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In God We Trust
and Other Fictions

A thesis presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
The College of Arts and Sciences
Department of English and Rhetoric
Georgia College & State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Ian M. Sargent
April 2017

In God We Trust and Other Fictions

by

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“You're going to pass something down no matter what you do or if you do nothing. Even if you let yourself go fallow, the weeds will grow and the brambles. Something will grow.”

— John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*

Acknowledgements

I'd like to acknowledge those who have been of such great help to me during the production of this work. I'd like to thank Dr. Martin Lammon, who first offered me the chance to be a part of the Georgia College MFA family three years ago. I would also like to thank my thesis director, Dr. Allen Gee, whose patience and guidance was an integral part of my completing this thesis project. I am also grateful of the advice given by Peter Selgin, who was the first to see many of these stories in a far more nascent form. Without the love of my family back in the Michigan, this project would have never been possible. They have offered unconditional support and were always close to my heart during this project. I owe a great debt to my partner, Laura, who, aside from being a constant source of inspiration, kept me healthy, motivated, and sane. Thank you.

<u>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</u>	<u>IV</u>
<u>AFTER THE CRASH</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>WHO WILL INHERIT THE DEAD?</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>THE COCONUTS IN FORTALEZA</u>	<u>32</u>
<u>THE OAK TREE.....</u>	<u>51</u>
<u>THREE DEAD MEN AND A LINZER TORTE</u>	<u>73</u>
<u>PERPETUAL MISERY AND PRACTICAL JOKES</u>	<u>102</u>
<u>IN GOD WE TRUST.....</u>	<u>132</u>

After the Crash

After the crash, Merrill knows he is going to be late. His main concern is a 5:30 meeting with union leaders at General Motors headquarters. His second concern is his 8:30 reservation at the four-diamond restaurant, Iridescence. He is not concerned with his rental car, its white hood resembling the chaotic folds of a used cocktail napkin. He purchased the rental insurance, charging it to his corporate account at Cadillac.

Before the crash, Merrill packed his luggage and arranged a limousine service to pick him up from his house in Great Neck. He had a mimosa and a blood orange for breakfast. He walked down the spiral staircase in the foyer and kissed his wife on the cheek as she straightened her black blouse in the mirrors. As Merrill put his hand on the door his wife said, I don't want to have an argument about it, Merrill, but I would like to get a divorce, very soon.

It is April. Chilly. 4:27 pm. Merrill left the airport at 3:13 and realizes now he should have taken the expressway. He took Michigan Avenue so he could use the traffic stops to write one e-mail to his secretary and another to his mistress. He drifted in and out of lanes, ignoring yield signs, crosswalks and the right of way. He played the radio loudly to drown out the car horns and profanities hurled at from other drivers.

But just as the jockey finished his hopeful forecast of the Lion's 2008 season, and just as he passed the sad empty field once belonging to Tiger Stadium, and right before he reached Trumble Avenue and typed "fleshy" into his Blackberry, he collided with the rear-end of a black Chevy Suburban.

These details will not be in the story he tells the police, and certainly not in the story he tells to the broad chested black man eyeing his Suburban with pursed lips and tamped aggression. The brakes were shot to shit, Merrill will say.

In jest and comradery, Merrill may have narrated these details to his colleagues at GM, if what happened before the crash and what will soon happened after had not happened. Instead, he will spare few words and be contrite for his lateness, despite knowing his presence at the meeting is symbolic. Those above him in rank have already made the decisions that will affect many of those below him. He is here to appear involved. He is here to dine and rendezvous.

Merrill, looking in his wallet for the appropriate insurance information, apologizes again, and says how fortunate he feels no one was hurt. When he looks up, he sees what appears to be a languid drip of black water fall from the top of the Penobscot building. It slowly spins in gravity's grasp, shedding small pieces of itself which casually descend after it, eventually vanishing behind the hazy skyline.

When Merrill realizes he has just seen a man leap to his death, his reaction is a monosyllabic laugh.

He returns to his ruined car and waits for the rental service to send another. As Merrill finishes composing his e-mails, he feels his insides lurch, they hoist themselves up as if he, too is falling. His heart races, and in the cool breeze he perspires fiercely, and his breath becomes shallow.

After the panic passes, Merrill composes the e-mail to his secretary, but not to his mistress.

Long after the crash, in June, Merrill smokes a cigar with his son, Junior, on the deck of their house in Great Neck. The bay laps at the shore and the moon gives the water a glassy, fragile texture. The graduation party has ended; inside the house are Merrill's wife, her co-worker from the district attorney's office and his wife.

Junior will leave for Berkley in the fall, and Merrill is beside himself. He is also very drunk, and doesn't see Junior nervously rolling his unlit cigar between his thumb and index finger. Merrill wants to impart some fatherly token of understanding, some assurance of unconditional support and love despite his own copious flaws and shortcomings. Through mucousy sobs he spews incoherent warnings of avaricious women, pacifist sympathies, and the inevitable backslide of the middle-class into savagery and self-serving vengeance.

He tells his son to find God, only because he thinks it is the right thing to say. He tells his son of the man who jumped 400 feet to his death, and the beautiful calm grace of his falling figure. Merrill tells his son that he laughed upon seeing this, but not because he found it humorous, but because he was simply incredulous, though this is a notion Merrill will continuously struggle to believe.

He says to Junior that he wants him to be anything, absolutely anything, so long as it is not something terrible.

Then Merrill leans back slowly on the Adirondack and falls asleep. His cigar falls to the deck, sending orange embers floating into the night.

Junior had stopped listening to his father long before they stepped out on the deck. He has already made up his mind about the person he does and doesn't want to be. But,

being his father's son, he will fail live up to those choices, and long, long after this moment when Junior's insides rise and his breathing shallows, he will remember the orange embers of his father's cigar, and the strange dance they do in the light before fading away.

Who Will Inherit the Dead?

A serpentine bridge curves into the Hangzhou bay, just south of Shanghai, connecting the continent to an island of offshore ports and oil refineries. It's twenty miles long and most of it rests just above the waves; but halfway out, there's a cable-stayed segment rising two hundred feet above the water, high enough that on overcast days the road disappears into the fog or smog and it's never seen again; and that's where most people choose to jump. They fall for three-and-a-half seconds, hitting the water at seventy miles per hour. If the wind is strong enough, howling out from the bellows of the East China Sea like it was the day Ya and I we're out there, you'll fall for another second. I don't think there's any profundity in that extra second, mind you, it's just an interesting fact; time can't possibly hold any currency for the dead, because let's face it, you're dead the moment your toes leave the railing, the physics just haven't caught up yet; you push off with the balls of your feet and the wind crescendos in your ears like the rondo of a final movement then, hush. The symphony stops.

What happens after, and I mean to the body, not the soul, is what connects Weng Baojian to the bridge.

Baojian is a fisherman. He's a widower, too, and father. He's fifty-seven, straw-thin and hunchbacked, about five-three, but in older pictures he's taller and wider at the shoulders. He lives on an island thirty miles out from the bay, one dominated by dry docks, salt mines, and canneries, where a beige haze never lifts. But north of those, the

land is rugged and sylvan; tributaries and creeks crawl out of the woods latching onto the river like muddy leeches. Baojian has a gray shanty where he and two cats live. He has no name for the cats but dotes on them fondly. The land behind his house slopes down towards the river, not far from where it meets the sea. It's where he sets his two gillnets, anchors his green jon boat and flicks the ashes of the one cigarette he allows himself each day. When the conditions are right, when the wind, sea currents, angle of descent et cetera all collude, the bodies that leap from the bridge make that thirty-mile trek and wash up to a spot just behind the jon boat. It's the same spot each time Baojian assures me. Right there on the back of the boat where the paint is lighter.

It started as one of those days where I felt inconsolably sorry for myself. I wasn't hungover, but I wanted to start drinking as soon as possible. This had become my life in Shanghai. It was part of my life in Seoul, too, but I had my wife, Allison, and my daughter Kendra. I loved being a husband and a father, but I was good at neither, and love isn't an adamantine shield protecting you from all the stupid decisions one can make. It wasn't for me anyway.

Things happened fast or slow, depending on how you look at it. Slowly, I and two other writers were working on a story involving a South Korean politician. We suspected him of handing out promotions to prosecutors investigating his prior business dealings. We had hit a wall, but I was working on a few contacts inside the Special Prosecutor's Office. One was a twenty-something assistant with big almond eyes and a drinking problem. We would meet at a discreet bar and I would play coy, buy her a couple of drinks, and ask about her bosses. You can guess what happened next. We stopped

meeting at bars and we stopped being discreet. Out of guilt I stayed away from home as much as I could, and with a two-year-old that becomes an incredible strain. I would blame work, but come home drunk and despicable. Once when I came home at four in the morning Allison asked me if I was having an affair. She was sitting on our black couch, wide-awake and wet faced. You have to tell me now, she said, while I've prepared myself for it. My answer was the same: work. That's what it always was. I don't know if she ever believed me or wanted to. Her imperturbable green eyes would scour me for some evidence of falsehood. I think she wanted to leave, but she was raised a republican so she needed a reason. In the end, I gave her one.

I tried to break it off with the assistant, thinking she would understand my situation, my guilt. Young women who drink often and sleep with older married men aren't very susceptible to being understanding. She was angry, she threatened to find out where I lived and tell my wife, which she didn't do, but she did tell her bosses they were being investigated, which was maybe worse. She claimed that not just me, but my two other colleagues would get her drunk, have our way with her, and then threaten to spread compromising pictures unless she did what we told her to, all which was untrue of course, but the fatal strike had been delivered.

This is when things happened fast. The Special Prosecutor's Office threatened a very public investigation unless we dropped the story. Since the other writers weren't going to, I had no choice but to admit what had happened, to come clean, as they say, which is a phrase lacking in accuracy of how one feels after the fact. I told my editor first, he was angry, disappointed, but seemed sympathetic. I had to resign that day. I always found the trope of the disconsolate employee throwing themselves out of the window trite

and ridiculous, but as I was cleaning out my office, it occurred to me how little I knew of abject pain. I left and went straight to a bar, got as drunk as I could and then told Allison. I don't even remember what I told her, I just know I would've rather committed murder than listen to the sounds she made as she packed her suitcase and carried my daughter out of our apartment and out of my life.

I tried to stay in Seoul and make it work, I would call, send e-mails, and loiter drunk outside of our friends' homes, hoping to catch a glimpse of Allison or Kendra despite not knowing if they were even there. After a month, I got a letter from Daegu where she was staying with her parents who were still working for the army. She wanted a divorce and full custody of Kendra. I gave in out of penance and lack of personal will. Before I left, a mutual friend asked if I didn't fight custody because I didn't want the responsibility of being a father. I quickly said no, but I wasn't sure. I knew I didn't want to be a weekend or seasonal father, but, if there was any hope I was keeping myself aware of, it was that if I wanted to start over I could, and if I wanted to drink and whore my way into oblivion then I could do that too.

I was supposed to meet a building inspector at a yakitori place in Changning. My previous story covered the collapse of twelve-story building under construction. I traced the collapse back to a poor run of inspections that had been swept under the rug. When the story broke, the developer of the collapsed building had projects stall all over the city. The inspector I was meeting was under pressure by developers to rescind citations for a resort, and had even had his sixteen-year-old daughter kidnapped in broad daylight. The

inspector resigned, and one week later, his daughter was found wandering the streets of Macau, heavily intoxicated and disoriented.

I arrived at the restaurant early to go over my notes, and after a short while, Ya arrived. Ya worked for the State Administration of Press, China's department of propaganda. When I saw him, I knew I was not going to be speaking to the inspector. I liked Ya, he was friendly, and I still consider him my favorite communist, but he was often dour and he smiled in the measured way someone does when they know things you wished they didn't. He squeezed my shoulder then patted me on the back. He told me to relax and set a bottle down on the table. I felt my eyes adjust to the strange familiarity. It was a fifth of Basil Hayden.

He sat down across from me and said, "We're going to have a good conversation, I can feel these things."

Ya had the waitress bring two glasses to the table, but insisted that he poured. He rolled up his sleeves. "I want two things out in the open, Jonas," he said. "I don't want to talk about the building inspector. Don't worry, he's fine, but so much has happened to him recently I think it's best we set it aside. Secondly, this will be my first bourbon, so please don't laugh if I don't take to it."

Ya filled his glass generously. He drank and winced. To his credit, he didn't cough.

"Yes," he said, nodding his head, which is one of the most appropriate things you can do after a glass of bourbon

I held my glass suspiciously, I thought about getting up, I figured if I wasn't going to work on the story then point had been made. Ya made a sound with his throat

then looked off to his left at nothing in particular. I looked too. On the wall was some kind of metalwork art installation. It spanned the whole wall, maybe twenty feet. It depicted several ancient sailing ships caught in a storm. The boats were gold plated and anchored to the wall in a way that made parts of the scene a two-point perspective. The sea was wrought iron and looked sharp, and above it was a green-painted glass dragon. I found the piece fundamentally awful and garish, everything was lacking in nuance, it was like the artist was screaming.

I can't tell if I like this or not, Ya said. "It smells and there's a sting in the back of my throat; but the taste—it's like I can already tell I'll be sitting on a train six years from now and remember this taste." He picked up his half full glass and threw it back. He immediately coughed; his cheeks puffed out and flushed red before releasing their contents on the table. I dodged most of the spray.

A waitress promptly arrived to wipe down the table and set a fresh glass of water in front of Ya.

"Are you alright?" I said. Ya nodded and cleared his throat.

In solidarity I finished my glass of bourbon quickly. It was smoother than I remembered, and had a delicious burn that reminded me of Fort Gordon and Augusta.

"I wish my son spoke as much as you did," Ya said. "He'd be more tolerable." He chuckled, and I could tell he wasn't joking.

"My son is seven, and he has no interest. He doesn't like sports, he's average in school. His only obsession, if you were to call it that, is with his Legos. He takes pieces, regardless of their size or color and stacks them into one long wall, from one side of his room to the other, the whole time he's having conversations with himself in different

voices. When he's done, he takes the wall apart. It's his only consistent interest. When I was that age, I knew what I wanted to be, but I had also seen more, traveled more. I used to blame his mother secretly, she's quiet, and melancholy; I liked that about her when I was young and loud. Now I'm blaming myself. ”

He poured himself another drink, very casually. He drank it slowly.

After a few minutes I stood.

“Are you leaving?” Ya said.

“I'd like to. I don't know what the protocol is for meetings like this.” Ya smiled.

“There is none. Take the gift, I hope you enjoy it. I hope you can write the story without the inspector, I'm sure you can.”

“He was the story.”

“Then I'm sorry. I'd prefer not to mess with a man's livelihood, especially in your situation. I may be able to help you, if you'll give me two more minutes.”

I took my wallet out but Ya had already placed money on the table.

“I have a story that's perfect for you,” Ya said. “It's about death, fate, and the plight of the working man; an American journalist's dream.” He motioned towards the door. “I have a spare shirt I'd like to retrieve, if you don't mind.”

I followed him out of the restaurant. Outside it was growing dark and would rain soon. We walked ahead half a block and turned right down a shady street with no cars, which is an uncommon sight in the city. Ya said it was just a safety precaution. He pointed to a security camera high on a light pole across the street. “Who watches the watchmen?” he said in English. He made a quick phone call and in a couple of minutes, a black Mercedes SUV rounded the corner and stopped in front of us. The driver, a tall

angry-looking young man in a suit opened the trunk and handed Ya a white shirt on a hanger. Ya took his time changing.

“Let’s speak in English, if you don’t mind. I’m sure you know Shanghai is in the midst of a suicide epidemic. People, especially young ones, are under pressure to find and keep jobs; businesses are under pressure to make profits in a stagnant global economy, and the two combined have turned the job market into a war zone. The stakes are high, the hours are long, and the fragile minded are taking their own lives.”

“These are white-collar workers, right?” I said. “American’s don’t consider that working class.”

“I’m not finished,” Ya said. “But it’s good to know your feelings on the upper classes.” Ya went on to describe how people were throwing themselves into Hangzhou Bay. They would drive their cars out to the Donghai Bridge, scale the railing, and jump. “There’s a fisherman who often comes across these bodies,” Ya said. “He finds them so to speak. He sells them back to the families. He’s more of an undertaker who occasionally fishes, business is that good.” Ya finished knotting his tie. “This fisherman is man fashioned after ourselves; he’s preoccupied with his inner-world, he’s not a participant in life, he just happens to find himself in it.”

“That’s not how I would describe myself,” I said. But that was more or less a lie. “Who would I write this for? It’s too dark for the *Daily*, and I can’t spin this for the *Global*, this is a communist problem as much as it is a capitalist one.”

“I agree,” Ya said. “Let Reuters have it. Your last story waved a flag and caught the attention of important people. But in the end, that building still fell down. You fought against money with that story. Money is a high flying two-hundred-foot dragon and you

have a butterfly net. I'm giving you something more attainable but still with gravity. I wish I had a writer's mind now, I would give you a proper analogy to match the dragon."

I wasn't sure what Ya stood to gain from the story. He walked closer to me and lightly grasped me by the elbows and said that if I was going to stay in China, I'd need to learn to place less importance on gain.

It started raining. Ya offered to drive me back to my apartment. Traffic was horrendous, it would have been quicker if I walked, but Ya told me about the year his family spent in Toronto while his father worked for the foreign office. He went to a hockey game at Maple Leaf Gardens and saw Darryl Sittler score six goals against the Bruins. He spoke highly of his mother, who wanted to be a school teacher, but both her father and Ya's refused to let her take classes, as they were afraid it would be seen too leftist. Ya was groomed for the Communist Party very early, and though he made it clear he preferred a career in sports, his father maintained otherwise. According to Ya, his father never raised his voice or grew upset at his defiance. "He didn't need to," Ya said. "Once he realized I was adamant about a life outside the party, all it took was a phone call to a coach. No team would have me. I was seventeen, and I remember feeling like somewhere in my father's study there must have been a scroll a thousand miles long where he'd written out my life with a cruel certainty. Maybe all children feel this way, but I am 47 now, and I'm still doing what my father wanted me to do.

Ya's most telling anecdote from his past went something like this:

"I think I was twenty, twenty-one, maybe older. Those were the years I finally gave up on my dreams and on my life. I hated my father but I couldn't bring myself to dishonor him by acting out irrationally. I'd just walked into the door and there was my

father, all white hair and placidity, standing over my mother, who was sitting on the floor in our front room crying. I thought my father had struck her, if he had, I don't know, I may have killed him, but that's easy to say now. He saw me and very calmly said, 'Your grandmother has just died. Your mother is grieving.' He never offered her a hand or tried to pick her up, he never said any words of comfort either. For a time I believed this was because he didn't know what to say. But I think he just knew there was nothing that could be said to lessen my mother's pain at that moment. My father wasted little, even words. Later that evening I realized my father's cold pragmatism would be mine one day. I was sure I would be emotionally incapable of offering someone I loved comfort at a desperate time. Has it happened? I don't know, maybe. I worry more about what my son has seen in me, and what likeness, if any, he's already claimed for his future self."

When we made it back to my apartment I told Ya I would take the story. He gave me a place and time to meet him the next day. I told him he could pick me up here but he said he wanted to allow me the opportunity to turn him down. Leaning out of the window with the rain pouring down over us he said: "There are people who enjoy forcing one's hand. They make great leaders; I work with a few of them. My office is not very big because I like forcing choices, you get to know people better that way."

I had the rest of the Basil's and opened a word file on the computer containing the first half a novel I was never going to finish. It started as war romance set in Afghanistan, a poor Roman a clef of a long distance relationship I had while stationed in Daegu. When the relationship ended, I couldn't bring myself to write scenes with the female character, so I turned the story into one of a war correspondent who gets off the subway just after

Seoul has been nuked. He spends two chapters counting charred human remains and pondering the evolutionary advantages of prolonged loneliness.

I met Allison and didn't return to the book until I found out I was going to be a father, which felt like leaping out of a fast airplane without a parachute knowing you'll land safely on your feet. I rewrote the novel to honor Kendra; it became a girl's journey into adolescence and motherhood. It would be a gift and a cautionary tale. Allison would let me read her third grader's daily journals for inspiration. After Kendra was born, nothing felt bolted down anymore. Every part of my life was constantly changing. Familiarity was like an elven goddess I could only read about in the books I didn't have time to read anymore.

The first year Allison and I had sex three, four times maybe. At least two of those times were in the nursery. We'd put Kendra to bed and not have enough energy left to leave the room. We'd fall on each other and cling together as if letting go meant absolute and certain pain. We'd fall asleep on the floor until the crying started.

Put that in the book became the phrase in our house, the little inside joke we took with us when we visited family. As in, Uncle Martin lifted Kendra above him like we'd warned him not to and as she spit up. Some of it trickled down his wrist and into his Malbec. We didn't tell him. *Put that in the book*. Or, when mommy put a diaper too big for Kendra on her and at some odd hour in the morning daddy went in to the nursery and found baby's fecal Jackson Pollock imitation on the crib's mattress. *Yeah, put that in the book*. Or:

Jonas, please don't let her take naps on the floor.

