go.

"Outside, I mean." The bartender points toward the balcony. Silky, thin blue curtains blow inward gently.

I nod slightly, wander away toward the open doors leading out onto the balcony. I do not leave a tip.

Earlier in the day it'd been unbearably humid to the point where it felt like I was breathing through wet cheesecloth. But now, as I step outside, the air is just this side of crisp. I frown, button up my jacket.

It's a large balcony, so I pass a lot of people as I make my way through the crowd. People I recognize: judges, lawyers, religious leaders, politicians, famous actors, infamous musicians, crime bosses, police chiefs, corporate CEOs. The ones who make the world go around. Mixed with these are faces I don't recognize. They seem incredibly out of place, like someone just stuffed them into a nice suit and told them to smile and keep their mouths shut. Nervous. Unsure why they're in atten-

dance at such a high-class event.

I wink at a couple of these out-of-placers. This tiny gesture says: *I know your secret, friend. And it's okay; it's safe with me. You're someone's friend. Someone important. Nothing to be ashamed of.*

I take a quick look behind me. See that my wife is no longer talking to President Whatever. I scan the crowd, but don't see her anywhere.

A gust of wind sweeps through the crowd. Women clutch at their purses, hold down their skirts: a balcony full of Marilyn Monroes. Men clutch their drinks to their chests, put hands up to their heads to protect their hairdos. People start heading indoors to get out of the wind.

I get to the end of the balcony, rest my beer bottle on the ornate granite railing. Look down. Tiny, tiny specks bustling about in the dark. Bumper-to-bumper traffic, even at this time of night. I wonder how many of those specks would kill to be invited to this party.

Take another swig. Look up. Squint to see a bunch of pinholes in the fabric of night. Moving away very, very slowly—nearly imperceptible. Squint harder, concentrate. *What the hell are those? Can't be stars.* Another swig, drain the bottle, tip it all the way up, getting every last drop of foam.

Forget about the pinholes.

Place the bottle on the railing again, turn to head back inside. Party seems to be thinning out. I glance at my watch, frown. It's early yet.

"Cameron! Yo, Cam!"

I glance about. Teeth flash, mouths open and close with fake laughter, eyes bulge too far out of their sockets. Feet shuffle, side to side, impatient. Expectant.

My name again. Go up on tiptoes to peer over everyone's heads, can't spot the speaker. Join the shuf-

flers trying to get back indoors. Another gust of wind slices through the crowd.

"Cam! Jeez, man, wait up, would ya?" A firm hand drops onto my left shoulder. Grips it there. Too tight.

I pull my shoulder out of the man's hand, immediately irritated. Step back.

"Didn't ya hear me?" the guy says. He's all shark grin, stiff hair, and Armani.

"Going to get another drink, fella." I lift my empty bottle. "Do I know you or something?"

"Ha!" the guy says, claps me on the back. I have a brief, intense vision of my fist ramming into his perfect choppers, blood running down his chin. And him still with his idiotic grin. "Good one, Cam. Good one. Say, look—"

"No time for looking, guy, sorry. Need to refill." I turn away.

Again, he clamps a hand on my shoulder. "You really don't recognize me? Jordan. From IBM. Remember?"

I shrug out of his grip, my voice hard as brick. "No fucking idea who you are. Now, if you'll excuse me."

When I get back indoors, I pull up a stool at the bar. Despite the breeze, the air inside is stuffy.

"Party's clearing out fast, huh?" the bartender says, one towel-wrapped hand inside a beer glass, wiping, wiping.

"Yeah," I say. "Night's still young and all that."

I twist around in my stool, glance about quickly for my new best buddy, Jordan, but he's nowhere in sight.

"Another beer, sir?"

"Yeah, same kind."

He pops the cap, hands it to me.

In my peripheral vision, I see several waiters scurrying around. I turn to see what the big event is that requires so many of them. But I catch only flitting

glimpses of the waiters' activity through the crowd, like in one of those flip-books where the action moves one frame ahead for each page you turn. I'm skipping pages, though, and no matter which way I lean, I can't get a clear view.

Gulp down half the new bottle. Wonder distractedly where my wife went, surprising even myself with my level of apathy toward her.

My vision swims when I turn my head to face the bartender. There are suddenly four of him, crisscrossing one another. I blink my eyes, rub the back of one hand across them. Blink some more. Down to three bartenders, but still two too many.

I turn around for a moment, look behind me; the room is getting more and more empty every time I look at it. Only a handful of partyers left in the room now. Swing my head in the general direction of the balcony: completely empty. Only the billowing curtains showing any sign of movement.

And my wife is nowhere in the room.

My wife. I try to make the words mean more by saying them again in my head.

"You alright, buddy?" the bartender says. Him and that fucking beer glass, wipe, wipe, wipe, and I want to smash it, jam the shards into his throat.

"Yeah...I'm fine, I'm fine. *Buddy,*" I say, and sneer. The corner of my lip lifts impossibly high, Elvis-high, and at that moment I'm not sure it'll ever come back down.

"You sure don't look it, chum." Wipe, wipe. Smash, smash.

"Look, mind your own goddamn—" I teeter on my stool, sweat dripping down the sides of my face. "—business, ya skinny little..."

I fall directly sideways, floor coming fast. Then hands

grip me tight, lift me back vertical.

My head is a steam press. I imagine smoke billowing from my ears. My skull feels like crushed ice.

"Easy there, Cam. You alright?"

Jordan—Mr. Armani, Mr. IBM, Mr. SharkTeeth—has his grubby mitts on me. "Not you again," I slur. "What's your fucking deal, guy? Christ."

Every word from my mouth sounds drenched in syrup, a sporadic stream of out-of-sync letters falling like stones, thumping on the carpet.

"Sorry about earlier, okay? Mistaken identity," Jordan says. "Thought you were someone else. You're Cameron Jacobs; I thought you were Cameron Jacobbs—two *bs*. No worries," he says, pats me on the back twice, releases his grip, walks away quickly.