She's fine.

She could hurt her neck.

It's carpet, it's soft. She's quiet.

Are you drinking?

Just a finger.

Could you please put her in the crib?

No. She'll be fine, and you'll be fine.

Please.

Al, damn it, relax.

Please!

Christ. Are you crying? Why are the hell are you crying?

I'm just exhausted.

Maybe you should take a nap on the floor.

Why are you so difficult?

Stop crying, I'm sorry. Jesus, now the baby's up. Look Kendra, mama's turn to cry for no god damn reason. Let's put that in the book.

I stopped writing the book when I stopped being home at night. Where I left it, the protagonist has to choose between volleyball and the cello. If she plays volleyball she'll catch the attention of the boy she likes, if she chooses the cello, she knows she'll be one of the best in the nation for her age. She wants that, but she doesn't want to be the snobby nerd with no boyfriend. I was waiting to see what type of person Kendra was going to be before I finished it. Now it feel likes it doesn't matter. I care, but I don't think it matters.

It was an hour's drive to the airport and from there a fifteen-minute flight to an island south of the bay. From there, two hours of ferries and dirt roads through green hills and brown woods.

We turned down a gravel pass and passed a water works station, then the earth leveled and cleared, and the tall trees gave way to a wide river on our left and flat fields of soy on our right.

At eleven we arrived at a small one-story raised off the earth by wooden stilts. The house was windswept, it leaned to one side and was in bad need of a coat of paint. Standing in the open doorway was Baojian. He looked like a boy, thin, short, his clothes loosely fitted and his hair stringy and falling over his eyes.

As we approached the steps Ya told me Baojian only spoke Cantonese but understood Mandarin. Ya said he was happy to interpret for no fee.

The house was lit mostly by sunlight coming through a few undressed windows. The air was humid and stuffy and there was a mildew smell I never seemed to adjust to

There was a woman in the kitchen boiling water over a gas light. This was Jin, Baojian's daughter. She looked unreal but only because she was so pretty, and because there was nothing in the house that seemed fitted to her purpose there. She was tall, very clean looking with soft skin and a white polo outlining her toned figure. She knew Ya but didn't seem as happy to see him as he did her. She looked confused by my presence, though I've learned this is often due to my appearance as well.

"This is the journalist I spoke of," Ya said. "He's an American but he's very friendly." Ya proudly stated that Jin was a concert pianist. Jin smiled and the three of us stood awkwardly in the kitchen until Baojian made a coughing noise in the other room. I

followed Ya. We sat across from the fisherman on a pair of blue plastic chairs Baojian scrubbed clean just moments before. He couldn't have weighed more than 120 pounds. He sat in a woven bamboo rocker that, if animated, would've swallowed him with little effort.

He nodded towards me while speaking to Ya and I found myself nodding back understanding what was being shared.

"You're the first American he's met," Ya said. "He thinks aside from being so big you don't look like what he thought an American would look like."

"He probably expected someone whiter," I said. Baojian coughed a phlegmy laugh, which was the only time I saw him happy. He said something else, which Ya translated as 'someone fatter, too.'

Jin set tea on the low table in front of Baojian. She also brought in a bowl of wheat noodles that Baojian refused to eat. There was an argument between the two that played out swiftly and loudly like a flash storm, long enough to observe but short enough that Ya and I couldn't pull ourselves away conveniently. We could only watch as Jin twice put the chopsticks in Baojian's hand just to have him slam them on table. Jin shouted, but you could tell by the way her mouth moved and her eyes didn't that this was a familiar front. Whatever was being said would be again and again.

Jin was persistent, Baojian ate and when he was finished he wiped his mouth and unprompted told us his story. Ya translated, and it went like this:

"My father was very smart, he thought more like an engineer than a farmer. He had no degree, but when he was in the army he was deputy to a man who would become one of the communist party's experts on hydroelectricity. You are probably too young to

remember him. He died in a plane crash somewhere near Ordos. They gave him a state funeral. I cried when I heard because he reminded me of my father, who I think respected this man more than his own father.

“We were poor cattle farmers near Baise. We had a small pasture that had soil so bad, so full of salt, the children, including myself, would sprinkle dirt on minnows we’d catch with our hands. Every year we had to dig our wells deeper to find fresh water, and the deeper we got, the harder the earth and the less water we could draw. My father said quarrying runoff and poor fertilization was responsible, and even took a petition to Nanning to urge for some type of industry regulation. This was even before America obsessed over the quality of dirt.

“My father left for Nanning and we didn’t see him for three weeks. This is when my mother started drinking and wandering into the village at night alone. I won’t say much about my mother; I was too young to understand what she did or went through. She was sad, always. But my father came back one evening, or morning. The sky was red. Li Fang wheeled him into our home. Fang was the pig farmer. My father had both his legs broken. He was thin, very much like I am now, but my father was younger, so it was startling to see. They had broken his legs for making a fuss. When my mother saw him, she made the sound a calf makes when it first leaves the heifer. [Baojian takes a lengthy pause. Stirs his tea. He continues]. All my father said at that time was ‘we must think of a new plan.’

“I worked in the fields, milked the cows, I was eight or nine, this was very hard on me. I wanted to play. I would cry all day until my father would wheel out and look at me with his broken legs. What other option was there? None. None. My tea is cold.

[Baojian looks at his cup for a long time. Ya gets up and pours hot water into the cup. He continues] While I was working, my father was designing a drill head. Day and night. We spent more money on graphite and paper than corn. We sold most of our milk to a Vietnamese man that had a forge. In exchange for milk, he cast the drill heads my father designed. I only went once. He had a daughter my age. If I had known that, I would have gone more. Her hair was long and touched the ground, the ends were dusty. I remember asking my father if she was the Weaving Maid and if I would marry her. I had just been told the fairytale and was feeling entitled to such questions. I only saw her once, because my father had perfected his design.

“The drill was as big as a paddy hat and threaded, so it could dig. There was stem coming out from the center, like a mushroom stalk. This was the genius of the design. The stalk was hollowed and contoured. You flushed air through it as you dug, and when the head hit water, it forced it back through the hose. In one year, we had a pasture so green I believed it glowed at night. When my father could walk again, we went from farm to farm, digging wells. We charged a small fee. We were successful. But this was the day of Mao and the communes, so men from Nanning came one day, and my father explained the drill. We thought we were in trouble, that we’d lose the farm, but they only wanted the plans for the drill. At first, my father refused to give away for free. He didn’t want money, though; he wanted land, a plot on the far side of Baise. There the land was hard but irrigated by a different river. They agreed and I didn’t understand why, being so young. He worked hard on his design, and then gave it away so cheaply.

“We moved, and I worked harder than ever to make the land arable. We lost many cattle and when I was fourteen, I fell on a rake. [Baojian lifts up his shirt.] I was so thin I

broke ribs and punctured a lung. I was bedridden for so long that my back grew weak, it never got strong again. But we worked, and the land grew green. When my father started graying we had ten head of cattle and we hired hands to grow watermelon. We were happiest then. My mother was still sad from time to time, and she drank. I don't think my father and mother loved each other at that point, but he was never brutal to her.

“I think I was eighteen when they built the aluminum facility. It was a massive building at that time. They fouled the water, but not our water. Our old farm and all the farms in that area were slowly ruined. Entire livestock were lost, and during August of that year Feng and the other pig farmers dumped 100 head into the river. Cattle farmers followed suit. It was a protest, and an effective one. Newspapers from Beijing came to see this. My father and I went to see for ourselves, and I remember the cattle, with their purple tongues, looked more alive in the water than they ever did on land, the current twisted their bodies on top of each other like fat wet snakes. Some of the other farmers recognized us. They shouted and starting throwing stones. They blamed us for what was happening, which is of course absurd. It was jealousy, but the kind I understood. They had nothing left now.

“We had to build a fence around the land and my father, who had earned some respect in the town, arranged for special security. But one day he went missing. I thought he ran away, but my mother knew something bad had happened. And she was right. They pulled my father's naked body out of one of his old wells. The attacks on our farm stopped, but later that year we sold the land and moved to Nanning, where I lived until I met Jin We married, had a beautiful daughter, and when Jin's mother's died the city

became too big. Jin left to study, and I moved here. Life was reasonable until they raised the bridge. But what more can I say?"

Outside we walked through the muddy field behind the house towards the wide river. It carved through the dense woodlands and moved quietly. Baojian stood on the bank, a small boat to his left and a line of nets to his right, swaying beneath the surface along the shallow edges. Several fish fought hard against the nets. Baojian said he waits for more fish before he gathers them, now that Jin is gone and his arthritis is worse. One fish wrestled with the twine of the nets as Baojian pulled it out of the water. In the open air, it was still and lifeless. It was small and Baojian tossed it back and watched as it disappeared into depths and fled with the currents.

He pointed to spot behind his boat and said that was where the bodies washed up. The current could be fast or slow, the water level could rise, but the bodies always find their way there.

Clouds crept over the sun and a breeze shook the leaves. Baojian took a deep breath followed by several merciless coughs. Ya took off his jacket and fanned himself. I asked Baojian how long he'd been finding the bodies. He said he didn't remember, but he assumed it was whenever they built the bridge. The bridge was a murderer he said. It brought money to those who didn't need it and took daughters and sons. He said the oldest body he found was only forty, and he was a party member, but the rest were young.

Baojian looked at the sky and then asked Ya for the time. It was a little past twelve, which is when we set off in the boat to meet the dead girl's family.

I couldn't see the sun through orange haze but it was directly overhead, pressing sweat out of the three of us while we moved upstream. Baojian paddled, and Ya, who told me on the one of the ferries that he couldn't swim, cursed every time the boat rocked too quickly for his comfort. Occasionally there was a breeze at our backs and wagtails sang from their hidden perches in the trees.

Two or three times Baojian would stop paddling and we'd drift momentarily, sometimes in the middle of the river and other times towards one of the banks. He'd slowly scan the sky and the treetops ahead. Then he'd turn around, and his eye would widen and for a second it was like he didn't expect us to be there, like he'd forgotten us, and then he'd turn forward and start paddling again. Ya didn't notice, but he cursed when we drifted into a low branch that we ducked to avoid.

When the bodies come, Baojian writes down in a water-stained pocket book what the corpses are wearing, whether they've any piercings, rings, or scars; As best he can, he makes a sketch of what they may have looked like before falling two hundred feet and floating for thirty brackish miles. He then takes the bodies to a holding spot upstream.

When Jin visits, she takes him into town where he calls a security bureau in Shanghai. He doesn't trust the island police, who he says treat him like a child. The first time he found a body he phoned the local police they arrested him on suspicion of murder. He was held for two days.

The river narrowed, and its bends became sharper. The encroaching banks sprouted thick broken roots, which reached deep into the water. Baojian steered us off the main branch of the river and up an inlet dominated by a large willow covering a break in

the current. this was where the bodies were kept. The smell. What can I say? If you've never smelled a dead body, it's stewing, rotten putrescence, there's little a description can do to communicate the experience. But much like the smell of blood for some animals, the odor of death triggers heightened fear, your hairs stiffen and turn every shuffle of the wind into a maelstrom. Run, run, run, every cell says. Ya and I clung to the side of the boat and tried not to vomit.

The tree stood at the end of an abandoned lot. As we slowed Baojian quickened his movements, and who wouldn't? This was death's home, not ours. The boat's wash rippled behind the swinging curtains of willow branches. On the other side, a blue tarp swelled and belched foul water onto the muddy banks. Baojian used an oar to move the tarp. Beneath it, seven bodies in various stages of decay floated in a sludgy eddy. All lay face up in a tight row. Their colors varied from sickly yellows to the more rotten, dark brown that gave the body an earth tone, looking less like a human and more like a crude facsimile that had grown out of the river bed. They wore ties, jackets, skirts. Baojian said they were all young.

“Dressed to enjoy life and not end it.” Ya said.

Out of the seven bodies there was only one female. Using the oar, Baojian pulled the body alongside us. Her face was bloated like the others, mud and vegetation caked her hair. He tied a rope around her waist and fastened the other end to a cleat. He covered the bodies with the tarp and moved to the rear of the boat, deftly guiding us back towards the river with the body trailing four or five feet behind.

As we drifted further up the river the air cooled, and I had to note the placid beauty of things. It was quiet and comfortable, and afforded a clarity of mind I'd forgotten was possible. I lived in a city of constant occupancy, of commodified space; I could no longer believe the rest of my life was ahead of me because I knew there was another life I fled from, another city, and the cloudless sky and slow ripples undulating in the water weren't an escape from these thoughts but a magnification. Here I was sitting at the front of a boat, and behind me were two men and a young woman who'd chosen to take matters into her own hands. She was the end of suffering. My pain, and the pain I'd given to Allison and future grief to my daughter were like a beginning.

We came to a rural two-lane bridge that was no more than seven or eight feet above the river, which at this point choked into a narrow strait. Two men stood in the mud and grass by the bank. One was the dead girl's father. He was wearing grey suit pants and a buttoned white shirt; Ya pointed out the other man as the Fat Constable. He was quite heavy, and his shirt was transparent with sweat. Above the bank, a woman sat on the ground hugging her knees.

The Fat Constable waved his arms above his head when he saw us.

"Noon, noon," the Constable said. Baojian shrugged. The Constable wiped his face and squinted at me and Ya. "Qu Ya!" he said. "You're in a boat. You can't swim! Ha ha."

There were a quiet few seconds where it appeared all of us were figuring out our purpose in the moment, all of us except Baojian.

Baojian asked who was going to look. The Fat Constable said he would, but then the father moved closer the edge of the bank and nodded.

“Be careful,” The Fat Constable said. “There’s a smell.” The man pulled out a red tie from his pocket and covered his mouth and nose. He gestured for his wife to stay behind, but her mind had been made, she came down from the road and stood by her husband. Baojian pulled the rope around the raft, turning the body over, and letting it float slowly towards the edge of the river. I fought the urge to look at her face, something told me not to look at the eyes so I focused on the crease running down her pants. The pant legs ballooned with air and water as she drifted by. There was a gagging sound and then the mother let out a shrill wail, a sound I’d be happy to never have to hear again.

Grief is a terse script with vast interpretations and no two are alike. The woman fell to ground, hands and knees covered in mud while the man made fists but no sounds. He let his tie fall and lifted his wife off the ground, peeling her clenched hands open and wiping away clumps of earth. The Fat Constable wiped his face and looked off at some vague point into the river.

The couple made their way up the embankment and the husband ushered his wife into the car.

“They’re leaving,” Ya said. I hadn’t notice he had been crying. The Fat Constable walked closer and looked down at the floating dead girl. “Everyone wants to know the dead,” he said. “But so few want to claim them. Ha ha.”

Baojian and the Constable arranged to pick up the body later in the day. We had turned the boat around when the father came down the hill and stopped by the river. He looked like he wanted to speak, but instead he pulled money out of his wallet. He tried to

reach into the boat, but his daughter's corpse floated between us, and Baojian had to swing the body to the other side so the transaction could take place. It was disheartening to watch economy grind on death and pain so openly.

The current brought us quickly back to Baojian's. I was exhausted, dripping with sweat, morally uncomfortable in the light of what I witnessed, yet Baojian exhibited no change in his mood or physical appearance. His eyes wandered to each bank and scanned the surface of the water.

I finally asked him why. He turned towards me and shook his head, which I thought meant he didn't understand. Then he said he didn't know why it was necessary for the bridge, the river, and for everything to happen the way they did.

"Necessary?" I asked Ya. "Is that right? What does he mean by necessary?"

Ya asked, and Baojian shrugged. After a minute had passed, and a cloud covered and then revealed the sun, Baojian finally said that "If you started with questions like these, if you asked why sad things happen, you could go on forever trying to answer them, wasting your life, which many have already done."

"Do you feel guilty taking money from the families?" I asked. He said if there was a god who thought it was evil, or some monk who thought it was sacrilege, or if it was wrong by any legal technicality, that it didn't matter. He said living by the river meant water guided his life, and he knew there was not much life left to him anyway. He brought dignity to the dead while he still could. He said he only feels guilty not knowing what will happen when he finally moves back to the city with Jin.. Even though I was behind him, I was close enough to see Bao-Jian's reaction as he contemplated his future.

It was a familiar one: some unseen immense weight pulling the shoulders down, laboring the breathing. His small world was receding, and he would soon have as much control over his life as he did the grim current in the river.

If I had been 10 years younger, if I had my family, I would feel all of this differently. Age accustoms you to unfortunate things. After we left the island, Ya and I drank for several hours at the jazz club Jin was playing at that evening. A brass trio played under red lights on the small stage. They belted some original tunes that were okay, and then closed with an awfully upbeat version of What A Wonderful World.

Two grand pianos were wheeled on the stage. The lights switched to blue and Jin appeared with another young woman. They both wore sleek white dresses that parted along the right leg. Jin's dark hair fell past her shoulders and may have fell further down her back but in such low light, it was impossible to tell. The women bowed, took their seats and played with lively command of their instruments. At one point, the two played in such rapid and fluid syncopation it appeared they no longer needed the stage, the audience, or the club; they were no longer playing for the crowd, they were possessed by something only they knew, we could only stand and applaud when it was over.

Ya stayed seated, and I could see he was watching Jin. I think he loved her, but I couldn't bring myself to ask. I did ask Jin in a roundabout way much later. I was finishing the story and sent her an e-mail asking her about Ya and her father and what she thought of them. She said nothing of Ya, she said her father was an ill man who, like so many old men, weren't going to change. His reasons for doing what he does, she said, have nothing to do with her, and little to do with himself. When he talks about the past he

talks about a different life but one still vivid for him, his reasons live there, in the past, but very alive.

She wanted to make it clear to me that she respected and loved her father, but often felt she didn't always have one.

After the club and a few more drinks, Ya and I drove out to Donghai Bridge. Along the way I texted Allison paltry things: *How are you? How's the girl? Good, and fine. How are you? Ok. That's good. It is. Working? Yeah. OK. Kiss K for me. I will.*

I missed them, though I didn't really know why, and I didn't want to think about it, but given what I'd seen today it was all I could think about. My daughter will be three years-old in a few months. I will have gotten older too, and there was no guarantee that in a month, or in a year or, in ten what I would feel then or what they would feel about me. All I knew is that they were making new memories in place of what I'd left behind. *La di da*, I chuckled. *They'll learn more than I'll ever know, and I think to myself, what a wonderful world.*

"Are you drunk?" Ya said.

"Yes," I said. "Are you?"

"I'm happy now," he said.

We pulled over to the shoulder of the bridge and carefully got out. Cars sped by. A pink crescent sun hovered low over the bay and a sharp wind made it impossible to speak or spend any length of time facing east. Ya said he loved the view, but I could only think of drop, the near two-hundred feet between us and the swirling waters. When I looked down, the waves appeared to ebb and swell mechanically, the distance giving the

tide's proportions a toy-like appearance. I got dizzy; I wondered as I'm sure everyone does, what goes through the mind of someone who has taken the leap, what they feel, see, and believe about their final few moments. When I turned around, I saw Ya crossing the street, or trying to. He looked ridiculous in his white shirt and tie climbing over the median. I tried to shout but it was useless against the noise. He climbed the railing and leaned forward. He didn't fall. He bobbed, the wind was blowing hard enough to carry his weight. He came down after a few seconds and crossed the street. He said something to me when he was about twenty feet away that I couldn't hear. His hair stood on his head and his tie lay draped across his shoulder. A light mist of sea spray speckled his face. He said something again but I still couldn't hear. I pointed to the car and when we got inside I asked calmly what the hell he was doing.

"Playing with the wind," he said. "Did you think I was going to jump?" I said yes. "No one could hear you scream," he said. "If you fell. The wind is too loud." I offered to drive, and he said that'd be fine since his eyes were burning. On the way back he repeated the thing about screaming.

"What's it matter?" I said.

"Wouldn't you want to leave this life with a shout? It would be like a mark you scratch in someone's ear."

"You're still drunk," I said.

"You're dark, Jonas. Moody. Don't let today get to you."

"Did it get to you?"

"I'm happy," Ya said. "I'm going to go home, maybe play Legos with my son. Are you happy?"

“Sure,” I said.

“Then don’t be moody,” he said.

And I said I wouldn’t be.

The Coconuts In Fortaleza

I was sprawled out on the couch, moving from planet to planet on a video game when Joana came home from work, carrying a large paper bag and a coconut. I sat up as she tossed everything on the kitchen table and looked at me with kind of a flat face, showing maybe a little annoyance. She's not a fan of the game.

"Work OK?" I said. "What's in the bag?"

"Food," she said. That meant whatever was in that bag wasn't for me. "You sit on that couch all day?"

"No," I said.

"Smoke all day?"

"No," I said. I hadn't, I finished my bowl last night. "I was thinking of doing some straightening up in the garage. I might put up shelves before winter. If I do that, we could fit both cars in there."

I laid back down and waited before I started playing again. I could hear Joana opening drawers and slamming them.

"I might head over to Enner's," I said. "He called me a while back and I haven't been able to get a hold of him. He may be on a job, which is good."

"Did you call Haabs & White?"

"They haven't called today."

"Did you call them?"

“I haven’t, yet. If they want me, they’ll call.”

“Or you could call.”

“If I do that, some secretary will brush me off just because it’s the only time she gets to have any authority. No thanks, I’ll wait.” I heard something like a rock land on the counter. It was a coconut.

“I know these people, Jo,” I said. “It’s best to wait.”

I didn’t know Haab’s & White specifically, but I knew architects. With my drafting degree, I had landed a few interviews over the summer, but things always fell apart once money came into the equation. As a carpenter, if you gave me nine months with good weather I could turn an acre of grass into a white picket-fence dream home, tire swing and all. But as a draftsman, my value is knowing which dick in the big office likes cream in their coffee and which likes it black. There’s not a big market for that.

It was frustrating spending half the summer out of work, I didn’t know what to do with all the days I had to myself. I tried to find my own gigs but since I wasn’t insured I wasn’t trying too hard. Joana works at a beverage warehouse translating for Spanish and Portuguese clients, and we’ve been able to manage with her working weekends at a daycare.

I looked back into the kitchen and could see her head from over the couch. Her hair was in a tight bun and her movements made her look like a fuzzy brown ball bouncing around the room.

“What do you think about the garage?” I said.

“I don’t think the garage should be something you want me to worry about.”

“What’s that mean?”

Joana brought the coconut down on the counter again and I jumped.

“Hey,” I said. “Do you want some help in there?”

“No.”

“Let me get a hammer at least. That can’t be good for the counter.”

She brought the coconut down and it slipped from her grip and landed on her foot. She said something in Portuguese I didn’t catch, but I could guess what it meant. I got up from the couch and took a step and then fell to the floor. My leg had fallen asleep.

“I tripped,” I said.

I went into the kitchen and picked up the coconut. It was bigger than a normal coconut and had less of the hairy fibers on it. I asked her if it was a coconut, just to be sure. Sometimes she’ll bring home what looks like a big grapefruit when it’s really a pomelo, or tiny tomatoes that are really persimmons. I don’t eat the stuff, but I like to know what it is.

“This is a big one. Did you go to Eastern Market this morning?”

“No. It’s no good. It’s a stupid American freak-fruit. It won’t open,”

“Everything’s better in Brazil, I know.”

I grabbed one of those hammer-like tenderizers from the drawer and placed the coconut on a cutting board. “Aren’t all coconuts a pain in the ass?” I said.

“How would you know?”

“Darwin,” I said.

“Darwin? What does that mean?”

“Look it up,” I said. I held the coconut firmly in my right hand and kept my left wrist nice and loose and lined up a strike. There was a crack.

“There,” I said. I started feeling around but everything felt as firm as a rock.

“*There*,” Joana said in baritone. She called it her dumb-Josh voice. “*There*.”

I gave it another whack but only felt the cutting board slide against the counter.

“How is this supposed to work?”

“You crack the seam first,” she said.

“You didn’t tell me there was a seam; you should’ve said that first.”

I found a seam and made solid contact. There was another crack, but nothing came loose.

“This is just *so* stupid,” she said. “Only here would this happen.”

“You make it sound like coconuts in Brazil are made of glass.”

“They aren’t made of chemical shit.”

“It says organic, Jo, right here on the sticker.” I peeled it off and stuck it on her nose. “It’s just a tough nut; probably means there’s good stuff inside. What are you making anyway?”

“Franga coco, but nothing now. Just throw it away.” She reached for the coconut and I pulled it away.

“Let me saw it open,” I said. “It’ll give me something to do.”

“You’ve had all day to do something; you’re not going to do anything.”

She opened the freezer, took out some chicken, and threw it in the sink. She ran the tap and was watching the water go down the drain.

“I could be in Fortaleza,” Joana said. Marta, Jo’s mother, moved back to Fortaleza after the divorce. This was the first summer Jo hadn’t been able to afford a ticket home. Marta offered, but Jo has qualms with charity, which is a luxurious virtue to possess.

“You could,” I said. “Beaches full of soft coconuts. Or maybe you should go to Miami and see Waldir, maybe we should do that instead, drive down together, since I think we both need a vacation.”

I set the tenderizer down and wrapped my arms around Joana’s waist. She felt like she was one giant knot.

She pulled away and said: “Only in America do the unemployed take vacations.”

I chuckled, and maybe I said something else under my breath, I don’t really remember. I grabbed the tenderizer again and took a big swing at the coconut. As I was coming down, something felt wrong, like the motion was being thrown off balance by something. I realized by the time I had already come down on the coconut that the head of the tenderizer had shifted loose. There was a soft pop followed by two thuds as the head bounced off the wall in front of me and struck Joana below her left shoulder. She didn’t scream or cry. She stared at me with the look one reserves for the stranger you catch in your house at 3AM. Two giant pools swelled in the bottom of her eyes. I made took a step forward and they burst. I leaned back against the counter and watched her take soft and quick steps towards the bedroom, which she shut firmly.

I put the chicken back into the refrigerator and set all the spices back. I threw the tenderizer away and was going to do the same with the coconut when I decided I would cut the thing open. There wasn’t much else to do at that point.

I went into the garage and was startled at how cluttered it was. I knew it was a mess, but I hadn’t actually been inside for a while. I had years of tools and scrap wood in big plastic bins covered in sawdust and cobwebs. My truck had a fine layer of dust its own.

I set the coconut on the hood and started stacking boxes and moving as much as I could towards the wall. At some point, I thought that Joana might divorce me. It was the first time I had considered it as a real possibility. There have been signs, but they always seemed a part of the stress of our situation, of me being short on work. Lately she cries a lot, and usually on account of very little: running out of toilet paper, the third day of rain in a row, my feet being too cold in bed. This was depression, I knew because my ex-wife Nicky had it, and I knew that before I married her. She managed well but winters always cut her down. But Joana would never admit to having depression. It was too simple an answer; it was another American thing cured by expensive drugs. That was a fight I was never going to win, and I didn't care to.

After I had cleared some room in the garage, I pulled my band saw out from a corner. I opened one of its drawers but couldn't find the blade. I checked some other boxes and looked in the bed of my truck, not really looking, just moving things around, all the while thinking that at some point, Joana was going to walk in to the garage and tell me we needed to talk, and that was going to be that, so I had to get away. I grabbed the coconut and got into my truck and just started driving, which was a habit of my own I had started lately, though I usually used Jo's car.

I pulled into Enner's driveway. Clay's truck was parked on the street; he was a plumber we worked with. I never liked him. He used to make jokes about stealing underwear from the houses he worked at, and I never really believed he was only joking.

I knocked on the door and after about a minute Theresa answered. She cracked the door slightly at first, then she recognized me and invited me in. She was in a green robe and barefoot. She had white cream all over her hair.

“Don’t mind me,” she said. “Getting the gray out.”

“I didn’t come at a bad time, did I?”

“No. They’re downstairs. I just thought you were someone else.”

“Well, I won’t hang around if you’re expecting company,” I said.

“Oh stop it,” she said. “You’re fine. Though you probably shouldn’t stay, you know, ha-ha. That man is no good.”

She said there was beer in the kitchen and then she headed back upstairs. When she left, and the fumes of the dye wore off I realized the whole house smelled like an old joint.

The basement was dark, and smoke was gliding around in the light.

I turned the corner and saw both Enner and Clay seated on the futon. They didn’t look good; Clay wasn’t asleep but he was drooling onto his shoulder, his head looked too heavy for his neck. Enner’s hair, which was long and pulled over on his right side had a greasy shine and was flecked with pot ash. They were losers! But they were friends of sorts, and I understood what I was seeing,

Enner’s head jerked in my direction. I could see his pupils expand as he tried to find me. He stroked his beard.

“Josh,” he said, drawing out ‘ah’ sound. “Hey Josh, have a seat. Look at this, Clay, damn near the whole crew is here.”

I grabbed a metal folding chair and set it up next to the futon. On the TV, the Yankees we're playing the Angels. It was the first inning.

"How you been," Clay said.

"Not bad. You?"

"Been all kind of things," he said.

Enner took out a little tin square about the size of a card deck and opened it up. He grabbed some buds and starting packing the in rolling paper.

We watched the game for a few minutes in silence. I started to feel a little better. The joint came back to me and I took another hit.

"I should go," Clay said.

"Well say goodbye then," Enner said. "Don't be dramatic."

"Don't get jealous." Clay said. "Enner's might cry if we leave, Josh. Enner's under house arrest. Enner can't cut grass without calling downtown first."

"Shit," Enner said. "Shit ain't it the truth." He pulled a pant leg up and showed the black box strapped to his ankle. "Big brother's got a steamy eye on me."

I shook my head. "No way I'd want someone knowing what I was doing all day."

"I think about taking the DeWalt to it ever now and so."

"Tell him what you did," Clay said. "Tell him like you told me." Enner shifted his eyes from Clay to me. He took a long hit and then coughed for a few seconds.

"No big deal," I said. I was curious, but I didn't like Enner looking so serious, and Clay didn't look so well, his head was getting heavier on his neck, and little sweat beads were sprouting on his forehead even though I was shivering. He took the joint and held it like a tiny paper plane.

“Tell him the story Enner, or I’ll toss it. You got any paint rags around here? Let’s light a fire.”

“It’s no big deal,” I said again.

“That’s all right,” Enner said. “I’ve got no secrets. Clay’s had a long night.” Clay laughed and took another hit.

Enner pointed to two handle straps hanging from the I-beam. They looked like something you’d exercise with but I wasn’t sure. “See those?” He said. “Had a kid come around, twenty-something, maybe older; black guy I was selling some bud to. Now you know me, Josh, I can hold my own against all kinds, blacks, Mexicans, whites, come one come all. But this guy saw me and thought he was real street. Didn’t know your old Enner had some Jiu-jitsu left in these hands.”

“Those hood blacks only know guns, right?” Clay said. He reached over and slapped me on the knee. “Josh, you’re least hood black I know, that’s a compliment, really. I love you, you know that?”

“Am I done here?” Enner said. “I didn’t think I was, but I can be.”

“Keep going,” Clay said, “I just didn’t want Josh to feel out of place. You don’t, right Josh?”

I said I was fine. I don’t think that I was, the weed was slowing everything down and I was feeling stuck, like I was never going to move, and the top of my head felt real big, like it was growing and becoming one with the ceiling. I didn’t want to move and let the house fall down. I said I was fine again and Enner continued.

“Well I had the scales out and was taking my time when this kid puts a piece right here, crown of the head, yes sir, I solemnly do swear.”

“Shit,” I said.

“I ‘bout near did. But he didn’t know old Enner had Jiu-jitsu. You see I’m a pacifist, it’s in my blood. 1972 my old lady drove us up from Richmond to Maryland, we marched against Nixon. Jiu-jitsu is the natural enemy of armed conflict, did you know that?”

“Did you know he was a hippie?” Clay said. “Can you see him dancing in a circle on a hill?”

Enner stood up and made several fast movements with his hands.

“Pow! Just like that I had his gun and this hood rat was just a-shaking in his boots.”

“Bullshit,” I said.

“Go ask Theresa, she heard all the noise and came running down. She had to help me tie him up.”

“You tied him up?” I said. “Theresa, too?” Enner pointed to the straps hanging from the beam. There were two loops in each one, big enough for a fist.

“Tell him how long you had that boy up there for. Take a guess, Josh.”

“Bullshit,” I said. “You’re fucking having me aren’t you?”

Clay got quiet. Enner rubbed his chin and folded his arms.

“I open my home and my green to this man,” Enner said. “Tell him the story of a lifetime and he doesn’t believe me.”

“Josh is a hard man to please,” Clay said. “That’s why he had to go international to find love. Tell him how long you had that boy up on the ropes. He hung for a bit, yeah?”

“Now just wait a minute,” Enner said. “We have to be sure about Josh. Josh this stays down here, right?”

“Aw shit,” Clay said. He sat back up and looked across at me. “I didn’t even think about this. You can’t say nothing, Josh. You know these thugs. You know what they’ll do to you, right?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said. I wanted to leave. Enner walked over and knelt down in front of me. He smelled dry and stale. I sat back as far as I could.

“Tying a young man up is no boy scout task,” he said. “But put a gun to man’s head and stranger things’ll make themselves familiar.”

“Jesus, man” I said.

Clay let out a childlike laugh and I jumped. Enner wheezed and stood up slapping his leg, nearly falling backwards on the television.

“You believed him, Josh,” Clay said. “The same shit. Don’t feel bad, he got me too.”

“Clay near came to Jesus by the time I was done telling that one,” Enner said.

They both laughed for a while and then settled. Clay laid back down on the couch and Enner sat down in front of him on the floor. We watched the ball game for a bit, though by then I felt like I was carrying the sky on the top of my head. It was like I could hear storm clouds and feel a tickle when a satellite passed over. More time passed, and then I started to wonder what the straps on the beam were really for.

“Hope you didn’t mind that, Josh,” Enner said. “We were just having a go, and I did the same to Clay, too.” I smiled at him, I think. I remember looking in his direction. “The truth is I had one hell of a night awhile back. I made quite the fool.”

“Enner put a block through some fuck’s windshield,” Clay said. “Said fuck was fucking around with Theresa at the Mill.”

“Now wait,” Enner said. “There was none of that. This guy was harassing Theresa, that’s all.”

“With his tongue,” Clay said. “Enner the pacifist. You know any hippies who put concrete blocks through homewrecker’s windshields?”

“Clay, you can fuck off,” Enner said. “I mean it, too. Now I’ve said this to you but let me say it to Josh. No one was in the car when it happened. I won’t say much else, but Theresa and I have worked through things before. She’s seen enough of me this summer. I’m man enough to let her have space. And—“ Enner trailed off, and we didn’t say anything for a while.

The Yankees we’re up four-zero, and there was as commercial, and I started to wonder about Joana and how things had gone the past couple of months. The summer had run together, so many days had felt the same, it was like weeks would pass, and I was still on the couch, and Joana somewhere working, or she was home wanting to be somewhere else. Brazil, no doubt, on the beaches of Fortaleza. I’d only been once, three years ago. It was our second anniversary, and Joana had spent years painting Fortaleza in my mind with her own special brush, comparing it to places I could reference. ‘It’s Miami, but not as dirty.’ ‘It’s New York but with more room, and more green.’ ‘It’s like Las Vegas with a culture.’ She spent the whole trip twenty feet ahead of me, moving from one stall or street shop to the next; like she’d never left the city and she was walking the path like she’d done every day.

One night I stood on one of the beaches watching Marta take a picture of Jo, the promenade of balconied hotels right behind her. I had my feet covered by squash-yellow sands and looked towards the tides as they white-capped against the shore. I didn't see what was special, I knew I was in a different world but I felt it all the same. The ocean, Lake St. Clair, The Gulf Coast. I could see how Jo saw the familiarity exceptional, how she saw a different life in her culture, one I wasn't trying too hard to understand. It's why I don't question whether or not people should be taking more Paxil in Brazil, or if the coconuts in Fortaleza open like they should everywhere else. I like what I like. One of my favorite songs in the world Nessun Dorma by Puccini. I know it's part of an opera, but I don't know what it's about or what Nessun Dorma means in the grand scheme, but those last few seconds feel like enough culture to last two lives. I bet if everyone had their own bit of Nessun Dorma no one would need Paxil, but that's just me.

By the sixth inning, things had died down in the basement. I still had a buzz going and remembered I had Jo's coconut in the truck.

"Hey," I said. "You guy's wanna saw open a coconut?"

Enner sat up.

"A what?"

"Jo bought this coconut. I tried to saw it open at home but I can't find my blade."

"A coconut?" Clay said.

"Your carbide blade? The nice craftsman?"

"Yeah."

“I got it. You lent it way back when. Yeah, let’s cut a coconut. Shit, what’s left to do in this miserable life? Go get it,” Enner said. “I’ll meet you upstairs and we’ll dig the table saw out. Clay and I will roll another J and we’ll cut something.”

Outside the temperature dropped. There wasn’t a wind but I could tell there’d be frost in the morning. The coconut felt was frozen, the hairs were brittle.

I waited in the kitchen and poured a glass of water. I set the coconut on the table next to a stack of envelopes. I could hear music coming from upstairs and the TV in the basement. After a few minutes, I went downstairs, and both Enner and Clay we’re asleep on the couch.

I went back upstairs and Theresa was in the kitchen. She was in a nice pair of jeans and a black t-shirt. Her hair was black, too. There was one gray streak towards the front. She had a can of beer and was staring down at the coconut on the table.

“We we’re going to saw it open,” I said. “Enner and I, and Clay.”

“Don’t you crack’em? Like with with a hammer?” she said.

“We tried.”

“With what?”

“A hammer.”

“What else?”

“Just that.”

“Well,” She said. “There’s a machete upstairs. It’s Juan’s cane blade, Enner’s father’s.” She set the can down on the table and looked at her phone and then at me.

“How high are you right now?” she said. I don’t know if I said anything back, but she went by me to go upstairs.

She came back down with a blade that was about the length of my forearm. The steel was wider at the end; on the top, there was what looked like a thick hook a couple inches long. I could see something like it being used in a horror flick, the kind where the teenagers are always half naked and running away from some seven-foot maniac with bad skin.

Theresa picked up the coconut and walked over to the sink. I followed her and then we both realized we didn’t really have a clear idea as to what to do next.

“Why don’t I hold it and you swing,” I said.

“You want to *hold* it?”

I looked at my hands and laughed off the suggestion.

“You could still see it open,” she said.

“Do you have a cutting board?” I asked.

Theresa set the machete down next to the coconut and started looking in one of the lower cabinets.

I picked up the machete. It felt sturdy and the balance felt good. I did a little half swing and then tapped the blade against the shell.

“I might just have a go,” I said.

I looked at Theresa, who was holding her beer. She didn’t look like she had an opinion, but she just could’ve been studying me to see if I had one of my own. Then she walked over, grabbed me by the chin, and looked into my eyes.

“Are you still high?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I don’t think I am.”

The tip of her nail was touching my bottom lip. I was afraid to move at first, and then I laughed, and Theresa laughed.

“It’s your hand,” she said. She walked back over to the table and crossed her arms.

I tucked my thumb under my palm and brought the machete down. It was a light swing but the counter shook and so did my hand. The blade dug in about a quarter-inch. It felt like good progress. I brought the blade down a little harder but only got as far as I did the first time.

“Try turning the nut the other way,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll hit it on the seams.”

I tossed the coconut in the air and caught it, feeling the weight of the liquid inside slosh around and then settle. I gave the whole thing a squeeze and could feel it had lost some rigidity, that it maybe only needed one or two more strikes. I made a little throat noise, something like ‘here goes nothing’, and lined up the blade against the seam. I knew if I missed now, or worse, if I succeeded but followed through the coconut straight to my palm, that the top of my hand would end up on Theresa’s floor. I raised the blade to about chest height. I came down fast. There was a wet ‘pop’ and the whole thing came apart like it was spring-loaded. Theresa and I jumped at the noise and sudden sound of all the water hitting the floor. The two halves bounced around the tile, leaving little brown hairs in their path. I hesitated to count all my fingers even though I knew they were all there.

Theresa picked up both pieces. Right away we both noticed the smell. It was a little eggy, and a little like compost. She set the two halves in the sink and I saw its

mottled flesh, white flecks surrounded by fuzzy black and brown splotches. The skin was mushy, too, so it all looked like snow a big street plow piled up in a parking lot corner.

“How does that feel?” Theresa said. “To almost lose a finger over something like that.”

“I was always in control,” I said. She laughed and started throwing down paper towels to soak up the milk on the floor.

I wrapped the coconut pieces in a plastic bag and was going to share them with Jo when I got home, but when I left Enner’s and the cold air smacked me across the eyes I felt like the best thing to do was just to run back to the Meijer and find another coconut, which is what I did.

I pulled into the garage and tried to think of something to write on the card I got along with the coconut and a bag of plantains. I never had it in me to be sentimental, it wasn’t a strength I possessed. Joana once told me she had an ex-boyfriend who tried to change her mind about the break-up by making little origami flowers with love poems written on the petals. She would find them in her backpack or taped to her locker. She even found one tucked under her windshield wiper one morning, which meant the creep had walked right up to her house while she and her folks were sleeping. She found it romantic, ate it up. I asked her if she took the midnight stalker back and she said she didn’t because she loved getting the flowers so much she thought that if she took him back she wouldn’t get any more surprises.