I fall forward onto the bar countertop.

And then the lights go out.



When I come to, my hands are tied behind my back and my head is a thick fuzzy sock filled with marshmallows.

I'm seated in front of a wall of small televisions. A black-and-white surveillance video plays on all the screens. The only difference between them is that they're each showing a different angle. But they're all of the two rooms I was just in: the one with the bartender, and the balcony.

Hurts to twist my neck side-to-side, so I angle my head back a little bit, try to see behind me. Only darkness back there, though I hear breathing. Two sets of lungs.

"Hey, uh..." I croak. "Could I, like, get a glass of water or something? Christ."

No answer.

On the video, a man—my good pal Jordan, by the looks of it—flits around the party clapping people on the back, smiling, teeth like tombstones, even on the small, grainy screens. People drink and drink, then they fall over. Drop like flies. I realize I'm watching a slightly sped-up playback of about half an hour ago. And here comes me, slithering to the bar, then out onto the balcony. Back in again, over to the bar. Jordan saves me from a carpet-to-face meeting, then I slump over forward on the countertop. Some waiter lifts me up by the armpits, drags me away, out of the shot.

The video screen switches to snow, then starts again from the beginning of the party.

"Is that everyone?" someone behind me says. A man.

"Think so." A beat. "Should be," says the other set of lungs. A female pair.

"What about this one?" A boot kicks the back of my metal chair.

"Take him home, I guess. Wrong Cameron. What else can we do?"

"Fuck it. Let's put him on the plane, too. No one'd know. And it ain't like he's some shining example of the species."

"Don't be ridiculous. Every seat is already assigned on every ship. At least for the next few waves. Now just backup the tape and let's go. Come on, hurry it up. We've got less than twenty-five minutes to rendezvous."

Noises of quick but measured movement: bags zipping up, laptops clicking shut, plugs pulled from walls, metal chairs folding, a door opening. Light from the hallway cuts the interior swatch of darkness like scissors, momentarily blinding me.

"So, no water, huh?" I say, my eyes scrunched tight.

"No. Not right now. There's some in the van," the woman says.

I nod, move my pasty tongue around in my mouth, making dry clicking noises. "Fantastic."

The man behind me hoists my inert body from the chair. Only my mouth and brain seem to be working properly.

Into an elevator. Doors close, down we go. Doors open.

Someone's cell phone rings. I hear its owner flip it open. What I gather from the one-sided conversation is that the proper Cameron Jacobs has been found, and everyone has been "loaded in," whatever that means. And that these two charming persons currently dragging me by my armpits along a cracked chunk of pavement outside this high-rise's lobby are needed ASAP—no time to drop off the other Cameron.

The last words I hear before I drift off again are: "Waves two and three launched; preparing to launch wave four."



My brain reboots one more time and now some hatchet-faced fucker is dousing my head with cold water. I inhale sharply. He moves the lip of the bottle to my mouth, tips it back. I gulp greedily.

The front of my shirt soaked, water dribbling off my chin, and the rope tying my hands together digging deep into my wrists, I blink my watering eyes at my surroundings. I'm in the back of a van. It's dark except for little blinking lights coming from row upon row of electronics on shelves stacked floor-to-ceiling on both sides. Again, I'm seated in a metal chair between the stacks, face toward the back doors.

Crouched low to avoid braining himself on the ceiling, Hatchet Face steps behind me, moves to the pas-

senger seat at the front, says something to the driver that I can't quite make out.

We bounce over pothole after pothole. Definitely not in the city anymore. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I look out the two small windows in the van's double-doors: pitch, except for the slight red haze of the van's running lights.

I clear my throat, wish desperately I could wipe my sandpapery eyes. "Cameron Jacobbs," I say.

Hatchet Face's gravelly voice barely cuts through the noise of the truck: "You say something?"

"Cameron Jacobbs. The other one. What did he do? What do you want with him?"

Silence.

We ram into a monster pothole and I bounce up off the chair, fall sideways, slam my head into a piece of electronic equipment peppered across its face with small knobs and buttons. I feel blood on my teeth.

I wind up on the van's floor, crammed between the chair and the wall of equipment.

No one moves to help me.



I slip in and out of consciousness for awhile. Then Hatchet Face and the driver of the van—a frail-looking twig of a woman in her forties with a soiled do-rag on her head—stop the vehicle, drag me out the back doors by my feet.

Twiggy cuts the rope tying my hands together. Hatchet Face pushes me in the back, tells me to walk. I wring my wrists with my hands, trying to get feeling back. I look around, see that we're in the middle of a desert.

My eyes clear up a little with the dry air; I wipe them

on my sleeve. Blink the last of the grittiness out. Up ahead: lights. Fiercely bright. Some winking, some pulsating. The sound of massive engines as we get closer. Looking left to right across the horizon, I see a row of launching pads similar to the ones that used to be at Cape Canaveral, before NASA was forced to shut down. Probably ten or twelve of them.

Shuttles lined up, aimed at the sky. Not as wide and bulky as the old shuttles, though—the ones I used to watch on TV when I was a kid. These are longer, sleeker. Shinier. Other shuttles are on their sides away from the launching pads. Teams of workers move about. Sparks fly from blowtorches scorching metal.

I nod my head toward the ones aimed at the sky, turn my head around to call over my shoulder, “Where they going?”

“Up,” Twiggy says, tells me to turn around, keep walking.

Few more feet and we hit pavement. Armored trucks coast by. Diesel fumes cough out. Enormous tented facility to our left. People in uniforms I don’t recognize drift in and out. One of Hatchet Face’s frying-pan-sized mitts slams into my back, pushing me in the tent’s direction.

I gawk up at the closest shuttle, watch people move about on its scaffolding. Beetles scurrying over a biscuit. I’m reminded of the party, looking down at all the people bustling below. I realize I’ve never hustled for anything in my life.

We walk through the tent’s flap opening. Inside, more bustling, but at least the scale isn’t dizzying.