Lately it hasn’t been difficult to see that I’m burning through any good wick Joana and I have left between us. Sometimes when she cries it’s like time moving twice

as fast, I keep seeing the end of us come at me at an unreal speed, and the only way to slow it down is to leave. Last month, after we fought all day over a job I turned down because of the pay, she went to the bedroom. An hour passed of her crying and I had to leave. I walked into the garage and turned the car on, and I could swear I could still hear her little sobs, and each suck of her breath was like months going by; I just sat there with the engine running, staring out the windshield, wondering how'd easy it'd be to lie still, to let the everything fill with smoke and wait for myself to pass out, and if that might be easier for her and me. I wondered, and when the tips of my fingers started to tingle and my neck became stiff, my whole body felt weightless, like I had just jumped from a high place, but instead of being scared I just felt ashamed. I remember getting out of the car thinking I was either going to drop dead right there or walk into the bedroom and tell Joanna that I loved her, and that if we just held each other for a time that we'd figure out a solution. I went to the door and it was locked. It was the first time she had locked me out of any room. I went into the living room and poured myself some Wild Turkey I couldn't stop feeling sorry for the rest of the day, and I wasn't sure if I was sorry for Joana, for myself, or for not staying in the car.

I put the card in the glove box and went inside with the plantains and coconut. I went to the bedroom and Joanna was laying up in bed watching TV in the dark. I stood at the door and I couldn't tell if she was looking at me or not until she smiled. It startled me because it was a happy smile, like she was glad I was home, which I wasn't expecting.

“Where'd you go?” she said.

“Enner's. I picked up a few things.” I showed her the plantains and the coconut.

“What did you do with the other one?”

“It was bad. It was rotten inside. So I picked up another.”

“From the same place? If you got it from the same place, then it’s probably bad too.” I hadn’t thought of that. The fact that I hadn’t made me angry. I tossed the coconut up the air and caught it.

“Feels better,” I said. “I’m sorry about earlier.”

“It was an accident,” she said. “But hey, I’m going to let my mother buy my ticket. I’m leaving next week.”

I tossed the coconut in the air again.

“That’s great,” I said. “How long?”

“I have three weeks of vacation.” I smiled and blew her kiss. She smiled back and turned the volume up a little louder on the TV.

I went into the kitchen and set the coconut and plantain chips down on the table. On the television in the living room, my spaceship was still orbiting a planet. I laid down on the couch and shut the television off. I spent the better part of the night thinking of anything special I could do for the next week. I wanted to send Jo off in style. But in the back of my mind I knew whatever I did wouldn’t stop whatever was going to happen from happening.

The Oak Tree

Cliff sat on Dew's porch, under the shade of the massive oak tree, pulling the hairs on his forearm. He couldn't remember when they turned white, but he knew recently they'd been black, invisible against his black skin; they had to have been. And then sometime between then and now they'd all turned white. Or maybe one night he went to bed, and whatever was keeping the color there crept out of him while he slept or withered like spent wick. He was seventy-one. All kinds of things were happening to his body at night, things he'd feel in the morning. But this change eluded him. Cliff thought about asking Barbara, his wife, if she noticed, even though he had an idea she'd just tell him he was getting old.

It was sticky hot, late August hot. The Michigan summer was dragging its heels, putting up a fight against the change of seasons, leaving high nineties and triple digit temperature days in its wake.

It was cooler under the oak tree. There was a box fan blowing behind Cliff and Dew, and between the two chairs was a Coleman full of bottled waters, ginger ale, and hard ciders. The two mostly sat. Sometimes they'd listen to a Tiger's game or talk radio if a good signal came through. Dew would volunteer his fresh and critical insight on the topic and, if necessary, bullet point personal deficiencies of the host or caller who whose ideas offered opposition. Cliff participated socratically, nudging his friend one way or

another with questions or impromptu razors, all in good humor. This morning they got a lot of static then about a half hour of Sean Hannity.

Sotomayor can't do no better or worse than a white woman, Dew said. Plus she a southern girl so I don't know what Sean problem is.

She grew up in the Bronx, Cliff said.

She was born in Puerto Rico. What direction you go to get to Puerto Rico?

She said Latina would make her a better judge, don't seem too ethical a thing to say.

Graduating from college makes you a better judge. Read in the paper she went to NYU. Know who dropped out of NYU? Sean Hannity.

So maybe Sean don't really mean she's a race baiter. Maybe at heart its peer jealousy.

Sean Hannity got a fake degree from Jerry Falwell University. Falwell gave Sean Hannity a degree for being Sean Hannity. Plus I heard he named his dog Jim Crow.

You didn't hear that, Cliff said.

Maybe I did, Dew said.

Then the signal dropped and it was just static, which they let run for background noise, another thing you heard if you chose to, like the cicadas or reedy squeal of blue jays. Before Jolene passed, she'd add her hearty voice to the chorus, a little bit of Ella, Billie, or Eartha Kitt would float from the kitchen or rise from the basement where she held voice lessons. That all stopped about four months ago. Cliff missed hearing her, and he could only imagine how Dew felt.

Mr. Donahue came down the street, his old basset hound lagging behind, two strings of foamy slaver dangling prominently out her jowls like a fashion statement. Donahue was wearing his Notre Dame polo and pink Bermuda shorts that came only half down his pale thighs. They were headed towards the park at the end of the street but stopped in front of Dew's yard. The dog squatted on the grass and did its thing.

He ain't going to pick up after that dog, Dew said.

He was right. Mr. Donahue adjusted his Kangol and pulled on the lead when the dog finished.

Pick that up, Dew said. Don't leave that in my yard.

That's not your yard, Donahue said. 'There's a three-foot easement. It's city land.' Then he walked on without another word.

Too hot to be walking a dog anyway, Dew said.

Cliff pulled on his arm hair. Across the street, he saw the bright pink of Barbara's hat coming through the leaves. She had the garden hose out and was spraying the potted cordylines on the deck. Cliff watched as she moved from the cordylines on to the bougainvillea hanging from the pergola. Then Dew grabbed a hard cider and cleared his throat.

I'm being foreclosed, he said.

He was rocking in the chair now, and the runners squeaked like a clutch of crying kittens.

What do you mean about that? Cliff said.

I got tired of paying, Dew said. So I stopped.

You mean you couldn't make the payments?

Could if I wanted to. I don't want to.

And then silence for a few minutes. Then Cliff said: So you giving up the house?

Where you going to stay?

Hell if I'm leaving, Dew said.

Cliff set his ginger ale down so he could lean forward and get a better look at Dew. He stared into the ample trunk of the oak tree. His wide face and high, flat cheekbones—so often a painted canvas of emotion—offered no insight into thought or feeling. If anything, it was stoic in the eyes and hard around the mouth, where Dew's lips pressed together into a thin line.

Cliff cleared his throat. Dew set his unopened bottle of cider back into the Coleman, leaned back in the chair and crossed his arms.

Cliff said nothing more on the subject.

He told Barbara the news that night. She was reading at her desk. She set her glasses down and closed her book.

What's he going to do? She said.

Cliff said he didn't know. He said he wasn't sure if Dew knew either, other than he planned on staying.

He can't stay if he's being foreclosed, Barbara said. He can't stay if doesn't pay.

Well I'm assuming he knows this, Cliff said.

Barbara thought for a few moments. Then she picked up her desk phone and called the Deacon's sister, Gloria, who gave her the office number of her niece, who was

a property lawyer in Ann Arbor. She wrote the number down on a strip of paper and handed it to Cliff.

You should have Dew call in the morning, Barbara said. And figure out what's going on with that man. He's like a box of secrets..

Cliff went to the garage and after grabbing the putter out of his bag lined up half a dozen golf balls on his practice green. He sent each ball well wide of the hole on either side, the last one rolling under the meat freezer never to be seen again. Cliff didn't think Barbara was wrong, but he never considered Dew a secretive man. He told Cliff whenever he was having nightmares about Vietnam; he wouldn't elaborate on the content of those dreams or what he was going to do about having them, but Cliff understood the exertion of the disclosure and respected it. Just as he respected the candid regret Dew had over raising his son in such a tough love manner, and the anger harbored over the boy's unwillingness to forgive him. Cliff understood that, too. He didn't need the finer details of Dew's thoughts, nor would he know what to do with them. But some things were only known after the fact, and rarely from Dew himself. Jolene had been the one to tell Barbara about Dew's prostate cancer scare and about the trip to New Zealand, where he was pall-bearer for a Navy friend who had drowned when his catamaran capsized in the Tasman. And when Jolene died had the heart attack that killed her, Cliff and Barbara only found out the night after, when Dew called from the hospital.

It all happened real quick, he said. I'd have called sooner otherwise.

After that, without the postscripts from Jolene, Cliff knew only what Dew told him, and he never gave much thought about all that was being left out of the conversation; after all, Cliff didn't have much in the way of heavy notices he felt he

needed to share himself. Life was getting less and less involved the older he got. He thought this was the case with Dew.

Cliff walked across the street early in the morning and joined Dew in his kitchen. Blue smoke whorled around the stove stop as Dew fried turkey bacon and poached eggs. Cliff poured a hot coffee and sat at the table by the window while he waited for the right moment to bring up the foreclosure.

If the heat don't let, Dew said, I might have to buy me some pink shorts a la Donahue. Walk around the block showing more leg than a table, showing more meat than a deli.

All that frying you're doing don't help much, Cliff said.

I'm seventy-two and got low cholesterol. I'll commit to a grapefruit and yogurt breakfast when I need to.

Dew filled his plate and joined cliff at the table. They sat quietly for a time, eating, drinking, and looking out the window. Cliff looked towards his house and saw Barbara walking through the garden with her hands on her hips. She disappeared behind one of the oak tree's low branches.

Finally, Cliff took out the slip of paper with the phone number on it and placed it on the table, hoping Dew would get curious.

Go on and say it, Dew said. Whenever you thinking about speaking, your mouth hangs open and you start breathing like a heavy kid.

The foreclosure, Cliff said. What are you going to do about it?

Dew wiped his mouth and said, What's there to do, Cliff? I don't want to pay, and I don't want to leave. Everything I got is here.

Be serious, now, Cliff said. You can't play games over this.

Dew put two pieces of bacon in his mouth and then pushed his plate forward. I'm done playing games, he said. I'm widowed, I'm a veteran, I'm an old jack who's done nothing but played by paying my whole life. They can't tell me I still owe.

Cliff lowered his head and tried finding logic in the scenario. He slid the paper towards the middle of the table. Dew picked it up.

She's a lawyer, Cliff said. Maybe there's another way, I don't know.

Don't see one, Dew said.

Give her a call, anyway. It'll settle my mind if you do.

Dew tucked the number in his wallet and cleared the table. Next time bring something from the garden, he said.

Cliff smiled.

A few days passed. The air had cooled but it still hadn't rained. They were sitting on the porch when a Washtenaw Sherriff cruiser pulled into the driveway. Cliff looked at Dew, who was already standing and tightening his belt.

Cliff recognized the deputy when he stepped out of the car. Tom Hayes was Glenn's son, and Glenn was the Chief at Eastern Michigan when Cliff ran the electrician's shop. All four had played at the charity scramble a few years ago.

Tom walked towards the porch with his thumbs tucked into his belt.

How ya'll doing this morning, he said. Ya'll remember me?

Cliff wanted to tell the boy he didn't need to say ya'll to build a rapport, plus he knew the boy and his family came from Providence out east, where he was sure they didn't say 'ya'll'.

You're Glenn's boy, Dew said. You could drive but had no business holding a putter.

Tom laughed. That's still the truth, he said. I didn't have the patience to read the greens, but I loved cracking it from the tee.

There was a pause Cliff didn't like. Tommy wasn't looking at either of them, but at a place behind and in between them. He pointed at the front door, which had been fluted and carved to resemble two sets of organ pipes.

Dad said you were some kind of carver, he said. You do that? Tom asked.

Dew nodded without turning around. Is there a problem? He said.

Tommy asked to go inside and talk, but Dew sat back down in his rocking chair and folded his arms like an umpire.

Cliff rose. I'll give you two some room, he said.

Sit on down Cliff, I need a witness.

Cliff sat. Tommy kept looking off into space between the two of them.

Well, he said. There's not much to it. I'm going to have to put this notice on your door.

He pulled out a folded sheet of yellow paper.

They usually have us do this in the dead of night, he said. But out of respect to you, I didn't think that was appropriate. Do you know what this notice is?

Cliff leaned forward in his chair. Dew rocked without a word.

It's a notice of sale, Tom said. It's not the move-out date, but once the sale happens, you'll have to vacate.

And what if I don't vacate? Dew said.

Tom looked mazed as he shifted his stance and looked back towards his car.

Well, he said. Two deputies come with a moving crew that the bank sends.

Everything left in the house goes into storage, and if it's not claimed after thirty days, it's sold off at auction.

That's the business of taking, Dew said.

It won't come to that, Cliff said. Now Tom, Dew just needs time, okay. There's no need to do any auctioning of a man's effects.

I don't have the to power to slow anything down, Tom said. I'm here to place this notice on the door. Other arrangements need to go through Mr. Keele's lender.

And I've already spoken to them, Dew said. Yeah I sent them a letter awhile back saying I was done paying and they shouldn't waste time looking for more checks from me.

Tom's radio crackled and a voice on the other end said something unintelligible to Cliff. He looked at Dew who had closed his eyes and gently rocked in the chair.

Tom unfolded the noticed and started towards the front door. He put a foot on the first step of the porch and Dew popped forward in his chair with his hands on his knees.

Just the business of the taking, Dew said. Ain't that right, Tommy?

Cliff felt a prodding feeling in his throat, and talking seemed like the way to soothe it.

Well, he said.

What a dumb thing to say, Cliff thought. Tom folded the notice back up and left it on the porch. Y'all have a nice day, he said, and left.

Dew leaned back and closed his eyes again.

Cliff picked up the notice but didn't open it. He didn't know what to do with it so he set it back down.

I'm tired, Dew said. Real tired.

What now, Dew? Cliff said. This has got real for you.

Dew rose and stretched his arms. He looked at Cliff and said he was going to take a nap and then think about what he might do about the future. He went inside and shut the door, leaving the notice and Cliff on the porch.

Dew picked up the notice again. He didn't want to leave it in the door or on Jolene's rocker, so he put it on his chair and walked across the street back to his house.

The next morning Cliff sat on his deck and watched Barbara talk to Dew on the porch. He was rocking with his arms folded, and through the oak tree's branches it looked like he was doing all the listening and none of the talking. He figured that was good; Barbara taught 8th grade science and had a way of laying things out.

Last night Cliff looked up foreclosure laws on the computer. He didn't understand most of it, but he knew the Notice of Sale was bad news as there wasn't a lot of time left to fix the situation, but there *was* time. Even when the sale happened there was what the website called a redemption period, where a person could pay the arrears and keep the house, or declare bankruptcy and stall eviction for up to a year. He printed all of this out and put it in an envelope. The website also said it took four months of missing payments

to get to the notice of sale. Dew never gave any signs of money trouble. As far as Cliff knew, Dew wasn't a gambler. He had a pension from GM and only one car.

Cliff tossed and turned all that night. He got up to get a drink of water at around three in the morning. He looked out of his kitchen window and saw Dew sitting on the porch under a light. He was staring up at the oak tree, and it looked like was smiling, or maybe grimacing. Cliff didn't know what to think of it so he told Barbara in the morning.

Smiling or not, the man's in pain, she said. It's plain to see.

It wasn't plain to Cliff.

When Barbara came back Cliff handed her a sweaty glass of lemonade and they sat under the pergola and talked.

He ain't right, Barbara said.

How so? Cliff said. You think something's really wrong with him?

He talks like he's clear, but he's acting like he's not living in this world. He still insist on staying.

Well did you give him that envelope? Did he say anything about that?

He said paying would mean admitting he owed. And Cliff, he said he can't even declare bankruptcy because he's got too much money.

Cliff thought he didn't hear Barbara right. He leaned forward.

Jolene's life insurance paid out. He's got enough money to pay, Cliff. He just won't.

Cliff looked over at Dew on his porch. He was reading the newspaper in his chair.

And he won't move? Cliff asked.

Lord, no, Barbara said. He said they'd have to pick him up and carry him out. He said he wasn't going nowhere. I just can't put it together, Cliff.

Barbara's bottom lip quivered. Cliff reached across the table and held his wife's hand. His throat tightened. He got the feeling of wanting to say something again but the feeling didn't give him the words to say.

They went inside, and after Barbara dried her eyes in the bathroom she went to her desk and grabbed her rolodex. Cliff watched her finger through the cards. Because they'd been married for 56 years he didn't ask her what she was doing, he knew any baffling thing his Barbara did would not remain so for long.

After a minute, she stopped flipping through the cards and then looked at Cliff.

I'm going to call Rodney, she said.

Rodney was Dew's son.

Cliff shook his head. Barbara, that might be throwing gas on the fire. Him and his boy...

Barbara didn't say anything. She was looking at Cliff from over the top of her glasses. She sighed, as if to say, *then what else?* Cliff shook his head again. There *was* nothing else, aside from doing nothing, which Cliff did think about. He imagined two deputies dragging Dew out by the arms, or four deputies dragging him out by the arms and legs. It'd be a nightmare.

Call the boy, Cliff said. I'll explain it all to Dew, maybe try to smooth a path.

Cliff brought Dew green tomatoes and summer squash. They were sitting on the porch. First, they talked about the weather, how hot it still was, how glad they were that they

didn't have to work like dogs anymore; those days were gone, good riddance. Then Cliff told Dew that Barbara was calling Rodney, and he tried, as best he could, to explain that they weren't trying to meddle, but that they were worried, very worried.

Dew stared at the tree the whole time Cliff was talking. When Cliff finished, Dew said nothing for half a minute.

Rodney, he said finally. And the way he said it implied he had more to say, but he shook his head. Then he said, If you and Barbara are worried then maybe I should chew on this a little more. But I'll tell you, I can look out damn near every window in this house and see this tree or the shadow it's throwing. That's omnipresence, it's a divine quality.

Cliff made a sound in agreement, but he wasn't sure what Dew was trying to say.

I never understood the divine, Dew said. I picked up on enough with Jolene around, but I got a mechanic's mind. If an engine won't turn, there's a damn long list as to why that may be. You stick to the list long enough you'll find the problem. So I can't wrap my thick head around the idea of explaining a mystery with another mystery. If I can see the problem, I should be able to see what'll make it turn. But I can't.

Well, that's an honest thing to say, Dew, Cliff said. Problems beget a cause, which beget a solution. That's reasonable. Just locate your problem, brother.

Dew laughed and folded his arms. I got no problems that I can see, he said. Unless having is a problem. I've been having things for a long time, been giving, too. But it don't balance out for them. They got to take, and I'm tired of letting them.

You can stop them, Cliff said. You can make all this go away for good, man.

A pair of squirrels sprinted out of the bushes to the right of the porch. They chased each other in tight circles around the yard before bounding up the oak tree. Their scurrying was heard even after they disappeared in the mesh of branch and leaves.

That money ain't for paying, he said. I didn't ask for that money, and I had to pay to get it. And now I got to pay again. I can't explain that. Can't make it turn.

The phone rang inside the house. Dew didn't move from his chair. When it stopped he stood up and grabbed the bag of vegetables Cliff gave him.

That's probably Rodney calling, Dew said. He'll probably call again. Cliff, maybe I'll come around and get tired of being tired. Or maybe I'll buy a boat, get back on the water.

A boat? Cliff said.

Or plane ticket to Tahiti. Or back to Vietnam. But I really don't see myself anywhere but under this tree.

The phone started ringing again, and this time Dew thanked Cliff for the vegetables and went inside.

The next day was the hottest of the summer. They canceled the Tiger's game and opened up a hotline for seniors without central air. Three people had died across the state already, one a young high schooler who collapsed on Twelve Mile after a morning run, and was baked by the blacktop. Brown outs were happening everywhere east of the Huron all the way up to Canton. By ten in the morning, three stray cats and one probable runaway with a collar had sought shelter under the shade of the pergola. Barbara wanted to take fifteen minutes to go out and water the plants and leave several bowls of cream and water for the

cats but Cliff told her to forget about it, let Mother Nature handle the lots. Barbara forced the issue and in the end, a compromised was reached: She half-filled a blue mop bucket with ice and Cliff set the bucket under the pergola. He felt his whole face perspire after just two steps. When he paused to wipe his brow, the cat with the collar made a full sprint for the open door and was through the sunroom and down the hallway before Cliff could even begin to say, You better don't!

After an hour Cliff and Barbara gave up looking and Cliff put a piece of frozen fish on a plate and set it by the door to the garage, hoping to lure it out of the house. Cliff sat sentinel in his recliner and waited. After another hour when the fish had thawed and started to pong a bit, Cliff took the plate into the kitchen to wrap it in foil. As he pulled out the Reynolds Wrap he looked out the window and there stood pink-shortened Mr. Donahue, who was shirtless and covered in sunscreen. He clutched his basset in his arms and looked in the direction of Dew's porch. That's when Cliff saw Dew standing in his doorway. Rodney, his son, a tall, brawny, meaner shade of Dew was pulling boxes out of the back of his SUV and throwing them towards the front door. Through the window, Cliff could faintly hear certain words as Rodney shouted them, old bastard and fool being most often repeated. Dew didn't move from the threshold, even when the boxes knocked against his knees and sailed near his head.

When Rodney was out of boxes, he stood shiny with sweat under the sun in the driveway wagging a finger at his father. Then he got in his car and left, spinning wheels and kicking up loose gravel as he left.

Cliff watched Dew take the boxes and toss them inside the house.

On the phone, Dew said to Cliff: Well, Things started apologetically enough. The boy said he didn't want me to lose the house but was glad to take me in while I sorted things. I told him thank you but that boarding me wouldn't be necessary. We got to talking about that and, well, me and him are too much alike to ever come close to something like amity. As for the boxes, there's a moving truck coming tomorrow, and I'll have some things to put on it but I'm not leaving. If you want to come on over later tonight I'll fry some tomatoes and we can do some packing.

The day melted on and Cliff started to feel dizzy with worry and a deep heavy fear that swung low in his gut. Every step felt like going up a sand dune, so he sat on the sofa watching the weather channel. He didn't want to use the word crazy. When you're thirty or younger you can be crazy and get away with it. Being crazy at that age is paying good money to jump out of an airplane or running naked across a ball park on national television. Losing your mind at seventy isn't an anecdote, it's a diagnosis. It's a broad fuzzy line that makes knowing when you're close or when you've crossed it a difficult thing to recognize until it's done.

Cliff thought about his sister who had Alzheimer's and would call him in a panicked state whenever her children stayed over for more than a night. They're trying to kill me, she'd cry over the phone. I don't know who these negroes think they are, but they're trying to kill me.

Cliff didn't want to use the word crazy, but he didn't know what else to call it.

If it's happening, Barbara said. All we can do is make him safe. Let's go over there and let him know he's loved no matter what.

The heaviness crawled up his gut and spread across his chest. The light in the room turned yellow then orange and finally made the slide into indigo. He heard the wind outside and because it was the first time he'd heard it in so long for a moment he felt like world was falling apart. He grabbed at the bed sheets with a start and from somewhere in the dark of the room the cat let out a long low mew and Cliff was certain the world had surely ended.

He turned on the lights and searched under the bed, in the closet, beneath and inside both nightstands, not a cat in sight.

Barbara was sitting at her desk. She was rubbing her hands when Cliff came into the room.

My hands are singing a song, she said. Might rain tonight.

We need it, Cliff said. I think I'll head over to Dew's. I'll go alone if you don't mind.

Barbara didn't mind. Cliff knew that she knew this was best done man to man. Not that she believed one gender more capable than the other, she'd told Cliff this once. She just understood the import of appearance when long bonds are tested.

Outside the air felt like it'd fallen from high up somewhere. It was crisp, cool and impossible to deduce from it the fatal nature it had just hours before.

A yellow light spilled from Dew's house. The front door was open, and there was an electronic whine coming from inside. Cliff got to the porch and saw that the front door wasn't open but removed from its hinges and placed against one of the living room walls. Sitting next to it was a crooked white pile of wainscoting, which had been pulled from all the walls on the first and second floor. The black cherry handrail was propped in a corner

by the stairs, the vertical supports were still mounted on the stairs treads and looked like an ascending row of fangs.

The whine came from the kitchen. There, Cliff saw Dew taking a power drill to one of the cabinet door hinges. He let the brass screws fall to the tile floor one by one, and when the door dangled by a final screw Dew made no attempt to catch it as it landed with a sharp thwack against the counter before sliding on down to the floor. Dew moved quickly on to the screws on the next door, and then the next, on down the length of the wall.

Cliff felt dreamlike and cotton-mouthed. He stood motionless or so he thought, he must have moved because after the fourth door hit the ground Dew whipped his head in Cliff's direction and jerked with freight. Cliff had never seen Dew afraid, not even for a half moment, and it wasn't that he thought it was impossible for it to happen, he just didn't think he'd ever see it himself.

Cliff didn't have to say anything; he couldn't feel his face or think about what it was doing, as his thoughts were floating above and outside of him, but he saw how Dew looked at him, how any tautness in his friend's face went slack, how wrinkles in his skin spread out like tiny black veins, how his spirit, or some physical representation of such, sunk away like water down a drain.

Dew set the drill on the counter and bent forward with his hands on his knees. He groaned, and Cliff felt the vibration travel through the floor and buzz around his feet.

If you came to take me, you best go on home, Dew said.

Cliff waited. Outside crickets hummed and there was distant barking. If I'm walking across the street by myself, he said. I don't think I'm coming back.

Dew looked up. He stared at the mess around his feet. I can't go, he said. I've been sturdy for too long, he said. I've never felt the ground move beneath me like this. I can't let no one take me.

. The wind moved through the open door and shifted the curtains and chilled the air. Rain tapped on the window outside. The pitter-patter started slowly at first, then receded to nothing. Then it became a downpour.

Dew gathered some of the cabinet doors and moved past Cliff without a word. As he tossed them into a pile by the stairs, Cliff felt he'd been smacked in the eyes. He watched Dew ascend a ladder with a black crowbar and pry the crown molding off the wall.

One last time, Dew, Cliff said. Come on and let's go.

Dew shook his head wearily and then turned around. Cliff did not recognize the eyes staring back at him, they were from someone else, someone who had gotten lost and found himself in a different person. So, when Dew turned back around, Cliff walked out into the rain and never saw Dew again.

Oddly enough, as hurt and as defeated as Cliff felt, he was able to sleep that night. The torrential rain made things easier.

Sometime between four and five in the morning is when the tornado came. Cliff and Barbara woke roughly at the same time, which was after a transformer exploded on the corner of the street, temporarily turning the sky white. The sound of the wind was deafening, like standing between two freight trains as they passed at tremendous speed inches away. When Cliff realized he could not be heard nor hear himself, he grabbed

Barbara's hand, and out of years of memory and a deep survival instinct, he felt his way through the dark hallway and down into the basement. They fell onto the old sofa and clung to each other like terrified children, which all men and women become in the midst of absolute fear.

Cliff ear's popped, and then two of the egress windows at the top of the basement wall shattered, and the flickering shards of glass flung across the room briefly became the only light visible. Cliff could not see Barbara's face, and it was the only thing he wanted and the only thing he ever remembered wanting; the thought of not seeing her again was unbearable, and as the air shrieked to its highest frequency and terror, Cliff's mind, acting out of self-preservation, stopped recording memories. He knew at one moment that he might die seeing only an overwhelming darkness, and then, there was a copper light spilling into the basement. Birds were singing outside. Barbara, still wrapped around him, muttered, Oh God, Cliff, and when the two saw that they both were alive and unharmed, they cried into each other's shoulders.

Outside, the red tinted light bathed the tornado's destruction. To Cliff's left, only the foundation of the Ballmer's ranch house remained. Splinters of brick and wood covered the yard, along with material possessions no longer recognizable. The Ballmers and their two boys were sitting in the grass. On the opposite corner, the Hanford's home had its front façade torn away and spread out into the street, its two dormers resembling hollowed out eyes.

The events of last night hit Cliff like an arrow. Broad leaves covered the siding of Dew's house and branches of the oak tree lay scattered over the yard. The porch had no chairs and the doorway yawned open.

Cliff and Barbara still had their pajamas on when they crossed the street and searched the house for Dew. Water pooled on the first floor, and the piles of wainscoting, molding and cabinetry had all been swept by the force of the wind to one side of the living room. Glass covered the kitchen floor, and upstairs, water dripped down from the ceiling in both of the rooms. They could not find Dew.

Cliff checked the crawlspace with a flashlight. A raccoon and two cubs shivered beneath some duct work when light hit them, but there was no sign anyone had been there over the night. While Barbara called Rodney and the emergency services, Cliff searched around the house and the empty lot behind it, fearing what he might find. There was nothing but scattered debris, some of which were pieces of the rocking chair, but they could not find Dew.

Cliff sat on the porch while the police talked to Rodney and Barbara. His entire body ached and his legs twitched. When the sky cleared and the air warmed, steam rose from everywhere, vaporous tendrils curling up vanishing. Cliff admired the view, and then wept. He felt fear and pity. He thought of the fate Dew may or may not have faced. If he was dead, which seemed likely, he felt responsible. He tried to listen to his insides, which he felt were telling him not to blame himself for other's decisions, but he couldn't believe that, not now. Grief and guilt had already begun to burrow a home in him.

He got up and walked towards the oak tree. It seemed brutal and ugly. He noticed that the ground around the tree had shifted up slightly, the earth had torn, and pieces of

roots reached up like dirty fingers. One of the fingers was much darker than the others. Cliff kicked at it. It was hard. He bent down and grabbed it. It was cold and inorganic. He tried to pull it out of ground but it wouldn't move at first. He tried and tried, and finally, something loosened in the ground and Cliff pulled. Dew's crowbar slowly came out of the dirt. Before it could be completely removed, the claw caught on something, a root surely, Cliff pulled harder only once. When it didn't break free after that, Cliff slid it back into the ground, where the earth slowly swallowed it for good.

Three Dead Men And A Linzer Torte

The committee finds no fault in the dismissal of Erving Boone by Hannett Media Holdings, inc. Boone demonstrated a clear pattern of flagrant insubordination, and made unqualified accusations implying a deep distrust of his peers.

The committee also acknowledges the possibility that Erving Boone, who, at the time of dismissal accumulated nearly twelve years' worth of vacation days (the bulk of those days grandfathered under previous NP Guild CBA) may have suffered a stress-induced catastrophic collapse of mental acuity. This finding has not been attested to by a practicing mental health professional, but is of the opinion of an extra-ordinary subcommittee of intern graduate social critics and assembled for class credit and for the sole purpose of this case.

What follows are the writings and correspondences between Boone, his direct editor, and his managing editor:

Erving,

Was expecting copy of the F4 that hit SE Michigan a few nights back. Double checked with Duggar who confirmed your assignment. Any update?

A. PATTON

—

Asher,

Working on alternate, more acute angle of tornado story. A general summation of events and casualties were found to be inadequate, impersonal. A more suitable synecdoche has been found. I have advised Duggar on the matter.

EB

Erv,

Not sure I follow. You don't have the F4 copy? What do you have?

A. PATTON

Asher,

I have a story. I'll send the WIP

This is the story of three dead men and a Linzer Torte.

One of these dead men is Morgan Tynan Hart, a thirty-four-year-old mortgage lender from Saline, Michigan who is still alive. For fifty-three years, there was a second dead man entombed in the walls of Morgan Hart's office.

This is how the dead man came to be there.

Morgan Hart

Morgan Hart, who is alive, and only wanted to be left alone, was already dead when the tornado swept by his third floor apartment building on the corner of Golfside and Packard Street. His state of death was internal, his soul festered, and, as he told me in one of my many visits with him in the cafeteria of Hawthorn Psychiatric Hospital, he long prayed (so much as an irreligious sociopath can be said to pray) for the fortitude to

die and fester externally. He claimed he wasn't depressed or suicidal in the classical sense. He was not suffering any long-term physical pain; he was not a manic-depressive. He simply did not enjoy life, nor understand why he was a part of it. He hated not like you and I; his hate was a state of being, and despite what many believed he did not derive pleasure from his sadism, he simply no longer knew any other way. He was aware of this, and aware of the complications it brought to his life. So he sought to end it, and yet he couldn't. Physical pain terrified him, swallowing pills seemed childish, a gun made too much of a statement. He simply wanted to depart, to be taken, to blink and no longer be. It should've been easy, but for Morgan it wasn't.

The Washtenaw County tornado was an answer to his prayer, an act of god, if you will.

Or so he thought.

At 4:27 AM Eastern Standard Time, the exact moment the F4 tornado made landfall in an empty field south of I-94 and Ellis Road, Morgan Hart was masturbating. Earlier that day the temperature reached a high of 123 degrees Fahrenheit, and despite repeatedly telling two platinum blonde coeds from building 4A they'd have to be "non compos mentis to risk heatstroke, melanoma, and sexual assault on a day like today", they continued to sunbathe in the courtyard outside his window, bronzing their peachy hairless skin to the color of Oklahoma wheat. Though he was dead, Morgan believed he was a font of practical well-informed advice, and when his assistance went unheeded he became murderously angry, and due to an unfortunate miswiring in Morgan's parasympathetic nerves, anger frequently manifested itself in the form of painful, throbbing erections.

He sat in the dark of his living room vigorously relieving himself when the pounding of rain on the roof abated and gave way to a tremendous roar, shaking the walls of his apartment, and pulling Morgan out of a reverie before he could climax. Further enraged and in pain, Morgan crawled to the window and saw an enormous black mushroom-shaped cloud slowly creeping north, flinging cars, roofs, and flora hundreds of feet into the air, where they appeared like peppercorns swirling in gray brine.

Rather than seek cover, Morgan Hart, fully erect, sought death. Estimating the path of the funnel, Morgan drove his Toyota Corolla south and west towards the high school, where he parked his car at an intersection. There the sky was a deep purple and fist-sized hail fell like terrible manna. Over the trembling treetops, Morgan saw the inky cloud approach. Time slowed, the firma quivered and rose, and when the light was at its darkest, the din receded. The funnel shifted further west.

Morgan followed the black mass without fear (what scares a dead man?), but the closer he got to the funnel the more intensely the air pressure dropped. This lifted his car on its springs, causing it to lose just enough traction to inhibit forward progress, but not enough to lift Morgan off the earth and into a spiraling cloud of bliss and death. As the tornado continued on, Morgan watched as it headed towards the business district. The wash of debris obscured the final path of the tornado, but he was certain it would consume the offices of Brutus-Stern Lending, where he'd worked for nine years..

When the chaos of the storm ended a brief period of stillness followed. Morgan relieved himself to climax, and drove further into town to survey the damage. He was surprised to see his place of employment stood intact; however, he noted that the

building, a classic palazzo inspired two-story, seemed there but not there correctly, as if he was seeing a mirror image of a symmetrical design, the same but not.

What Morgan was seeing was the result of the tornado's might. While it did not flatten the building, the cyclone lifted the structure off its foundations where it then settled three inches further east and four further south.

Inside, papers covered the floor and light fixtures fell from their anchors in the drop ceiling. When Morgan entered his office, an old bank vault, he first noticed the sharp acrid odor, one he described as somewhere between rusty water and road kill. He also noticed a black fissure in the rear of the room. The thin crack started on the floor and then opened wider as it climbed both walls. To the right of Morgan's desk, the vault lining had cracked and fallen away, revealing the upside down remains of a dead man.

Morgan examined the corpse. It wore a stiff to the touch black jacket and fine dust covered its entire body. The mouth was contorted in a grisly snarl and the lips pulled back to reveal a mouthful of ashen teeth with their roots exposed. The dried eye sockets were deep wells of black set in a face stretch tight with desiccation. "I saw prolonged agony in the dead man," Morgan told me. "I rather enjoyed that taste of rare empathy."

Erving,

Duggar has no record of granting permission for your 'acute' angle. We request the immediate copy of the F4 story. We'd like to run it in print and web, so please confirm that you can do that.

P.S. Talk to Patience or Leshchenko if you're interested in doing features. I'd go with Patience; Lesh hates everything suburban. Either way, don't send them this; it's a bit unappealing and tasteless if you don't mind my saying.

—

Asher,

Duggar, as you know, is a notorious liar. I know he is your superior, but do not let him wet your nape with his close breathing.

As stated, this was a work in progress; I have only started to weave the greater concern into the nervous system of this report. THINK SYNECHDOCHE.

Your criticism is valued. Language is the familiar garb fitted over the nude exotic. It provides likeness and a fillip towards greater understanding of the unknown. But should we always favor the *impudens* for the *pudenda*? I will lay her bare for you, Asher.

Your friend,

Erving.

—

Morgan's time at Brutus-Stern was a patchwork of small personal success sewed among large fields of public improprieties. While others took pride in housing families, Morgan understood his role as lender to mean taking advantage of those in need. Most would say being dead was the best condition to meet Morgan. In the manner of Lyndon B. Johnson, Morgan used his tall frame and angular features to bully, leaning over and into those who he spoke to. He contrived at every opportunity to belittle if he believed it gave him a psychological edge. His colleagues impressed that Morgan emitted airs of physical,

mental, and cultural superiority. By his own admission, Morgan excelled at identifying those who were passive and amiable, individuals who either feared or opposed confrontation. On most occasions, he did not have to speak to get his way. When he did, something in the tone, cadence and surely his word choice caused others to defer, if not comply fully. This internal disturbance he caused in others made him a weighty presence and many gave him a wide berth. Nevertheless, every fault of his character was a resource in his profession as a sub-prime loan and mortgage lender.

As the list of those willing to endure his exhausting company shrank, he became more vitriolic during team meetings, scoffing and slamming his fist on the conference table. He grew more withdrawn during business hours, avoided eye contact, and stopped bringing leftovers to work so he would not have to use the microwave in the breakroom. He found himself more tempered in isolation, and though he still hated, and felt himself dying on the inside, he was able to tolerate his condition so long as he was left alone. When Brutus-Stern remodeled, and the vault was no longer used for storage, Morgan happily volunteered to use the space as his office.

Without power to use his office phone, Morgan drove to the Walgreens and demanded to use theirs. He called his branch manager, Sam Karson, not to inquire on his wellbeing, but to know whether or not plans were in place to relocate for business.

He said: “There’s too much to lose if we just shut down, Sam. The McDonald’s on Washtenaw is still open, what does that say about us?”

Karson, who declined to be interviewed, and who Morgan claims suffered from “an idiotic stammer most likely resulting from childhood sexual trauma” said:

“Morgan, I’m dealing...I have... with other issues. It’s good you’re worried about business. But I’m checking in with our employees first.”

“We also have to talk about the vault, Sam. There are issues with the building. Integrity issues.”

“You’re at the office?”

“It’s Monday morning.”

“You really shouldn’t be in there if it’s unsafe, M...Morgan. I...I can’t deal with this now.”

“Clearly,” Morgan said.

The line went dead, and Morgan, insulted, said he briefly fantasized about murdering Sam Karson in front of his wife.

Why would Morgan Hart say such things? Why does he behave in such an abrasive and callous manner? Is it possible to reduce his self-destructive sociopathy into a terse list of life events?

After spending several days with Morgan I have tried to do so:

APRIL 1982, AGE 7 NEAR THE SALINE RIVER, After being caught watching his cousin Claire shaving her legs—

Morgan’s Father: After this prayer, I’m going to hold you under the water.

If you pass out before I count to seventy-seven then we’ll both know

you’re going to Hell and there’s nothing we can do about it.

OCTOBER 1989, AGE 14 IN THE CORN MAZE AT WIARD'S ORCHARD,

On a date with Talitha Loder, two days before she intentionally steps in front of a train—

Talitha: I do like you. I just wished you liked talking to me more and told me I was pretty more often, then maybe I wouldn't have to cry so much.

JULY 1993, AGE 18 IN A HOTEL ROOM IN VIENNA, Moments before losing

his virginity—

Daphne: Careful, this is my favorite corset. Have you ever seen one with so many lattices? Here, hold this. Now *ziehen*—pull. Now take this. Pull. Gut. Now open. Don't be nervous. You are too beautiful to be nervous.

MARCH 1997, AGE 22 DRAKE UNIVERSITY, At dinner with his writing

professor—

Mr. Bruss: Morgan, I've been reading this goddamn play over and over. It's heartbreaking, it's fucking heartbreaking. Do yourself and the world a favor and don't ever stop writing, son. You'll be somebody someday.

AUGUST 1998, AGE 23 BRIAR STREET THEATER, CHICAGO, With the

Chicago police officer who would moments later shoot Cory Muir—

Officer Crisco: I know he's your friend, I want to make sure he'd doesn't hurt himself in there. Give me the key, and we'll both go up there and talk him out of it, you and me. I won't hurt him, you have my word.

JULY 2003, AGE 28 UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN HOSPITAL After his mother's final stroke—

Morgan's Mother: Every time I look at you I see him, I see your father. I should've never let that man inside me. Lord save me if yours is the last face I see.

Later in the afternoon Brutus-Stern Lending had their power restored. Though the building remained empty, Morgan arranged his affairs and prepared himself to meet the day's clients.

When asked why he insisted on working with a dead man in his office, Morgan said, "Gainful employment relieved the worry and boredom of my living death. In the vault, I was protected from the unnecessary generalities of day-to-day interaction. As I festered, I hated more and more. The way people spoke irritated me, the way they walked, the movies they favored and the names they gave their children. I hated what they concerned themselves with, I hated that I concerned myself with them. My only respite was occupation."

Morgan, like a true-blooded capitalist, medicated through work. So when Jon and Chelsea Kozlowski arrived at Brutus-Stern at around 2:30 in the afternoon, Morgan felt at ease. That is until the Kozlowski's noted the scattered mess of loan papers, credit reports and other commerce errata covering the main office area. When Morgan assured them they would be safe in the vault, reminded them of their deadline to close, and implored them to please take a seat or leave and never dream of being homeowners again, they saw the dead man hanging in the wall.

They left at 2:33, calling the emergency services shortly thereafter. Being heavily predisposed throughout the weather-ravaged town, they could only verbally condemn the building by informing the branch manager.

Karson called Morgan and asked if there was a dead man in his office.

“First,” Morgan said, “There’s always been a dead man in my office. Second, you hung up on me. Criminal. Unprofessional. There are people, god help them, who still look up to you.”

“T...This is... You have to leave, Morgan.”