People brush by me, eyes straight ahead, purposeful. I glance behind me: Hatchet Face and Twiggy are still in tow. Twiggy’s knife by her side, fist clenching it tight.

At the back of the tent, a short, overweight woman

with dark, shoulder-length hair, and John Lennon glasses waddles around in the same unfamiliar uniform everyone else is wearing. Glance behind me, see Hatchet Face nod toward this woman.

She’s got charts, maps, and other papers scattered all over a desk in front of her. She shuffles through the papers, wheezing like she just climbed several flights of stairs.

“The other Cameron Jacobs,” Twiggy says, motions for me to sit. Again, it’s a metal chair.

Darkroast coffee wafts up my nose. I look at Lennon’s cup staining some of the maps on the desk. Perhaps my eyes widen a little or I lick my lips, because Lennon says, “Conklin, get Mr. Jacobs a coffee.”

Hatchet Face wanders off.

“Thanks,” I say.

Lennon moves to the other side of the desk, flips through some papers there. She does not tell me I’m welcome.

“Those glasses don’t really suit you,” I say, unsure what prompts me to speak at all.

Lennon looks up at me, smiles, says, “Your suit is too tight.”

I smile in return.

Hatchet Face arrives with my coffee.

The moment passes like sun glinting off chrome.

“Now, before you start asking a million questions, Mr. Jacobs, I shall inform you quite seriously that I’m shadowy and cryptic and all that, and you won’t glean anything of importance from what I tell you.”

“Good, I would expect nothing less of a criminal mastermind,” I say.

“Is that what you think I am?” she says, picks up her coffee, sips, places it back precisely on the ring it had previously left on the chart paper.

"Well, by your own admittance you're shadowy and cryptic. Plus, you have a bunch of space shuttles lined up and ready to launch God-knows-what into space for some presumably dastardly purpose."

"Dastardly, you think?"

"I do."

"Shall I show you what I'm launching into space, then?"

Lennon moves to a small monitor, flips a switch. The screen flickers to life.

"Will you have to kill me if you show me?" I ask, not really enjoying this silly banter as much as I thought I might.

"No, no need to kill you, Mr. Jacobs. You'll read all about it in tomorrow's newspapers, anyway. And the day after that, and the day after that, too. I suspect what I'm doing will be newsworthy for quite some time to come."

Outside: the whine of airplane engines. Rubber screaming on pavement.

Inside: the monitor shows where the party in the high-rise moved to. But no one seems in a partying mood anymore. Strapped to narrow seats. Row upon row of them. The view is from the back of one of the shuttle's compartments. Important people. Incredibly important. But again, shot through with nobodies. Some I've winked at, some I haven't.

"Wave four?" I venture.

"Wave four," Lennon confirms.

One of the women in the seats nearer the front turns her head enough so that I see her profile.

I point to the monitor. "That's my wife."

Lennon says nothing. Sips her coffee, asks Hatchet Face for a refill.

It occurs to me to ask that Lennon release her, give me my wife back. Demand to know what this is all about,

who she thinks she is, kidnapping people, sending them up into space for whatever insane purpose she has in mind.

"I'd say I'm sorry, Mr. Jacobs, but I'm not. Your wife deserves to be on that shuttle."

I look down at a crease in my suit pants, pick at some fluff there. The pants are so tight, I can't pick at the fluff without pinching my skin.

"Do you want to know what she did?"

"No," I say. The word is out of my mouth before I even realize I want to say it.

Lennon shrugs her shoulders, goes back to shuffling papers, barking orders to uniformed people in her vicinity.

A sudden wave of tiredness drops my shoulders. The only thing of relative importance I can think of to ask is: "Where are they going?"

"Up," Lennon says. "But you already knew that, didn't you."

"Just into space?" I ask, look up at her. Her eyes are soft, caring. "You don't seem the type to just launch people into space. If you don't mind me saying."

My chest feels like a stone weight, sinking me deeper into the chair. Something like tears wet my eyelids.

"I'm not *just* launching them into space, Mr. Jacobs. But I do appreciate your kind words about my character." She leans against the desk, one arm across her chest, one fingering the handle of her coffee cup. No nail polish. I glance up to her face. No makeup, either.

Forgettable.

She tilts her head to one side. "Aren't you going to ask how I did this? Don't you want to know who I am?"

"I thought you were shadowy and cryptic."

"I am. Very much so, but now that the operation's underway, there's no point in being so silly. I'm fairly

certain I can't be stopped." She smirks, pleased with her cartoonish declaration.

"Ah," I say, rapidly losing interest.

"What's more invisible than a short, middle-aged, overweight woman, Mr. Jacobs?"

I shrug.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," she says. There is pride and sadness in her voice at the same time.

I nod, glance at the monitor. My wife is squirming in her seat. I can't be sure because the camera's too far away for clarity, but I think she's crying.

"And you've got a few bucks, too, I'd venture to say."

"A few, yes. More than a lot of people. But most of the money came from investors."

Another airplane lands outside. Passengers for the next couple of waves, I assume.

I look around me, watch everyone hurry about, seeing to their assigned tasks. They do not look mad. They do not look particularly concerned with their lack of sanity at all.

"I decided, with some input from my backers, who would go, and why. Which politicians, which leaders of religion, which terrorists, which greed-driven CEOs. The hate machines of the world. There was a period, early on in the project—this was probably a decade ago now—when I wasn't sure I'd get enough support," Lennon says, her confession sounding scripted. "Or that it would be impossible to pull off, that the timing would be too hard to coordinate, but you'd be surprised at how easy—"

"Can I go on the next wave?"

Lennon stops talking. Stares at me. "Pardon?"

"The next wave of shuttles. Can I be on one of them?"

On the monitor, more than just my wife is squirming in her seat now. There are eleven more monitors, but

they're turned off, so I can't see the other shuttles full of people squirming, crying, begging for their lives. But it's comforting enough to know that they're there.