“The dead man should leave. What right has he to my office?”

For the second time that day, Karson ended the call prematurely, and Morgan again imagined murdering the branch manager. He became erect, and relieved himself in the women’s restroom, where the chamomile scented soaps made it easier for him to relax.

—

Erving!

I tried to call. Duggar’s wrath. Help me out here and get me six inches on your **assigned** copy. I’m fighting off the wolves for you. Please do your job.

—

Asher

My apologies, there appears to be miscommunication on your end. Duggar assigned me to cover an act of god, said act rippled through time like vibrations through link chain, the chain is time, the links are irrelevant, the ripple is your story, everything is connected, who am I to parse? To censure? To edit?

You are editor, Asher. Do **Your** job, if you don't mind my saying.

Erving

—

Erving please answer your phone.

A.

—

Norman Petters

To know how a dead man came to find himself inside the walls of a bank, one must know the brief story of Norman Petters.

In 1956, well before Morgan Hart was born, and while our two dead men still lived, Morgan's office at Brutus-Stern Lending was the vault of the National Trust Bank in Pittsfield, Michigan.

The dead man was a porter for cash-strapped mason Norman Petters. Petters, needing work to feed his family and copious gin consumption, wildly underbid his local competitors for the contract to build the National Trust Bank. After winning the bid, Petters was overjoyed, that is until he realized that by quoting so low it would be impossible to cover the cost of raw materials, let alone the labor, transportation, and other miscellaneous incidentals. His workers, protected by the Bricklayers Local #2, were non-fungible. Petters, a man versed in the delicate balance of thrift and gamble, found his economy through two scheming and devilishly unscrupulous means. First, he resorted to buying raw materials of a far lesser quality. Second, when still projected to run over budget, he simply began to use less materials.

No more was this evident than in the construction of the bank's vault. Where diligence demanded an eighteen-inch pour of reinforced concrete around the vault's perimeter, up to a height of eight feet, the mason poured nine inches of unreinforced concrete to a height of seven feet, using fly ash and plaster to make the difference. Additionally, in lieu of a continuous pour, he quite literally cut corners, beginning each pour a foot or so away from the adjoining angles. Altogether, this saved the mason over seven-thousand cubic yards of concrete and over one-thousand pounds of steel; Petters was a shrewd, calculating man.

How then, you may wonder, did the mason get away with his fraudulences? First, know that the art of contracting and swindling is a practice stretching back to our Neolithic ancestors, who, when building huts for the wealthier clans, discovered that the robust rib of a woolly mammoth bore an uncanny resemblance to a less-sturdy, lime covered bough, and one could charge the same weight of meat for the former while using the latter, thus avoiding the risk of being gored, flattened, or fossilized in an unbecoming way. Second, none of vault walls were load-bearing structural supports, and thus their questionable construction did not threaten the building's greater integrity. Third, the mason counted on the near-certain corruptibility of low-level government bureaucrats, and bought off the local building inspector. Lastly, Petters took it upon himself to pour the vault in the blue black of a quiet night, away from the eyes of bricklayers and other tradesmen, relying only on the assistance of one other laborer; a young, eager to please porter—the dead man, Burgess Pratt.

Burgess Pratt

The porter, Burgess Pratt, agreed to abet the mason in exchange for a referral to the Bricklayers Local #2, which would see his weekly wage double. This would ease his own financial burden at home, where he had a mortgage, a ravenous Neapolitan Mastiff, and a duly devoted wife, who loved him nearly as much as she loved her Sears and Roebuck catalogue. Neighbors and friends agreed the Pratts were adorably close, though it is worth noting that a second cousin of Burgess told me in a phone interview the two “would have made a caring pair of friends had they not been so unwise as to get married.”

With the deal agreed, young Pratt found himself over the moon with delight, that is until tragedy befell Norman Petters (you will notice the word “until” is used quite often, and this is appropriate, as these three men suffered greatly from the conjunction of inevitability and change).

Before the referral processed, Petters walked blotto through a job site near the city of Willow Run. On the hunt to collect a gambling debt, Petters walked under a crane whose load had been improperly secured. The crane dropped an eight-hundred pound steel girder ninety-four feet, where it landed only a few feet away from poor Petters. The incident report from that day stated that Petters shouted *Sweet Almighty Eisenhower!* Just seconds before collapsing in the dirt and dying from a heart attack.

The porter, dismayed at his poor fortune, continued his work but not as a part of the Local Bricklayers #2. In time, this placed great stress on his personal financial situation. He couldn't face the embarrassment of losing his house or asking his wife to find work no more than he could ask her to curb her penchant for Westmoreland glass

and General Electric kitchen appliances. Desperate, at the nadir of his life, and driven by unconditional love and mounting debt, Burgess Pratt decided to rob a bank. And what better bank to rob than the National Trust of Pittsfield Michigan, the one whose vault he had built so perfectly poorly. He would need no gun, only cloud cover, a crowbar, a strong rope, and his Craftsman blow-torch.

On a breezy cool night, the porter ascended the service ladder of the National Trust Bank, stood where he stood some few months prior, and used the crowbar to pry away tar and a plywood panel. Beneath the plywood was a false slab of porous concrete. The slab, set in place by the porter at the request of the late mason, gave the appearance of a continuous pour when looked at from above. At eighteen inches square and two inches thick the light slab lifted easily from its mount. Below the slab, where reinforced concrete should have been, was a cool dry emptiness near the corner of the vault, a hollow shaft with just barely enough space to hold a man of reckless measure.

What follows now is conjecture built on this reporter's knowledge of Pratt's ultimate fate, the items in his possession, and the conditions on that night. Let us now presume that:

Concerned with the narrow width of the passage, Pratt hastily tested his ability to fit inside the shaft. This is where the porter would have made his fatal mistake. He failed to tie a rope to any fast point on the roof. In fact, he never took the rope out of his haversack. He held on to the ledge of the shaft with his sturdy hands and lowered himself. His shoulders wedged tight against the course concrete, but he found there was sufficient room to successfully descend and maneuver. As he looked down into the dark crevice, a cold wind gust rolled across the roof, and forced its way into the shaft past the porter. The

high-pressure current stirred fine particulates of fly ash and plaster that quickly ascended into the nose of the aspirant burglar, who sneezed, lost his grip, and fell eight feet into the bottom of the shaft. Halfway down, his right leg jammed itself between the gap of the vault lining and concrete wall. The sudden stop violently snapped his leg in two, immediately severing his femoral artery. Hanging upside down, the porter was exsanguinated in a manner of minutes, buried under a medley of blood, fly ash and plaster.

Burgess was missed, and like all men of mediocrity eventually forgotten.

He was nearly discovered eighteen years later. Receipts obtained show that the owners of the National Trust Bank remodeled in 1974. The paper trail led to a roofing contractor who did remember finding the slab, the rusty crowbar, and the rotted piece of plywood. He assumed another contractor had inspected the site and had passively-aggressively left his tools behind to mark his territory. Assuming this, the contractor said he quoted a price lower than usual, won the bid, and resurfaced the roof as quickly as possible, ensuring maximum profit and the incidental continued neglect of Burgess Pratt.

Until, that is, in late August of 2009, when a tornado descended on Washtenaw County in sleepy black of a tepid night.

I arrived at Brutus-Stern where a municipal stir had its epicenter in Morgan's office. A county sheriff and state forensics investigator augmented the local fire and police units. I first saw Morgan sitting behind his desk, scowling. He told me later he hated their faces, feeling each of them betrayed their standing. He said the fire chief nodded overconfidently at every pointed out detail, as if knowing such and such a thing was

expected out of dead man in a wall. The deputy sheriff's long, sad looking head reminded Morgan of Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters*. He was balding and winced as he walked. The forensics expert was too young to be an expert, Morgan said. "She looked like a feminist, and frequently spoke out of turn."

Morgan, who only wanted to be left alone, realized the comfort of his vault depended on removal of the dead man.

"Cut him out," he said to the deputy. "He's a felon."

"He's compellingly situated," the forensics expert said. She examined the body, focusing on the face and hands. "Preserved like a bog man."

"We can't cut him out," said the fire chief. "The vault's compromised structurally. We start chipping away and the whole thing could come down."

"Well it's a risk I'm willing to take," said Morgan.

"Sir, this isn't a joke," the deputy said.

Morgan laughed. "Clearly it is. This is novelty, news blot fodder. Kitsch."

The forensics expert pulled a locket from the breast pocket of the dead man.

"Compelling," she said.

"Kitsch." Morgan replied.

The fire chief opened the locket. I don't think anyone but myself noticed his reaction to the picture inside. At that time, I was oblivious to the dead man's story, so I took no note of the conversation between the chief and the deputy. I instead watched Morgan approach the forensics expert. He pointed at the body's mangled leg, making a little sawing motion.

“Here,” he said, “is where I’d cut. And then to make it easy, here, here, and here. What would you do doctor? If you are a doctor.”

“Please, sir,” she said meekly.

Morgan tried his best to work, continuing his bizarre diligence and insensitivity to the situation at hand. While the crews took pictures and measurements, carefully peeled at the opening in the wall, and craned their heads at the dead man, Morgan made calls, gritted his teeth, filed credit reports, and disappeared into the bathroom for long stretches at a time.

I later asked the deputy, who wished not to be named, why they allowed Morgan to work in the office alongside them.

“He looked like a fella you could leave lone and be let alone. I could see he was stressed, who wouldn’t be? I’ve seen men on the verge of violence, they have a trance to them, a bug-eyed mania or they’re a blubbering wreck. You sensitize yourself to those cues...Morgan would just look at us every now and then, didn’t seem to have any ill will, and as an officer of the law for more than three decades you feel qualified on these matters.”

At 4:30 Morgan had one last appointment, which he held in earnest and in full view of the authorities as they watched in quiet confusion. An average-looking gormless man entered the vault as a plebian would a gladiatorial arena. Taking in the sight of the dead man hanging in the wall, he paused half way into the room. Morgan clapped his hands twice, and the man came to attention and took a seat in front of him. The man, Malcom Coles, a shift manager at Tim Horton’s, spoke quietly and habitually buttoned

and unbuttoned his cuffs several times during the brief conversation, which was as follows:

Morgan: Hello Malcom, look at me please. Are you ready to close on your mortgage?

Malcom: There are police here.

You must ignore them.

Was there an accident?

Please focus, Malcom. Sign here.

I wasn't expecting this.

How much do you value owning a home, Malcom? How badly do you want this?

I feel very uncomfortable about this. Everyone is staring.

Do you want them to stop? Then you must initial here.

But, this is a different rate than our last meeting.

Your monthly payments will more or less be the same, but you have very poor credit, Malcom.

But these payments aren't what we discussed, either.

Yes, but they will stay more or less the same, Malcom. You will get no better deal anywhere else; I would put your life on that. Initial here.

I don't know if I can afford this.

You can always take out another loan. You have a friend in me, Malcom, but you need to sign here, please; just two more, you're almost done. I'm happy for you.

May I think about this for a moment?

But you've already signed, Malcom.

You said there were two more.

I apologize. Congratulations let me shake your hand. You're going to be a homeowner, Malcom.

After Malcom left, the deputy said: "Mr. Hart, this is an inconvenience for you, I understand. I want to get the body out by this evening. But I need you to go home for the day. If you do that, we can make haste to get out of your way. You've got my word."

"Your word," Morgan said. "Sure. I'll also want a name, badge number, telephone number, and name of your commanding officer."

The deputy let out a resigned sigh and said, "If that's what it takes." He wrote the details down on the back of his business card and handed it to Morgan, who promptly dialed the commanding officer's number to make sure of its authenticity. Satisfied, the deputy escorted Morgan to his car.

Erving,

You're being verbally warned. The paperwork hasn't gone through yet, but I'm letting you know in advance. Please pull your shit together. You're reliable. Let's keep it that way.

I don't understand what you're working on, but if it's something you're devoted to at the moment we can try and find a home for it once it's done.

Also, I don't know what you said to Ash, but you'd do well to apologize.

Lew Duggar

Lew

Asher must learn to callous, to self-cauterize.

I am seeing the danger of institutional restriction in my research. The limits to our work are placed to remind us of our arbitrary nature. Some we choose to respect, but all are immaterial. E.g., I must know I am a journalist through deadlines and copy. But to treat limits as impenetrable, to think of them as physical, is to lose control over your self-signification. I.e., You warn me as a journalist, you insist I apologize as my employer. As Erving Boone, I tell you a dead man can learn to feel no pain if not given what he wants.

Morgan Hart confided in me many things, most of which you have already heard. What you have not heard is that he was a constant scribbler of pithy philosophy. Many of these sayings were incomprehensible if not poetic, and some were the clinical ravings of a mind poisoned by its own thoughts. His persistence was not a total loss. A few lucid words struck a balance between honest suffering and insight into the thin membrane between Morgan's world and ours. I share with you this, written on the back of an unused 'thank you' card from Kroger:

Intelligence is paramount. Not sacrificing it for love, sociability, and humor, is the ultimate sacrifice. To indulge in such things is to endanger certain progress of one's self, and ultimately society. Christ himself sacrificed such things for eternal omniscience and he is worshipped. I only wish to be left alone.

And this, written on a City of Ann Arbor parking ticket he received outside of a Dairy Queen:

Anyone who attacks a man's dignity in front of others should be equally shamed in public, if not killed altogether.

I found one of his most eccentric qualities being his search engine habits. Each day, Morgan made mental notes of words he found intriguing or statements he found suspicious. If he felt unconfident about a thing, he would remember to look it up later. While he was unwilling to directly share the things he searched for, he did lend me his laptop without first clearing the search history. On the day he left Brutus-Stern at the deputy's request, he searched these terms:

“tornado deaths”

“swine flue deaths”

“swine flu deaths”

“define kitsch”

“bog man”

“pain behind the eyes”

“cutting a dead body”

“vivisection”

The Linzer Torte

The next morning, Morgan did not stop to speak to his colleagues, who had returned to work, nor did he stop when Karson called to him from his office. If he had, Morgan might have learned an important fact that may or may not have changed the course of Morgan's death-life. He would have learned that Cathy Santos, who worked part-time for

Brutus-Stern as a data entry clerk, had died in the storm, and that a vigil would take place after nightfall. With this information, Morgan may have planned things more carefully.

Morgan entered the vault and saw an opaque plastic sheet tented off around the dead man. His desk had been pushed to the far side of the room. Because she was barely five feet tall, Morgan didn't see the elderly woman by the tent until she moved. She had a cauliflower crop of thick silver hair and leaned against a walker, staring at the dead man through thick glasses.

Morgan cleared his throat, and she turned. The over-magnified look of her eyes made him titter.

In a working-class northeast accent that Morgan said reminded him of an idling weed-wacker, she asked if he was the owner of the establishment.

"God, no," Morgan said. "That's Karson, he's a fat disappointment."

"Oh," she said, unimpressed, which Morgan found oddly delightful. Morgan introduced himself.

"Morgan," she said. "Like my grandniece. How are you?"

"Do you know the dead man?"

She shrugged. "That's what my Lucas says. Do you know my son, Lucas? He's a fireman or some thing."

This was Loretta Clark, Fire Chief Lucas's mother, who at one point in her life had been Loretta Pratt, the duly devoted wife of the dead man in Morgan's wall.

"My first husband. All this time," she said. "Upside down in a wall."

"Was Burgess a crook?" Morgan asked. "A felon?"

“Well he was as dumb as hammers. But he looked like a young Gary Cooper. And he made me happy.”

On the floor between Loretta and the dead man sat a beautiful pie, decorated with sparkling sugar and a pastry lattice work that reminded Morgan of a trip to Vienna his senior year in high school.

“I thought he ran off,” Loretta said, as if giving directions to the nearest pharmacy. “I was sleeping with the Kennedy boy across the street. I figured he found out and left me. The Kennedy boy was eighteen and a varsity quarterback, but I always figured Burgess would come back, so I made Linzer Torte twice a week for months.”

“Linzer torte,” Morgan repeated, finding joy in the word.

“Lucas told me to bring flowers,” she said, “Flowers die, but turbinado sugar sparkles.”

Loretta turned. She examined the space as one would a garden. Then she asked Morgan what his name was again.

For a time, they both stared at the dead man without speaking.

“If I could put Burgess to rest,” Loretta said, “I’d feel much better about this whole situation.”

“You should take him with you,” Morgan said.

“Lucas said that’ll be a whole procedure.”

“Why?” Morgan asked. “I don’t understand waiting for what you want. I never have.”

“Like the Kennedy boy,” Loretta said. “It’s just in your nature. People won’t care what you understood, Just what you made. That’s why I made pies instead of going to night school.”

Chief Lucas entered the vault and nodded towards Morgan. He lowered the plastic sheet over the wall and walked with his mother out of the room, which took some time with her walker.

Morgan, alone with the dead man again, sat at his desk and mentally composed a list of insults for deputy, targeting his age, line of work, and weight. He called the number on the card the deputy gave him and left a message with his secretary, calling him a pension-seeking queen and an old dog that the union was too afraid to put down.

He then searched these terms on his work computer:

“Linzer torte”

“Turbinado”

“How to dismember a body”

“Gary Cooper”

“Where to buy a Tomohawk”

Erving I don’t have time for this. I have no idea where this story is going; I have no idea why you’ve gone in such a roundabout way of telling it. No one in our target market wants to read about a deviant like Morgan.

Can the story. Take two weeks off. No need to reply.

Duggar

Lew,

You're a man of limits. A limited man. You see boxes. The world is ordered for you, and you wish the world to be ordered. Your story would consist of the little kingdoms you conquer, your family, your kids, Tonya (yes, most of us know about her) all these little dominions you lord over because they are simple, predictable things.

If no one wants to know about Morgan, then no one wants to know about where we are going and the warren of choices we take to get there.

Keep conquering your little things, Lew. No need to reply.

Erving things don't look good. I wish you would call. I think Duggar had a panic attack or something, but now he's going upstairs, probably to ask for your head. If you want to keep your job, please contact me right away. What did you say to him?

Asher

I told him the truth, Asher.

Later that night, Morgan drove to his local Wal Mart, and purchased an 18" tactical tomahawk, rubber gloves, and a blade sharpening stone.

In his office, Morgan sharpened his tomahawk and stared at the plastic sheet covering the dead man. Morgan insists that the plastic sheet was translucent, and that he saw the dead man "as clear as one sees oneself in a mirror." Having seen the sheet

myself, I know this to be untrue. Morgan would have seen a gray waxy shadow, a blurry façade, not a mirror but the tain. If he saw anything clear in the greasy plastic it would have been a projection of his outward self, his mind finally breaking.

Morgan lifted the plastic, and this is where he made his crucial mistake: The Linzer torte still sat on the floor in front of the dead man, and in his haste to removed himself of the body, Morgan kicked the ceremonial pastry aside, where it slid in its pan across the floor and stopped at the threshold of the vault

Morgan set his blade against the dead man's right leg, which was the only anchor keeping the dead man in the wall. Like a batter at the plate, he readied himself by slowly going through the motions. At his first true swing, the blade made a crunching wet sound. The body shifted when Morgan removed the blade, but the leg remained. He swung again, striking lower towards the knee, where he met more resistance. The leg fell at the third swing, and the body of Burgess Pratt rattle onto the vault floor, completing his fifty-three year journey.

I believe this is when Morgan died completely. He has no memory of the events that followed. Witnesses say shortly after they gathered at Brutus-Stern with their small candles to pray and remember Cathy Santos, Sam Karson broke into tears. Not wanting to make an undue scene in front of his employees, Karson entered the building to collect his thoughts and heard the hammering and shouts coming from the vault. Several of the other attendees to the vigil did as well, and when they followed the noise they saw a most grisly scene. Morgan, who only wanted to be left alone, had not stopped attacking the dead man once he'd fallen out of the wall.

Witnesses said Morgan did not react to their horrified cries. This is consistent with Morgan being wholly dead. Karson, being branch manager, and having finally found a reason to dispatch of Morgan Hart, was first to enter the vault. As he did, he sunk his foot into the Linzer torte, slipped, and rolled heavy and forward towards Morgan. Only with Karson at his feet and the tomahawk raised above him did Morgan finally recognize the world around him. I imagine it was like waking from a dream; eyes blurred, awareness fractured. He would have looked out at the watching crowd with sullied vision, seeing the tiny orange lights hovering, disembodied from the short white candles and the hands that held them; he would have watched them back myopically, and perhaps, in that fragile state, before he collapsed exhausted, he would have felt the stinging barbs of humiliation thrust towards him, and he would have felt pain, incredible pain, the pain he had long since feared, and maybe that would have opened a door for him.

Morgan now spends his days under moderate supervision. He says he still feels dead, but that the medication has lessened his desire to no longer exist. He still enjoys being alone, and is only spoken to by medical professionals who either care little for his jibes or find him an interesting psychological curio. When asked what he would like to do most in the world, if he were to ever leave, he paused, and thought for some time. He said he would probably visit Austria, where he would find a village high in the alps facing a cliff, he would read, write, and slowly work up the courage to either live fully or die entirely. He added that he doesn't think this is a reasonable dream, however. He says that any desire to live is coupled with the capacity to suffer, and not just suffer physical pain, which he

now less again, but emotion, internal pain, which he now understands has been foreign to him for far too long. Morgan, who only wants to be left alone, knows wanting to live requires wanting to trust a world he has chosen to leave but cannot. At least not until he is ready.

Perpetual Misery and Practical Jokes

What do I have to remember but my version of the truth, my beginning, my middles, my end.

Before the Big Joke, or the Manhattan Massacre, or whatever you want to call it, the protestors were doing their thing, whatever that was, down in Wall Street. I suppose it was *occupying*, or protesting, if you consider camping in a park a form of protest. I don't. I'm sure there's more to it than acoustic guitars and patchouli, but I've never had the details adequately explained to me. Whatever they were doing it wasn't effective, it was an annoyance, a nice try, but it did put the pin-striped-Brooks-Brothered select on their toes, and with their Tammany sway they put the cops on edge, and everyone else—the drones, the peons, the hustlers and wannabes, everyone from the God damn-let-me-get-a-piece-of-that-pie, to the please-sir-will-you-just-let-me-sit-in-the-chair-while-you-eat-it, all eight million us—well we were all at our breaking point, nerve and hostility swelling each day like hot coffee filled over the brim, only the surface tension of our collected discontent keeping ourselves together. The elbows jostling you in the subway were sharper, change splattered and clanged across countertops with more spite, the shadowy arches of piss lingered longer on building's sides; but this was New York City, there were too many of us for everything to spill over into anything more than hate, the laws of meta-physics wouldn't allow it, and there were no shortages of exits if you'd had enough.

Last week, some deadbeat from Great Neck drove his Cadillac into the family courthouse on Lafayette. He set himself and his dog on fire, and then it was like the wind came and blew away the ashes and the rest of us just kept holding on, doing our business, because what else could we do to keep ourselves from falling apart?

I was holding it together, just barely. Rent was late, and I was staring at a rat. It had positioned itself under the kitchen faucet, and was catching drips of water in its open mouth. The rat had moved in a couple months ago and was proving formidable. Poison, glue, and spring traps we're ineffective. It was a super-rat, and I had begun to worry that if the rat bred we'd be so overrun with hearty rodents there'd be no point in fighting anymore. Given the current state of the city, I thought part of me would welcome our new super-rat overlords.

I held a plastic broom handle and set my sights on spearing the thirsty pest like a jousting knight when I heard Will in the hallway talking to Miah. I hadn't seen him for three weeks. I also hadn't seen Miah for some time. I had a thing for Miah—a strong thing. She was our age (early 20's), also from the Midwest (Toledo), and also came from a family of poor, hardworking minorities. She was the only person we kept in touch with since moving here. Amol and Laksmi moved out to Crown Heights and Leo was somewhere in Staten Island now. We'd met some others, too, but they all drifted further and further out from the city, chased away by rent hikes, rats, or both.

When the door opened, I saw Will's face. The skin around his left eye was plum-colored, ballooning like a bad horror film prosthetic. His lip was red, swollen,

and his The Jesus and Mary Chain shirt he wore had a dried burgundy blood stain covering all of Jim Reid's head.

He picked up late rent notice that had been slipped under the door and as he bent down I saw a bald patch on his crown where a tuft of hair had been torn out.

I asked him what happened.

"Fucking pigs, man. They cleared us out of Zuccotti last night, in full fucking riot gear." He sat down on the couch and unfurled the notice. "You didn't watch the news?" I hadn't, but I had heard the staccato roar of helicopters earlier in the morning.

"You fought cops in riot gear?" I said.

"I wish. It was like 3 a.m., most of us we're passed out. Next thing you know, a line of black and blue tears into us like a fucking combine. We were fucking wheat, man. Didn't have a fucking chance to fight. But we have a plan. A big one." He stared at the notice as if it were a subway map to a foreign city.

"You need to write the rent check today," I said. "I paid your half of the utilities."

"I was worried about you, too, love," he said.

Will leaned forward and held his head in his palms. He looked like a shriveled play on Rodin's *Thinker*. Through his shirt I saw the outline of vertebrae and the curvature of his ribs. He wasn't big to begin with, barely five-six, and part of me was disheartened at the thought of him on the receiving end of a maelstrom of batons and steel-toed boots. I imagined him being dragged by his dirty blond hair up the shallow steps of Zuccotti Park and tossed on to Liberty. I could also see him

screeching anarchist bellicosity and digging his nails into the hands dragging him. My sympathies were guarded.

I sat down at the table and looked out the window. A line of cars exited 495 and branched off. They inched towards 37th and 35th like a slow migrating herd of beasts as seen from above. I believed beyond any scant doubt that no one in any of those cars was concerned about what happened to the protesters. This slightly eased my ambivalence towards Will.

Suddenly, we heard the unmistakable *clack* of a rat trap going off under the sink. I went into the kitchen and opened the cabinet door. The trap was empty, the bait gone. I could hear tiny scratches coming from some distant part of the millwork as the rat made its dastardly escape.

Will went to the bathroom and I could hear the water in the sink running. That was how he bathed now. My mother calls them whore baths. For Will they were just another repudiation of his well-adjusted upbringing. His parents abused him by having decent jobs and sound investments. He was traumatized by vacations to the Gulf Coast and the odd Caribbean cruise. Worst of all, he was maliciously tortured with a six-figure trust fund to use towards a law degree. All this was repressed until we moved to the city and made nice, hardworking friends who had little to show for their labor. They were stressed, but happy enough. But the more Will was immersed in the lifestyles of the middling and nameless the more he changed. Despite never being gaudy he was embarrassed. He stopped studying for the LSAT, dropped out of The New School and transferred to Hunter, then quit that, too. He dabbled in minimum wage employment, started meeting strangers in pop-up

café's and printed political pamphlets at Kinko's by the thousands. I never had money, grew up poor, I wanted to work, to invest what I saved and to prepare for the future. Will thought himself rank and file of some subversive army toppling American Capitalism. It empowered him. He was irrational, but until then I had never thought him capable of endangering his own welfare.

I finished breakfast and went to my room to change for work, and Will came out of the bathroom and went to his. We lived in a narrow studio in Murray Hill, so our rooms were two sides of an old stage curtain we hung from the high ceiling and our doors were salvaged cubicles set on casters. I took my time getting ready, as I wanted to make sure Will didn't collapse and fall into a coma, but of course I also wanted to make sure he wrote the check. I couldn't risk him disappearing again. My phone buzzed with a text message. It was from Miah. It said: "back. Talk soon?"

"Now?" I replied. Her response was a smiley face.

The scent of brown sugar and warm bread hung outside Miah's apartment like a misty welcome curtain. She opened the door, we hugged and her black curls tickled my nose. Her head smelled like vanilla extract and hair relaxer, and even though I'd never done it before, I felt like picking her up and kissing her, cupping the back of her thin thighs and hoisting her up, wrapping her long Caribbean island-girl legs around me and kissing her, moving and spinning until we fell on the couch with me on top of her, still kissing her. None of that happened. I let go and noticed the bare walls and bulging black trash bags lined up against one wall. A blanket stitched in

the pattern of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines lay across the couch. It was the only color in the apartment.

“I made flan,” Miah said. I watched her small brown feet as they moved into the kitchen.

“Are you moving?” I said. My voice was solemn. Hers was too.

“Ya,” she said.

“Where?”

She looked up. Her eyes were deep brown, like mine, where the iris and the pupil seem one. But there was so much light coming into the apartment I could make out the difference for the first time, where the black met the chestnut. Why had I never seen that until now?

“I’m watching a friend’s place,” she said. “Battery Place, real fancy.”

“You’re moving to Battery Place?”

“Fuck no. I’m watching it, let’s do dinner there.”

“You’re moving far, aren’t you?”

“No,” she said. I don’t know, really.”

“You’re moving, but you don’t know where? Do you need a place to stay?”

“No, I just—fuck it,” she said. “Do you want some flan?”

I realized I was still standing awkwardly near the door, some ways from her in the kitchen, but I didn’t move. I didn’t do anything. Was my heart breaking right then and there? Probably not. But if she had asked me if it was I would’ve said yes.

She wrapped the flan in foil and put it on a plate. She walked over and gave it to me. It was heavier than I thought it would be. "It's fucking expensive here," she said. "A real nightmare."

We hugged again, and I got that feeling again, and if there are concrete reasons why I can't look a woman in the eye and tell her that she is not just special, but special to me, intrinsic to my happiness and a persistent affair in my thoughts, I don't know them, and probably never will, which I realize may only be an excuse, but it is all that I have at this point.

She gave me the address and the time and I went back downstairs.

Will was in the kitchen, emptying little packets of animal crackers into a Pringles container. On the table were two Ziploc bags full of Cheerios and three cans of beef and noodle soup. I walked in and set the flan next to his black gym bag. He jumped at the sound. He looked cleaner, but his features were still lumpy and dark, and his left eye still swollen shut.

"Thought you left," he said. I shook my head. It was clear he was preparing another get away, and I sat silently waiting for him to show some redeeming act of responsibility.

"You talk to Miah?" he said. I nodded.

"Did she tell you where she was going?" I said.

Will's left eyebrow furrowed. I "Going where?" he said. "She's moving?"

"You just said you knew."

Will sat at the table shaking his head again.

“What don’t I know?” I asked.

“Nothin, man. Just nothing.”

Just then he got up headed towards his room. “I have something for you, something you’ll like.”

He returned with a grease-stained paper bag. He turned it upside down, spilling its contents, which were six neat bundles of cash. Each stack contained one-hundred dollar bills bound by a red-and-white strip of paper, upon which appeared “\$10,000” three times in a bold font.

He grabbed a stack and began sliding out notes.

I had never seen so much money before. It unsettled me, made me afraid, and of what I don’t know, but after a flash of lightheadedness I felt a rush of adrenaline starting in the middle of my chest and rising to the front of my throat, surging past my jaws and settling somewhere in my inner ear as warm low hum. I wondered if drug dealers and mafia dons felt like this all the time; it would make sense why so many of them never quit until they were dead.

“You can touch it if you want,” Will said.

I didn’t. He set a few bills in front of me, smiling. “Six grand,” he said. “Yours.”

“You don’t owe me that much,” I said. “Eighteen hundred will settle it.” I still didn’t touch the money, though its crisp clean smell was apparent to me now, and it coalesced with the buttery sweet smell of Miah’s flan.

Will scoffed. “Consider it insurance or something, I don’t know.”

“I don’t need insurance, or a handout. Just a check. I don’t have time for this.”

“I can’t.” Will said. “Write a check.”

“Why not?”

Will shrugged his shoulders. He gathered up the rest of the cash. “I’m out of checks. Look, just in case I’m gone, or I forget, ya know. You won’t have to fucking freak out.”

“How long do you plan to be gone?”

“I don’t know. Six grand’s worth, maybe longer.”

He grabbed more cash out of the bag and set it down in front of me. There was a scattering of Benjamin Franklin faces all looking up at me now. Some were upside-down, their faces appeared happier than the others did. “Fine, just fucking leave it there, then,” he said. He was packing his bag when I noticed his hands were shaking. He reached for a can of Pringles and knocked it over. Animal crackers spilled on the floor. Will stared at them, scoffed again, and then kept packing.

“Your first stop should be to a hospital, not wherever it is you’re going.”

“Man, I’ll be fine by tonight,” he said. “Whatever happens in the end, I’ll be fine.”

“What does that mean?” I said.

“Nothin, man. I’ve just got more figured out than you think.”

“You don’t,” I said. “You’ve got real problems, though. But you don’t need me to tell them to you.”

Will nodded with a half smile. His fat lip made the gesture sardonic.

He finished packing, saying nothing. He took the paper bag and stuffed it into a side pocket like an extra pair of socks. It was clear to me then that he was lost, lost in some phantasmal moral crusade. One that would surely bring neither joy or

sadness or completion, just abject misery. Perpetual misery. A practical solution for Will, and maybe all penitent white men. He was casting off the trappings of some self-styled sin, and on his way to the hermitage to don a filthy habit and eat animal crackers while someone's salary lay tucked away in his gym bag. He lived a life I couldn't understand.

I got up and made it to the couch when he said matter-of-factly:

"I forgive you."

I was disarmed, and looked at him blankly.

"I forgive you for being you," he said. "No offence, but you're a goddamn suit. You couldn't give two fucks about *being* happy. You gotta chase it, and rag on people who aren't running with you."

"You've read one Palahniuk book and got it all figured out."

He looked out the window for a few seconds, but I was impatient, so it felt like minutes. "Yeah, maybe I don't. I'll die happy and maybe balls-ass broke. But I won't be as tired as you."

"If you die broke with the head start you've had in life, maybe that's justice, I don't know."

He turned to face me, and in those few moments looking out the window it was like his face had changed again. He no longer looked comical or deformed. He looked resigned, as if he had just seen into his future and knew he could not change the outcome.

"Fucking suit, man," he said softly. It was the last time I spoke to him.

I usually walked the thirty minutes to the office, which was just east of Hudson Yards. But instead I headed north, towards Grand Central, where it was busier and more distracting, and taking the 7 would shave ten minutes off my commute. These were critical minutes, time I wouldn't take to process what I felt as the rapid crumbling of my inner circle.

I walked along 3rd Avenue, keeping my eyes fixed ahead of me, something I'd resisted when moving east. I embraced the visual and sonic whirlwind of the city, always keeping myself swivel-headed, unashamed of any 'tourist' stigma I may have attained in the process; I was a resident of the whirlwind, part of the madness, and had every right to admire. As long as you kept moving, no one cared what you did, or how you looked. The worst thing you can do in this city is get in someone's way, to stop in place and force everyone behind you to adjust. Try telling a ship captain to sail past the Panama Canal and head for the Strait of Magellan. It was no different. Changing your course on account of someone else was unfeasible, an enormous imposition, selfish. So I kept moving, and today I looked only forward, at the shadowless sidewalk and numberless mesh of faces and heads moving towards and away from me, a steady tide, all motivated by the desire for next moment in their lives, which wouldn't come unless they went towards it. In New York City, Einstein's relativity was observable, the future had already happened, but you would never see it unless you passed through it on your own; it was a weighty mathematical principle the city forced upon you, and you either accepted it wholesale, booked a flight back to the soft and slow center of the country, or bought a weekend home in Montauk.

I got off the subway on 34th. The sky beyond the hazy distant figure of the Empire State Building was a slate gray. A taxi pulled up to me on the curb, mistaking the adjustment of my bag for a hail. He laid on the horn and sped off, the tires briefly squealing, as if they, too, had no time to waste.

My mind wandered where it shouldn't have. I wondered what the next few months would look like. I would miss Miah, miss her terribly. I had convinced myself I was playing the long game, waiting until I had my own photo business off the ground, but I knew that wasn't the case, because I couldn't imagine what I'd say or do differently if that happened. I'd always end up in some semi-platonic scenario, shoulder to shoulder in some dimly lit bar, with just enough cash to catch a buzz and a cab back home, where one of our heads would rest on the other's shoulder. We'd part on that same landing, with that same lame-ass hug. I tried to plan for tonight, think of a string of events that would simultaneously lead to an unambiguous display of desire and her deciding to stay. My mind went blank, and I gave up.

I crossed a parking lot to get to 10th street. Up ahead two Hispanic men shouted at each other from the back of a cargo truck. A taller man spoke rapidly, his inflections rising and falling like an inhale and exhale, all while gesturing towards crates of colorful fruits—papayas, pomegranates, and oranges—which sat stacked on the sidewalk near them, waiting to be dollied into a bodega further ahead. The shorter man with the goatee hopped off the tailgate, and grabbed a red crowbar and feigned two swings at the crate while responding in a staccato, percussive dialect that nearly sounded a language all its own. I got closer, and the man swung again,

clipping the top of several pomegranates with enough force to tip a crate over, sending a pack of red spheres rolling down the sidewalk towards me.

I should have kept walking, I always kept walking. Seeing confrontation was no uncommon spectacle, but life is arranged in vast matrices of patterns, always subject to random operators that exist outside of it. As I tried to corral some of the pomegranates with my feet, I shuffled across the sidewalk and bumped into a man who then tripped over the produce, dropping a takeout container as he stumbled a few steps, barely keeping his sagging jeans from falling around his ankles. He caught his balance and looked at his hash browns and omelet that now formed a small pile resembling roadkill offal.

“Brother, that was lunch!”

By reflex, I offered a curt apology and walked ahead trying to ignore the man, who I could see peripherally walking towards me.

“You need to be more than sorry,” he shouted. I continued ahead. I realized the two Hispanic men behind me were quiet. The man shouted again, and feeling him closing in I turned. He was an older black man, thin and bald. He didn’t look homeless, he didn’t look much like anything, his jeans were blue, his sweater plain gray. A ring hung around his neck by a small chain. It could’ve been a class ring, it could have been a cheap trinket bought at a street stall in Times Square.

“Brother, you gon’ knock food out my hand and keep walking?” he said.

“Yes,” I said, and I wondered if this was a conversation I’d be having if I was lighter, my hair straighter. I was not his brother. I turned.

“You right,” he said. “That’s OK. I’ll eat right off the sidewalk. You can take a picture you Tom-fuck.”

I stopped again. When I should have kept on, I stopped. I couldn’t tell if I felt bad for him or for myself. I turned around. The man stood there, his hands by his sides. A couple walking two bulldogs on leashes gave him a wide birth. I walked back towards the man and he folded his arms, appearing to make himself bigger. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my wallet. I only had a ten dollar bill, and briefly thought of asking the man for change. I handed him the cash and apologized again.

“Now see,” he said. “That’s a true brother.” He smiled and extended his hand. As we shook, he looked past me and muttered something. He dropped his head and turned west, back towards the Yards.

“Both on the wall,” A voice behind me said. I didn’t have time to look over my shoulder. A pair of hands brought my wrist behind my head and forced me against a storefront window. The bald man fell in to my right. He was quiet, and looked at his feet while an officer patted him down with heavy slaps. As the same happened to me, I panicked and attempted to face the officer. My head was slammed against the glass.

“Why’d you give your friend money?”

“I didn’t do anything,” I said.

“The fuck you didn’t,” the second officer said. “What’d you pay him for?”

I did my best to explain the situation, even pointing out the overturned carton in the middle of the sidewalk a few yards away.

“Been there all morning,” one of the officers said. The bald man continued to look down. He offered none of the resistance or nerve he’d shown me. As the officer’s hands slid under the front of my slacks, I saw on the other side of the glass a small tax office with five desks, and behind each one a face stared blankly back. Time condensed. The whole morning started and ended just a few moments prior, and at the same time, I vividly recalled being a freshman in high school; Nik Reffit had forcefully pulled a towel from my hand, exposing myself in front of a howling locker room of watching hyenas. Reffit had me in a headlock and was pulling me outside the locker room when I broke free. I lunged and had my hands around his throat as we both fell to the concrete floor, his head making a sound I continued to hear in quiet moments up until my junior year. He convulsed on the floor, and suddenly, I was back on 10th street, pressed against a window, violated, terrified, and innocent. What was this city?

I could see the reflection of the street behind me in the glass, the world moved on, one or two stared but never stopped, my legs were kicked further apart by the officer and I leaned back for balance, and was thrust so hard against the glass I was sure it would shatter under the force.

Then I was turned around. I faced the officer, a flat-faced man with mahogany skin and a trimmed, black beard, the name BURGOS engraved on a tag under his shield. As he interrogated me, he examined my I.D. as if it contained a list of all the evil I’d ever done or would do.

“I work near 29th”

“Doin’ what?”

“Real estate photography.”

“You take real estate pictures on 29th?”

“The office is on 29th.”

“Why’d you hand him cash?”

“As I said earlier—”

“Don’t fucking lie to me.”

“I’m not.”

“What’d he give you when you shook hands?”

“Nothing. We just shook hands.”

“Why?”

I paused. I’d never considered why one man would shake another’s hand, and why should I, I had no interest in kinesics, no desire to scrutinize the numerous social conditions in which a handshake is used as a signifier. I knew the question did not require a simple answer, but it’s implication was nonetheless inane.

“You got no answer?” Burgos said.

“A gesture of gratitude.”

His partner, a fresh-faced ginger, handed a Velcro wallet back to the bald man. The two officers exchanged looks in a way that suggested they’d done so hundreds of times before, a simple nod sounding a retreat or something like it. Burgos handed me my wallet and turned away. I had to ask him for my I.D., which he seemed to forget he was holding. Without turning completely around he handed it back, and then the two crossed the street, taking the time to let a bike courier pass before reaching their squad car.

I quickly walked towards 29th and entered the lobby of my building. I was in the elevator when I noticed an arcing crack in the lens of my camera, a near perfect parabola. It must have happened during the stop, I thought. I took a test photo of the elevator door. The lens failed to focus properly and I had no control over the aperture. It was useless.

“Uh-oh,” a man in a burgundy sports coat said. He looked at my lens before meeting my gaze and half-smiling. “That does not look good. But what do I know? I’m no artist, ha ha.”