"They..." she says, appears to be choosing her words carefully. "They won't be coming back, Mr. Jacobs."

I think about this for a moment. Of course I know this, but hearing the words said out loud makes it more real.

"I know," I say. "I don't want to come back."

Lennon looks at Hatched Face and Twiggy. I keep my gaze locked on hers.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jacobs," she says, clearly uncomfortable with having to go off-script, with being forced to stray from her well-thought-out confession. "You're not on the list."

The weight in my chest sinks me further into the chair. The wetness in my eyes that resembles tears comes a little harder now. I'm unsure what I'm doing, but if I'm crying, it's a completely different experience than I thought it would be. For a moment, I allow myself the delusion that these tears are for my wife, that I actually loved her, and that she loved me, but that we'd just somehow forgotten.

Disappointed that I'd cut her off, Lennon turns away and appears to be sulking.

"Please?" I say, desperation creeping around the edges of my voice. My body feels hot, burning up from the inside. "My suits feel like a second skin, always too tight. My skin *itself* feels like a second skin. Never my own."

I look at the monitor again, imagine that my wife has turned fully around in her seat and is mouthing my name, motioning with her hand for me to come aboard.

"Can't you just put me—"

"Your name is *not* on the list, Mr. Jacobs."

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And just like that, I am as invisible to her as she is to the world.

She instructs Hatchet Face and Twiggy to take me home, then gathers some papers from the desk—knocking others off in her impatience, sending them fluttering to the floor—and briskly walks away.

I wipe a sleeve across my eyes, look at the wetness, touch it with a fingertip.

“Come on,” Hatchet Face says, wrenches me out of the chair, pushes me toward the tent flap.

Outside, handcuffed people get off airplanes, panic in their eyes, sweat dripping down their faces. They see the shuttles and they try to get away, scramble in the desert dirt. Their captors do not harm them, only pull them back up to their feet, march them forward.

The sun has just topped the horizon. I look as long as I can at the yellow-orange ball. Close my eyes and imagine sundogs to either side of its ghost-image. Something inviting, something beautiful to embrace these unwilling travellers.

When we get to the van, Twiggy ties my hands behind my back again with rope, opens the back doors. Hatchet Face moves to thrust me inside, but I tell him I can get in on my own. He backs up, clearly disappointed to have some of his ruffian duties pulled from him.

I wriggle inside with difficulty, gain my feet by propping my back against the shelves of electronics and pushing with my legs. Twiggy slams the doors shut. I kick my metal chair into position, plunk myself down on it.

Outside, rocket engines ignite.

We drive away. At one point, the van swings around so I get a decent view of one of the launches. Might be the shuttle my wife’s on. Might not be. Smoke billows under the fire of the rockets. Another one ignites. Even this far

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away, the sound is deafening.

I close my eyes. Sundogs dance behind my eyelids.



Back in the city, Hatchet Face and Twiggy drop me off at home. They do not say goodbye. They do not say anything at all. Twiggy cuts my rope and Hatchet Face shoves me in the back. They climb inside their van and drive off.

My socks are pooled around my ankles. My suit suffocates me. My own skin feels alien, more so than ever before. I want to cut it off my body, stretch it out on my lawn. Pin it down. Examine it. Determine how it came to be mine, who covered me in it. And why.

I look up. See tiny white ovals glittering against the light blue of the sky. Marching in single file.

Other people, curious about the noises coming from the desert, drift out onto their lawns in bathrobes, wiping sleep from their eyes.

Watching this cosmic funeral procession, my body burns inside. My chest crushed by millions of pounds of thrust. A feeling of weightlessness and lack of oxygen comes next. I look down but my feet are still planted firmly on the ground.

The shuttles move up in direct line of the sun. For a few moments, I can still make them out.

Then they disappear from sight.

I walk into my house, take a shower, and climb into my wife’s side of the bed.



In the morning, I check the newspapers, but Lennon was wrong. None of them mention last night’s march,

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nor the next night's, nor any of the following ones that I watch from my bedroom window over the next three weeks.

But the people I saw at the party are gone. Never in the news. Never in the scandal sheets. When I look up their names online, I get no results. They do not now, nor have they ever, existed.

My socks do not pool around my ankles.

My suit fits me perfectly.

My skin feels natural on my body.

I have never been married.

The sun is the giver of life.

LANDSCAPE

The landscape shifts and we barely notice.

Breathe in.

Move your arm down to pick up your coffee mug, bring it to your lips. Shift. Something has changed. Pan back, take a snapshot. The scene is different than it was just one second ago.

Breathe out.

Replace the coffee mug on the desk. Now there's coffee in your belly, some of it probably still sliding down your throat. The mug is no longer in the same place you picked it up from. Shift. It's different. You've impacted your surroundings; you've impacted yourself. The way you perceive things and, in turn, the way people perceive you from this point on has changed, and will never be exactly the same again.

This is all it takes to change the world.

Time doesn't change the landscape, people do. The best indicator of this is not a clock, whose hands just go around and around, impacting nothing; the best indicator is your perception.

Take my wife, for example. She goes to work in the morning. Very, very early in the morning. Roughly 5 a.m.

She works weekends, too, but doesn't have to be up until 6 a.m. then. When she comes home each night, at about 5 p.m., her face tells the whole story. Written in every line of her skin, every shift of her body, every word from her mouth, I know exactly what she's done all day. It's always terribly boring, but I never tell her this. She enjoys her job, and is under the impression that it's rather important.

These changes in her are not subtle; they are the furthest thing from subtle, but she perceives nothing. When she looks in the mirror, her landscape is unchanged. She might be in a different mood than yesterday, the last time she looked into the mirror, but otherwise, she thinks everything is the same. In the past couple of weeks, I've noticed that even her bone structure is changing. She no longer appears to be my wife at all. She's almost an entirely new woman every day. But I don't let on. I just smile, make us dinner, pour some wine, and stare across the table at a stranger.

Now, take my daughter. Recently, she began piercing every bit of flesh on her body that she could get a hold of. It started out how other teenagers' piercings start out: ear, nose, belly button, maybe tongue. But it progressed from there, and now when she comes home from school, all I see is a tall strip of metal walking through the door, mechanically reaching into the cupboards, fishing out food. At about the same time I started getting a new wife each day, my daughter stopped going to the regular food cupboards. Hers is no longer human food, but is instead oil, grease, and any other kind of lubricant she can find in the garage. She dumps it into her head, rubs it all over her body, between cogs, along hydraulic rods. Anywhere and everywhere it can be used.

My daughter glistens.

She squeaks and pops while sitting at the kitchen

table, headphones on, doing her homework, her pencil gripped between two chrome pincer-type claws. She scribbles endlessly, then finally packs up her work, floats by me on some sort of hover-suspension system, gives me a quick, cold-steel kiss and drifts up the stairs to bed.

I don't know what she sees when she looks in the mirror. We're unable to communicate now; I am not from her country, and she is no longer from mine.



Our pets have disappeared. What used to be our cat slithered on its belly out the front door one day when I'd left it open bringing groceries in. It left some kind of snail trail that I've not been able to clean from the floor tiles to this day. What used to be our dog crumpled up into a ball of thick, crinkled cardboard and rolled itself into a dark corner. It stayed that way for several days before I got the nerve to pick it up and toss it in the recycling bin.

I think we had a bird, too, but the last I saw of it, it had melted into a puddle of bright primary colors in its cage. I tipped its remains into a plastic bag and put it at the curb.

The garbage men wouldn't touch it. It stayed out there for two weeks before a little boy picked it up and wandered away with it. He was smiling as he stroked the bag of goo in his hands, and though I'm pretty sure I miss the bird, I'm glad someone found something worth saving in it.

Perhaps something I was just no longer capable of seeing.



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My chameleon wife and robot daughter went out together tonight. Bone structures shifting under various skins; whirligigs spinning, pincer-claws clacking. I think they went to see a movie.

My landscape seems to change faster when they're out of the house.

They came home from the movie, beeped and shifted lazily past me, clucking and morphing—movements and sounds I cannot understand. When my wife lost the power of coherent speech, I don't know. But all that emanates from her mouth now are clipped bursts of guttural barks.



Someone stole the refrigerator today. Don't ask me how, but it's gone. And don't ask me when, because I've been home all day. There're only dust bunnies and dead insects left to indicate where it once stood.

I tried to explain to my wife and daughter that the fridge had disappeared, but I couldn't make either of them understand. I gave up, leaving them confused, babbling and squawking to one another in the hallway.



The job I used to go to sent me home the other day. Knitted eyebrows and lots of curious stares from my co-workers, so I guess I did something wrong. Maybe I was doing a different job from the one I was hired to do. Could be that the square I was trying to put into the circle wouldn't fit. Another shift, blurring my perception. I'm usually quite good at recognizing when things change and can adapt pretty quickly, but it seems as though this one escaped my notice.

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I packed up my things in a box, went outside and quietly waited for the bus. No one at the bus shelter looked in my direction.



One piece of furniture disappears every day now. The pictures on the walls stay, the carpet is still here, there's no change in the ceiling—hanging plants, light fixtures, etc.—but the things that we all use on a daily basis, the things that support us when we sit down to speak to each other, are vanishing steadily.

From what I can make out when my family comes home, they blame me. There's certainly plenty of harsh, quick sounds coming from them, and their respective limbs point to the places where the couch, the La-Z-Boy, and the kitchen table and chairs used to be. I try explaining that I don't know what's going on, either. I write it with pen and paper, shove it under their noses. I think they try to understand the words, but there's no recognition in their eyes.

That's when I wonder for the first time what I might look like to them.



The car my wife drives looks like some kind of demented metal pelican. I don't know how on earth she controls it, or how she steels herself to even get in the hideous thing. When my wife pulls into the driveway and turns the pelican off, it shudders obscenely, flops to the concrete, deflated.

I sit on a milk crate in the middle of the near-empty living room. Indentations marking where the furniture used to be are like mirages to me, pockets of unreality

that will reform and fill in if I just get something, maybe water, into my system. Good thing the tap still works.

I get up from the milk crate, walk into the kitchen, turn my head as the door opens and my wife comes in. Her face seems to be melting, the colors of her makeup shifting around on her face. She drops her purse on the ground, moves toward me. I freeze, drop the glass I've removed from the cupboard. It smashes on the floor, sending shards everywhere. My wife doesn't notice, just comes closer, her face a churning mash of mascara, rouge, lipstick, and cover-up. I glance down quickly at her body. Her clothes seem to be crawling all over her, different sections of her outfit migrating from her arms to her chest to her legs to her stomach and back over to her arms again. A Ferris wheel of fabric.

Her voice takes on some semblance of human speech as her everywoman's face fills my vision. Just beneath the abstract cluckings and bursts of deep-throated belches, I hear something that sounds like the human word "love." Then she falls into my arms and smears herself all over my body in one smooth, sudden motion.

My daughter comes through the door, but doesn't even make it fully over the threshold before she completely comes apart, claws and whirligigs and steel rods and metal pins clattering to the floor. In pieces, she says nothing. The section of stainless, blackened metal that used to be her head does not say "love," does not say anything at all, but just stares at the ceiling, silent.

I am unsure what to make of this, so believing very strongly that the landscape can be controlled, I get another glass from the cupboard, run the tap, fill it with water, turn the tap off, and make my way through the debris back to the living room.

I sit on my milk crate again. The last of the furniture—and even some of the pictures and light fixtures—

disappeared while I was in the kitchen.

I close my eyes and drink the water in long, smooth gulps, leaving traces of my wife's makeup around the edge of the glass.

Inside me, I feel a shift like an entire continent being cleaved down its middle, fault lines giving way, massive internal eruptions peppering my organs. I puff out, bulk up, feel my soul sharpened by clarity, infused with the purest sunlight. I glow. I am fucking supernova.

I open my eyes.

The room is almost the same as it was before, except that the indentations left by the missing furniture are fading, the carpet filling out again, erasing any trace that the couch and the La-Z-Boy were ever there at all.

I stand up, move toward the kitchen, step through my daughter's debris, then into a glop of my wife's sad remains, put the glass in the sink. I reach down, pick up one of my daughter's lynch pins, as well as one of her long, hydraulic leg rods. Put them in my pants pocket.

I rub my wife's makeup deeper into my skin, hoping to hear her speak again in her own voice. The voice I fell in love with fifteen years ago.

But like I said before, time doesn't change the landscape, people do. So it's up to me.

I step toward the front door, look out at the shuddering metal pelican in the driveway, and wonder if I have the courage to start it up and just drive away, leave all this behind, start fresh.

Outside in the sunshine, standing in my driveway, the heat of the day beating on my back, I struggle with the lock on the bizarre contraption. Several minutes later, something clicks, and a portion of the pelican slides to the side. Inside are alien controls, flashing lights, and queerly shaped panels of buttons.

Panic rises inside my chest, creates a full body shiver

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that crawls over my scalp. But I steady it with the thought of the water gurgling in my belly, streaming through my system, the pure, cleansing water of insight, and the heat of the sun. I close my eyes to keep the panic at bay.

When I open them again, I do not recognize the hands at the ends of my arms. They are broader, full of strength, the fingers thicker, the knuckles bigger, and the arms they're attached to longer and somehow more *mine* than before.

I have no idea who I am or what I look like, but I know I can control this machine.

I slip inside the pelican, push the strange buttons on one of the nearest panels in a sequence I have no way of knowing, but that starts the engine with a low, meaty growl.

The metal pelican inhales, its life pulsing around me. I back out of the driveway, try to remember the way my landscape used to look, and tear off down the road.

My wife and daughter with me, whispering to each other in their alien languages.

Wondering at my courage.

WALL

Wall.

Blank wall.

Staring at a blank wall. No pictures, no paint, no nothing.

And it's the most fun I've ever had.

Little cracks sneaking down. Wandering veins of gray. Dim light in the corner shining on the sneakers, watching them sneak.

I suspect little bugs hide inside these walls. What are those bugs called? The ones that live forever? The ones that'll be around long after the human race is dead and gone?

Can't remember.

Doesn't matter.

I stare so long at these cracks, they seem to get wider as I watch. Optical illusion. Drug-induced haze. I wobble. I waver. I wonder how long before I see those little black bug-heads peeking out. Squirming. Quivering for release. Spotted with gray drywall. Plaster.

Scurrying. Unlike the sneaking cracks.

Insects do not know stealth.

This thought leads me to another, but I promptly

forget what it is, because my eyes water, tear up, spill over. I cry and stare at the widening cracks in this wall.

I'm in my apartment. I'm in someone's apartment, anyway. Someone who shares the furniture I remember buying, the TV I remember hauling up five flights of stairs, the bag of *au gratin* chips I stopped off at the store for last night, on my way home from a meeting with a woman, a woman who—

I see a bug poke its head out of one of the cracks.

I see you, you little fucker, I think.

I see you, too, you little fucker, it thinks.

Antennae probe the air, deciding whether it's a good idea to venture out into the light; dim as it is, it's probably more than this fellow likes.

Wish I could remember what they're called.

These bugs, they're shiny, scuttling, nervous, perpetually on edge.

My earlier thought comes to me again, and I—

It slips away, faster than last time. Not even a synaptic morsel for me to mull over.

Poof.

Which reminds me of the woman I was with last night, because we went to see a cheap magic show. I knew how he did all his tricks, this magic guy. This non-magic guy. Every time he did a trick, I saw a knife slicing across his throat, saw...something gush out. It pumps through you, this something. Engorges your cock. Washes your sins away. Gets infected, makes you sick, makes you die. Like the woman I was with last night, just like—

What's it called?

Fuck. Can't remember.

Anyway, I wanted to kill this no-magic motherfucker. I wanted to shout out all his dumb tricks to the audience. We'd charge the stage, demand our money back, and

even when we got it, we'd cut off his head, parade it around town as a warning to other so-called magic-men. We'd show them that you can't just—

Blood.

That stuff is called blood. I remember. I actually remember.

The little...whatever it's called—bug—pokes its head out again, antennae probing. This time I hear a crunching noise behind it. More bugs waiting to get out, no doubt. More magic-men for me to kill. I'll slit all their fucking throats.

Another crack appears in my blank wall. More crunching, more scuttling, more scurrying. Hurrying.

To be let out. To take over my life, to take over my wife. Or at least the woman I was with last night.

I don't know. But it's time to go for a walk.



Nasty streets. And I live on the nastiest one in this city. This city that I moved to so long ago, I've forgotten its name. But then, that's no surprise. I've forgotten so many things.

But not my wife. I haven't forgotten her. We went to the magic show last night. But I'm sure I've already said that. Though I'm not sure I said it was my wife I went with. I might have said it was some other woman, some woman I can't remember. But I'm not to be trusted when I say things like that, because it's clear I have a wife, and that she loves me very much. We have a house together. We share the household duties. Sometimes we even switch them, just so no one gets bored.

Because it's far too easy to get bored. If you're not paying attention, things slip away from you. You keep looking behind you to make sure they're still there, and

you keep going, then you look again, and again, and then you find that you can't see what it was you were supposed to be looking out for, and something is lost from your life forever, something you'll never get back.

That's what I've heard happens.

When you get bored.

When you stop paying attention.

These nasty streets are brighter than my apartment, but full of many more shadows. The faces that pass me are blurred, streaked with black paint. But I see smiles through the blackness; I see gleaming shark teeth.

The sidewalk is gritty. The curbs are sharp, squared off. Chalk from little kids playing hopscotch. Baby blue. Neon orange. Stark, biting white. The colors of a child's world.

But white's not a color. I know. I know. But that's alright, because you know what I mean.

The sun is going down. The soles of my sneakers get sneakier as the light fails. When the sun dips below the horizon and the streetlights come on, I can't hear my feet at all. It's as if I'm floating around. After a couple of minutes, I stop walking completely, but continue to move along somehow.

Drifting from shadow to shadow.

I sniff the air, and it's corny as fuck but I'm going to say it anyway, because it's true: I smell fear. Up around the corner, pushed back against the brick of an alleyway. It's crisp and strong in the still evening air.

No children playing hopscotch here, just a junkie, needles stuck into his arms, his neck, his feet, sprawled out on the ground, two teenagers kicking him.

Hello, junkie, pleased to meet you. Hello, bored teenagers. I understand. Really, I do. Kick him for me, would you, please? I can't seem to move my feet; all I can do is float around. So kick the hell out of that useless bag

of shit. Make him sorry to pull in his next breath. Make him see that his way of life is an embarrassment.

Magic-men drip from his veins as the boots are laid to his skull. I hear a splintering sound, like an axe into thick tree bark. The junkie stops moving. The teenagers stop kicking. They back away from the junkie's body slowly.

The smell of fear is gone.

There's a woman somewhere in this world who once loved this man.

There's a woman somewhere in this world who once loved me, too.

I drift away from the scene, back toward home, floating a little closer to the ground.



"Honey, I'm home," I say when I open the door.

There's no answer. Just the crunching from my wall.

I close the door behind me, drop my keys on the hall table. Step over the body in the hallway. It's slumped against the wall, floating four inches off the ground. I know because I measured it once. A long time ago.

Funny that it's still here, actually. You'd think someone would have come to take it away by now, but maybe some people just float around outside like me, unable to direct their motion, always meaning to come by and pick it up, but never quite able to stop at the right doorway, to turn inside.

Sometimes I wonder who it is, how she got here. Her hair's hanging in front of her face, and I haven't the nerve to move it aside. So I just let her hover there.

I putter around the kitchen for about half an hour—I always do at this time of day. It's a ritual of mine. I can't go to sleep if I haven't puttered around, slicing this, dicing that, frying up whatever, tossing salad, grating

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cheese. Half the time, I don't even eat what I make; I just leave it to sit on the spotless white Formica island. Untouched. Pristine.

Pure.

When I wake up in the morning, the meal is gone, and the dishes are washed. The dead woman in the hallway always looks a little bit plumper in the belly those mornings.

But I don't say anything; I don't want to embarrass her.

Scuttle. Churn. Scurry. CRACK. And I don't know how much longer that wall's gonna hold.

Where shall we float tonight, my dead hallway girl and I? Another magic show? More dead non-magic men, their cut throats yawning, so tired, so full of blood and fake charisma. Spilling all over the audience.

But it's not only me. Other people must want these fakers dead. I mean, all the magic in this world, and these cowards make livings faking it.

But no, no shows tonight; I'm not in the mood for entertainment this evening.

I feel like going back outside, finding that junkie, bringing him home, putting him in the hallway—just to see how far off the ground he floats in my magic kingdom.

More cracking, and that's all the wall can take; it splits near the bottom. Bugs spill out, clamber over each other, pour out into the living room.

I walk into my kitchen, put the kettle on.



I call to my wife to ask if she'd like a cup. There's no answer. I've come to expect that, though.

Perhaps the dead woman in the hallway would like a

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cup. But I'm afraid she'll speak if I ask her.

Blood and bugs all over the floor. Cracked plaster. Cracked drywall. Even the cracks are cracking now. I always knew something like this would happen.

The kettle boils; I let it whistle. Walk into the hallway. The woman slumped there, hair hanging in front of her face, she just hovers at her customary four inches, apparently unalarmed at the blood and bugs swilling under her, sloshing against my front door.

Chittering, splashing around in the frothy red. Swimming about. A bug's delight in my apartment tonight. Fun, fun, time to party. Suck it up, you little fuckers. You caused it. You formed the cracks. You planned it all exactly like this. You knew the moment, the second it would crack. A million little bugs with tiny digital wristwatches. Waiting, just waiting behind the wall. Waiting for me to—

CRACK.

And the junkie drops out of my wall, followed by another rush of bugs and blood. Flopping across my living room, turning, turning like someone unrolling a carpet. A carpet full of needles.

The kettle whistles, froths at the spout, spews boiling water all over the stovetop. I look again at the woman in the hallway. A black-red stew bubbles under her, but she remains motionless. Then her arms reach slowly up to her face, fingers splayed out, about to draw the curtains of her hair.

She's grainy, like a turn-of-the-century silent movie, little pops and flickering dots coarse through her. Forearms purple, bruised. The skin looks ready to fall off, loose, sagging. Fingers touch hair, pull to either side. Blood burbles beneath her.

The junkie's body is pushed into the mouth of the hall, gets stuck against a wide, soft chair, set low to the

ground, just at the edge of the living room. It flops in the torrent. Undecided.

I see white skin as the dark hair-curtains pull aside, but I can't stay to see her face. I don't want to know.

Back into the kitchen. A cup of tea for the three of us. That will make everything alright again.

I get three cups out of the cupboard, take the screaming kettle off the burner. Pour, pour, pour.

More bodies fall out of my wall. A fat man is dumped onto the leather couch. A too-thin woman in high heels spins out, twirls in the air for a second, thumps hard to the floor. Side-by-side, two naked men tumble out, and there's barely anything left of my wall now.

More tea. More cups. Better put more water on.

What is this all about? What will my wife say when she comes home? How will I explain the corpses falling out of our walls?

Another body drops out—a shrivelled old woman wearing a black dress and sun hat. When she falls out of the wall, near the top, her head smacks off a tall lampshade in the corner of the room; her hat comes off, lands on the fat man's belly. Her brittle bones snap as she crumbles to dust onto the cross-legged Buddha next to the coffee table.

I put the kettle back on the stove, ankle-deep in blood and bugs, reach for more tea bags to put in more cups. Then I hear something soft, whispery. My name. Whatever my name is. I have no idea, but this sound is familiar in the same way that your name is familiar.

I turn toward the doorway that leads into the hallway, the last place I want to go now, what with all the dead junkies and skinny whores and fat businessmen and the floating woman with hair in front of her face, hair that's no longer there, pulled aside. And it's magic time as she walks toward me, black holes in her face, burning

my skin, boiling my blood. She stares at me, grinning, floating four inches off the kitchen tiles.

Whispering what must be my name, though her lips do not move. Nothing moves except her body as a whole. Stiff, arms at her sides, pristine, pure, untouched by the blood, the bugs, the days and nights of wanting nothing more than someone to share tea with.

The deluge from my wall has nearly stopped; it's merely a trickle now. Those immortal black bugs scurry everywhere, crawl on everything. Wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling chitinous carpeting.

The floating woman's arms come up from her sides as she nears; her grin falters, slips from her face. She tilts her head.

Embraces me gently.

My wife, my love.

Silence, and the beating of no one's heart.

She leans in, whispers in my ear, asks if we can go to the magic show again.

I say, "Yes," and smile.

Even before we're out the door, I feel my feet lift up, float higher, higher still, more than four inches, five, six, the highest I've ever been. Blood and bugs follow us down the apartment building stairs, close on our heels.

But we glide faster, hover out into the street, holding hands.

Drift up and into the night.

BOTTOM DRAWER

In my office is a desk.

My desk contains three drawers, each slightly bigger than the one above it. The top drawer is where I keep my stationery; the middle drawer contains mainly instruction manuals for my computer, a scientific calculator, and other devices; and the bottom drawer is where I hide things.

Four years ago, when job stress got to be too much, I hid a bottle of whiskey in this bottom drawer. Hid it, but never touched it. It's still there, unopened, pushed to the back. After that, I hid a handgun. It's loaded, sitting next to the whiskey, unused now for three years.

This worked for a little while, made things easier, knowing that when depression hit, I had some whiskey and a gun. I could take action.

If I wanted to.

But for the past year, it hasn't been enough, and I've realized that this stress has little to do with my job. I feel ashamed when I think of the whiskey bottle and the gun, because I know I'd never use them.

A few months ago, I started hiding receipts for mundane things, like movie tickets, wiper blades, bags of chips, DVDs, everything.

Until last week, when I decided to use my bottom drawer to hide more important things, things that *deserved* to be next to the whiskey bottle and the gun.

In a tiny envelope, beside the bottle, I carefully placed my dream that I'd find someone to share my life with. In another envelope, I breathed my sexual secrets, licked the glue along the envelope's flap, tucked it snugly under the gun.

I filled the middle of the drawer with pages of conversations written in longhand—discussions, as well as I can remember them, with people no longer in my life. I stapled these together, grouped by association.

Friend, parent, lover, child.

I wrapped my love for my children in elastic bands, left it near the front of the drawer, so I could find it easily. So that on very bad days, my hand would touch this knotted bundle before finding the items at the back.

At night, when people drifted lazily out the doors to their successful lives, I locked my top two drawers, but always left the bottom drawer unlocked—and slightly open, maybe a quarter of an inch.

I wanted someone to open it. A nosy cleaning lady. A curious co-worker. Maybe they'd be inspired to add things of their own, wrap little pieces of their lives in stationery, nestle them next to my secrets. Hiding who they really were, who they really wanted to be, just to make life easier.

But every morning, I'd come into the office, and no one had opened it; no one had touched a thing.

Last night, after work, I opened my bottom drawer, leaned over and pushed down with both hands, shoved it all as far back as possible.

Let them try now. Let them work for it. Let them sweat. Courage takes work.

PUBLICATION HISTORY

“Messages” — originally published in *Realms of Fantasy* (February 2006)

“Scenario B” — original to this collection

“Apology” — originally published in *Brutarian* (November 2004)

“Freshets” — originally published in *Queer Fear II* (Arsenal Pulp Press; December 2002)

“Anniversary of an Uninteresting Event” — originally published in *Denying Death* (Prime Books; November 2003)

“Jimmy Dale” — originally published at *Gothic.Net* (April 2001)

“Jewels” — originally published in *The Asylum... Bedtime Stories for the Criminally Insane, Vol. 1: The Psycho Ward* (Darktales Publications; 1999)

“Water-song” — original to this collection

“Danny Boy” — originally published in *The Asylum... Bedtime Stories for the Criminally Insane, Vol. 2: The Violent Ward* (Darktales Publications; April 2002)

“Slipknot” — originally published in *Borderlands 5* (Borderlands Press; November 2003)

“Silica” — originally published at *Gothic.Net* (January 2000)

“A Diamond of Skin and Love” — originally published in *Vivisections* (Catalyst Press; March 2003)

NO FURTHER MESSAGES

"Subliminal Verses" — originally published in *Trunk Stories* (November 2005)

"The Collective" — originally published in *Denying Death* (Prime Books; November 2003)

"The Time Between Lights" — originally published in *Brainbox II: Son of Brainbox* (Irrational Press; December 2001)

"Running Beneath the Skin" — originally published in *Outsiders: 22 All-New Stories From the Edge* (Penguin/Roc Books; October 2005)

"Marching the Hate Machines Into the Sun" — original to this collection

"Landscape" — originally published in *Trunk Stories* (November 2003)

"Wall" — originally published at *Ideomancer.com* (December 2005)

"Bottom Drawer" — originally published in *Vestal Review* (January 2005)

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In the works are three more novels, and a dark comic book series with artist Homeros Gilani.

When he's not writing, reading, or editing, he plays drums for the southern-tinged hard rock band Diablo Red, whose second album, *A Statue of Mary with Bullhorns*, was released in early 2006.

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