I stared at the fractured crescent for ten floors. It was a 2800 dollar lens. I hadn’t finished paying it off. I was late, I’d been frisked over an act of kindness shown to a stranger. What was the universe saying? What would I tell Mr. Gamboa? Would the elevator suddenly plunge 200 feet, and if it did, would I have a few seconds of blissful weightlessness, or would I howl in horror all the way down, my body jellified like a Halloween pumpkin in December upon impact?

The doors opened, and Tammy had me wait in the chair next to the fish tank while Mr. Gamboa finished a call. The tank had no fish, but Tammy kept the filter running for the white noise. Frank came out of his office and pointed at me.

“Two in Chelsea then a big something in Carroll Gardens. You’re late.”

“I have a problem,” I said. I took a deep breath, the morning was coming to me in full, my mind playing catch up. “I cracked my lens,” I said. “Well, not me, the police did.”

“The police? You got another?”

“Yes, not here. It’s not as wide, but It’ll get the job done. I can go back to my place.”

“Forget it. Forget it. Too much going on. Come back tomorrow.” He finished the sentence walking back into his office.

On the way down the an older woman with dark hair and red lipstick entered the elevator. She was on phone, crying and kept repeating, “but they said he was fine,” over and over. When we got to the lobby she didn’t move, and four us squeezed by her without a word.

I walked south several blocks without a destination. The physical world expanded in front of me. I would’ve walked back to the apartment and laid in bed until night, but I didn’t want to take a cab or the subway, I didn’t want to be seen by people.

I walked to Washington Square and watched a jazz trio play near the fountain. I stayed away from the crowd and looked on from afar. They were all grey-haired, and played effortlessly. The bassist never seemed to open his eyes, even between songs. He moved his head from side to side smiling whenever one of his bandmates broke into a solo. I became upset watching them, it was a troubling feeling at first, and then I understood it as envy. I knew nothing of these three old men other than their music, but they seemed attuned to each other in a way I’d almost forgotten was possible. I tried not to linger on any implications, but it was hard.

I sat in a folding chair next to two gray-haired gentlemen siting behind chessboards. I watched them play. I took in the music. Nearby, a young man began to

juggle flaming batons. Not long after, there was a sudden vacuum of sound. The trio stopped, the park patrons hushed, and from under the arch a group of protesters clad in black marched silently through the park. Some wore balaclavas or bandanas. In the front they carried a white banner with black lettering which read: YOU CAN'T SEE THE GLASS CAGE TILL ITS BROKEN. When they reached the center of the park the marchers pulled keys from their pockets and shook them gently like priest's censers. The effect was startling, a high discordant ringing that brought to mind the breaking of glass or a great heap of coins spilling onto tile. Some park patrons shouted encouragingly or whistled.

One of the men playing chess, a black gentlemen in a bowler said to the other, "this is where ash meets water." The other man shrugged. He took off his brown frame glasses and began to clean them.

I groped for meaning in the metaphor and I came up empty handed.

"Sir," I said. "What do you mean?"

"I mean this here," the man in the bowler pointed at the marchers. "Keys, chains, and balaclavas will only messy the water. The police will wrap these knucklechucks up like sandwiches."

The other man nodded. I was still confused.

"If the marchers are the sandwiches then who is the ash and who is the water?" After a pause the man with the glasses placed a hand on my arm.

"Curtis sees the youth before us as both the remnants of something destructive and the potential of something swift. Ultimately, this dialectic of ideological intent will doom your generation. Between you and me, unless

something drastic happens, Curtis and I will be one of the last to think back in time and say 'how quaint, how nice', and think presently and say, 'I'm so glad I don't have to see what happens next.'"

"The knucklechucks," Curtis said.

"You give the rest of us little credit," I said. "Every generation has been moved to protest. You had the beatniks, flowerchildren, and communists."

"And where are they now? What do you think most of them do? I remember flying to Oakland for my cousin's wedding. I skipped the aufruf, ate brownies out of a paper bag with a Korean girl I hardly knew, and woke up dirty in a ravine at the Redwood Regional Park. There were two other women and a man who would later stand in my wedding. Now I'm retired and Curtis and I play chess. Do you see what I'm saying? We never worried. When I was twenty-nine I saw a school bus run over a mother superior. She had fallen in the snow, her habit camouflaged her, everyone screamed but it was too late, it was horrible, I fell into a deep depression, I was impotent for months, but I never worried about the future. I always knew I'd earn a wage, own property, and one day wake up with little to no obligations."

I understood; I did not want to believe him, but I understood.

When the marchers left, the crowd buzzed and conversations continued. The trio played one more song and then quickly packed their gear, and I sensed they were doing so prematurely.

I went to a coffee shop in SoHo and paid too much for a cheese Danish I couldn't finish. At a table next to me, two blonde students conversed over a shared

salad. One described to the other a scene much like the Washington Square protest, but she said it was in Tompkins Square.

“I bet they’re going to try and get back in that park with all the tents,” one said.

“Yeah, or maybe they’ll set themselves on fire, too.”

“Gross.”

“Yeah, but I bet they’d cancel class for a few days.”

“Oh god, I wish.”

“Yeah, me too.”

I thought about the man who’d torched himself. I’d read somewhere that he wrote a letter. What do you say before such an act? It was a premise I couldn’t wrap my head around. I could see Will setting himself on fire, surrounded by cash that smoldered and drifted away in the wind. Will would have written a manifesto. It didn’t occur to me until then that he might have been in one or the other groups of protesters. I thought about the cash sitting on the kitchen table. Is six thousand dollars a suicide note? The Greeks paid their way to afterlife with a pair of coins. I tried to draw parallels between the two, but could not, my mind being distracted.

I met Miah at a luxury apartment condo on the lower west side. It was on the tenth floor, it was furnished to maximize space in all directions, every chair, couch, and table was narrow, flat, and low to the ground. There was a large television mounted on one of the walls, but there were no pictures, trinkets or books, aside from an enormous coffee table print of *Helmut Newton: SUMO*.

Miah poured me a glass of red wine. "You need to catch up," she said. She wasn't drunk, but moved with a limber sway, like one does when they want to be drunk or are nervous. She stirred a large pot in the kitchen which was full of seafood and garlic scents.

"Callaloo," she said. "Taste like fucking home. Real home in the Vincy."

She was wearing dark navy sweatpants and a plaid button-up patterned in pink and black. They hid her slight curves, made her taller. I found this appealing, knowing some part of her she was hiding from others.

"How do you know this friend?" I asked, despite not wanting to know.

"From the Kingston, a regular. He would come in with his daughter and chat real smooth."

"How smooth?" I asked.

"He tipped well. He paid me to watch his little girl, keep the place when he left."

"Not a bad side gig."

"I could have ten side gigs and it still wouldn't be enough to keep me here."

Miah placed a lid on the pot and moved into the living room with her glass of wine. She pressed a button on the stereo and ambient music played softly. It was something like rainforest sounds interspersed with discordant xylophones.

We both stood near the large window looking out over the Hudson. There was a brief shower prior to, and the sky was a ruddy pink and long fingers of clouds stretch out above the sky in Jersey.

"Stunner look, yeah?" Miah said. "Take a picture."

Before I could protest, she lifted herself onto the window sill and unfastened five buttons on her shirt, revealing a chalice-shaped portion of neck, bra, and stomach, that quickly closed as she turned on her side, but I knew then I'd always see it, like the after image of a lightning flash behind closed eyes.

She propped her elbow on the ledge and after placing head in her hand said, "hurry and take it, I can't hold this all night."

"How long can you hold it for?" I said.

"Prick," she said. "Take it."

And so I did, or pretended to. The lens made an ugly grinding sound as it searched for focus. I didn't look at resulting image. I watched Miah button her shirt, which was like watching a beloved pet being euthanized.

We ate at the small hi-top table in the kitchen nook. I was finally starting to feel the wine, and Miah drifted into her more taciturn self. We superficially reminisced about the city, which she spoke of with a contempt I hadn't heard before. We spoke of the Midwest, how we hated early dark nights and the white farm boys who would sell their grandmothers if it gave them a chance to be born again south of the Ohio River.

We took our wines to the couch and flipped through the heavy Newton book, where we came up with mock titles for the most scandalous of photographs. We gave them names satirizing masterpieces, "The Moan of Lisa", "Girl With A Red Bush", "Whistler's Motherfucker." Miah found a small roll of black tape and started placing strips of it over breasts and pelvises. I abstracted the process, and placed tapes over ankles, knuckles, and throats.

“Serge will piss himself,” Miah said, laughing. “And fuck him, right? He’s a knob anyway.” She spat in the book and slammed it shut. It shook the table, and her glass fell to the floor, spilling cabernet into the carpet.

“Yeah, fuck that, too,” she said. She sat back into the couch, and her eyes stared ahead, her mouth was slightly parted and perfect. Her breath was shallow. I leaned towards her and we kissed. Her breath was tannic and warm. She placed a hand on my shoulder and with the slightest bit of pressure pushed me to the side.

“Shit,” she said. It was dark, but I could see she hadn’t moved and was still staring ahead. Outside we heard the roar of several helicopters over the Hudson, they seemed to hover for a time, then headed south. As they receded the trickle of rainwater came from the speaker in the corner.

“Miah,” I said. “Can you be honest with me about something?”

“Honestly, man,” she said. “No.”

“But you can with Will?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

She hesitated.

“Will, like I know he’s not like me or you. He has money. But he’s like me because he’ll do risky shit if he believes it’s right, or even if he believes it’s wrong,”

“He’s only like that because he *has* money. There’s no risk.”

“You only do what makes sense. It’s stiff, you know. Will’s loose.”

“He’s irrational you mean?”

“Sure. That’s why I can tell him things.”

“Pretend,” I said. “Pretend I’m irrational just for a right now.”

“I’ve tried,” she said.

She sighed and her shoulders sank, and in the dark her downward motion looked as though it wouldn’t stop, that all of her would just slough off and fall into the couch.

“We’re gonna catch a cab back to our place,” she said. “And then in a few days I’m going to catch a bus to Flagstaff.”

“What’s in Flagstaff?”

“A vineyard, and a girlfriend from Toledo.”

“That’s it?”

“It’s not here. That’s enough for me.” Miah got up from the couch and stretched. She disappeared into one of the rooms and came back out with a suitcase.

“Should we clean up?” I asked.

“Fuck no,” Miah said.

We headed towards West Street, and near the greenway, we could hear the massive chorus of sirens. Behind us, a fleet of police cruisers roared down Battery south towards the park. Five or six helicopters clustered in the same direction and a few more downtown to the east. Shafts of light moved like long fingers from them. It could have been anything, which is maybe why we didn’t think much of it first. A car chase, a gunfight, another protest we’re all plausible conclusions.

We walked two blocks north without seeing a taxi. Two dozen or so more emergency vehicles raced by, and as we were crossing Rector Street we heard three gunshots. They were unmistakable, three deep, sharp blasts.

I grabbed the back of Miah's arm but she swung it free. She said something I couldn't hear against the thrum of blood in my ears, but her eyes pointed me towards the lone shadow in the middle of the street just a block away. Its shape was uncanny, seemingly both thin and wide, and I was unclear if it was facing us or not until its large head turned. The zebra's flanks shimmered orange from the tungsten street light above it. Its striped neck glistened like wet amber as it trotted towards a trash bin and dipped its head inside.

Further up the street, a second zebra galloped towards us, and chasing it was someone dressed in all black, drifting in and out of the shadows swinging a link of chain from a bike lock.

I tugged on Miah's arm again. It felt dangerous to stay, and as much as I wanted to watch the bigger world fall apart around us, I felt if we stayed we'd fall apart, too.

"Let's go," I said, and I turned back towards where we came, still watching the chainman and the zebra, the former, yelping like an ersatz Hollywood cowboy. They got closer, and the first zebra lifted its head from the trash. It heard the cries and charged. The figure in black didn't react. Maybe he was distracted or just couldn't see the zebra for his camouflage until it was already upon him. They collided at full speed, a linebacker's dream tackle. The chain rattled against a storefront window as the figure sprawled limply to the street and was trampled.

I pulled Miah away and this time she followed. We headed south on West, hearing sirens and peal of helicopter thunder.

“I’m not going back,” Miah said. She had stopped and was taking off her shoes.

“We’re safer off the street,”.

“I’ll walk it, or try Chambers station. But I’m not going back to that place.”

She was calm, and sat on the sidewalk where she put socks on and pulled a pair of gym shoes out of her bag. The Chambers station was a few blocks up, and one or two east, where hell seemed to be rising. Miah didn’t look as though she cared. She tossed her flats into the street and walked ahead. I followed her, looking over my shoulder every five steps, looking at Miah’s face every ten.

We turned left on Trinity when an undulating roar came from a block over. I looked towards Broadway to our right, red and blue lights blinked over a dark parade of running shadows. I had at some point taken hold of Miah’s hand, it was warm and wet, we may have been running, I only remember the barbed-wire fence surrounding the skeleton of an unfinished building to our left and the subway steps just seconds away in front of us. To our right, a group swung chains and bats against the glass of the Liberty Plaza building. An unmounted police horse rounded Courtlandt Street in full sprint; it saw the fence too late, leapt, and howled as it fell back on its withers against a concrete barrier.

There was another cry from Courtlandt, and a beige blur flew low across the street and came to a rest so quickly on top of the horse it felt dreamlike, unbound by physical laws of inertia. The big spotted cat (which the papers would later identify

as an Amur Leopard on loan from the Philadelphia Zoo) dragged its long tongue across the horse's chest and placed its head there. The horse's legs kicked gently, like trotting along some invisible road.

The leopard twitched its ears, yawned, and appeared to watch with disinterest as a small crowd tiptoeing around it to the right or left, then scattering, most running inside Liberty One, where others were coming out with handfuls of clothes and electronic devices.

Miah took a step towards the subway, which was across the street from leopard.

"Don't move," I said. "Wait."

"For what?" she said.

She didn't turn around, she didn't take her eyes off the cat. She walked ahead of me, and didn't seem to be afraid. A helicopter moved overhead and the street was awash with white light, and she just kept walking.

She made it to the steps of the subway, and took a look back towards the Leopard. Their eyes seemed to meet, the leopard's tail swatted at the ground. The horse's head jerked toward the light in the sky, and gently the leopard opened wide its jaw and closed it on the horses' neck, guiding back to the street. And then Miah was gone.

I didn't see her leave, wasn't even sure if she went down the steps. It was painful. Women had walked away from me before, but none had disappeared so quickly. For a moment I pictured Miah at the bottom of the steps, waiting for me. I think I only considered this because I knew this could only be true in an ending

where I was worth waiting for, where I was excitement and surprise, not a statue to rationale, mounted on the sidewalk while everyone moved like water around me.

Miah left the next morning, as she told me in a letter slipped under my door. I read it over a slice of her flan. It was kind, she said she wanted to keep in touch, and said I had soft lips.

The police would come for days and weeks after. They would show me grainy pictures of Will pulled from CCTV footage at the zoo. They would threaten me with aiding and abetting, with jail time and warrants for my phone and computer. Lawyers called, Will's parents made tearful pleas, what did they expect from me? Each time I gave them only what I knew of Will, a detailed history of a close friendship that disintegrated under the pressure of our life in New York.

During NYPD's last visit, which was just shortly before I moved, they showed me a picture of a young man whose skin had been flayed from chest to nose. It could've been Will, I said. There was no way to tell. I gave them permission to go through Will's room. I was packing boxes when I heard several loud whacks. The officers tossed a dead rat into a trash bag.

I will sometimes look at a picture of a pink sunset and imagine a world where I followed her, where I, too stared the leopard down indifferently, where I didn't, out of personal frustration, become one of the many, looting through a Best Buy with a grey cashmere scarf around my face. Where there was no sprinting uptown away

from the sirens with a crowd of thieves like Spanish bull runners. In this world I don't walk the street and give every thin brown woman I see a look of desperation, a look that says if you want unguarded vulnerability from me then just smile and yes, yes, I will give it to you, I will drop everything and see the world for the sad joke that it is.

I try not to imagine this world with much sincerity, as it is far too rational, and lately, I have been trying to embrace the irrational.

In God We Trust

“Which girlfriend you bringing to Spiller’s party?”

“Spiller’s having a party?”

“His retirement party.”

“Spiller’s flamin’ out? That’s what you mean. You don’t retire from firefightin’ after two years.”

“Man, what? Not little Spiller, his old man.”

“Chief Spiller? Chief? Old man Lazarus?”

“Man, you were sitting right next to me. How do you not hear these things?”

“I got distracted. When’s the party?”

“Don’t say that.”

“What? That I got distracted?”

“Distracted. Say you were thinking. Say you were calculating Pi. I don’t ride in the engine with a distracted man, Ain’t that right fellas?”

“Fine. I was thinkin’, then.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I was thinkin’. You happy now? You still think I’ll drop the ladder on you while you’re ten stories up? Hey guys am I free to keep my seat? Am I still in time out?”

“OK. Easy, man, easy.”

“Jesus, why won’t these people move.”

“Pump the revs up a bit. So tell me.”

“What?”

“What were you thinking?”

“Forget it.”

“Don’t be like that, baby. Come on.”

“It’s just Cannarsa didn’t say ‘amen’ after the prayer.”

“What?”

“You know how Cannarsa usually says ‘amen,’ with the Brooklyn *Ahh* like he’s about to eat the podium? *Ahh-men*.”

“So?”

“He hasn’t said it the past three days.”

“He hasn’t said amen in three days?”

“Don’t say it like that. Piss off, man, all right; just all the way off back to wherever.”

“I’m not saying it like anything, just making sure I heard you right.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“What does it mean? Anyone else want to know back there? I want know, let me hear it, baby.”

“Naw, I’m done man. Mother Mary, these people need to get out of the way.”

“Just tailgate’em a little closer. Come on, so Cannarsa hasn’t said ‘amen’ in three days and you were thinking.”

“Look: I’ve known Cannarsa my whole life. Even if Pops wasn’t a firefighter I still woulda been cuz’ a Cannarsa.”

“He’s your brother’s Godfather, right?”

“Kayla’s. Anyway, he’s stopped saying ‘amen’ and he ain’t been at service either.”

“Damn, what he have for breakfast?”

“Forget it, I’m done.”

“Come on, you’re giving the Bloomberg report on this man’s life and I can’t tickle it a bit?”

“You can do whatever, bro.”

“So you think he’s having a mid-life crisis?”

“I think it means somethin’.”

“Well everything means something.”

“I’m saying Cannarsa keeps his computer in the middle of his living room with no password; he keeps his liquor in a padlocked freezer in his *attic*. The kind you gotta pull the string to get the steps down. It’s easier to steal his identity than have a drink at his place.”

“OK.”

“He’s doing all that for Jesus. No temptation, you know? So why’s he not saying ‘amen’ anymore? Why’s he not at service?”

“Stress. Indigestion. Maybe things is funny at home. He’s got six daughters and only two got heads screwed on right.”

“OK, so that’s what I’m thinking, too, ya know, but when a man of God wants to work through something what’s the first thing he’s gonna do?”

“Well if he’s a man a God like you I’d say he’d go the Wagon and tell every NYU honey coming through the door he’s a firefighter.”

“Yeah that’s funny. I really can’t believe how funny you are. I might have to pull over and find my inhaler. Yeah, everybody back there can keep laughing, too.”

“So that’s not true, you’re not a man of God anymore?”

“This isn’t about me. A man like Cannarsa is gonna pray about it. He’s gonna ask God to help him through whatever his problem is.”

“And you don’t think he’s doing that?”

“I don’t know. I just know he’s not saying amen anymore, and he’s not going to service.”

“If you’re that concerned find out the deal.”

“I don’t know. That seems intimate, ya know. Stuff between man and God.”

“So is this Cannarsa thing’s getting under your skin?”

“I can’t tell. You ever have that thing, that something you always sure was there, ya know?”

“You might have to elaborate there.”

“Like that one person you could always walk by on the way to school and you just knew in back of your mind that the day that person wasn’t there was the day they were dead?”

“I can probably say I’ve never had that. I have never, ever had that.”

“Well, there was this old guy named Ezra over in Dyker, he wasn’t all there, ya know, but he wasn’t full on nuts, either; a bunch of the places on 7th would pay him to

wash their storefront windows and water their window flowers and what not. He was harmless.”

“OK.”

“He always wore this orange winter hat, I mean always, and as long as I left the house by seven-thirty I could walk down 83rd and meet him at the exact spot every time, right in front of this fabric store where he’d sweep the little area in the front of the door. He’d wave, and—I think I forgot to say this—he was real southern, real thick accent.”

“What kind?”

“What kind of what?”

“What kind of southern accent?”

“Are you serious right now?”

“The South is a big place. But go on.”

“Unreal. Anyway he’d—and this is every morning, Monday to Friday—say ‘how y’all doin’?’ and wave with this big grin. And we’d say, ‘Good, how you doin’ Ezra?’ And he’d say back, ‘Alrighty now, God, bless ya,’ and it was like that from about third to eighth grade. During the weekend and summer’s we’d maybe see him around town with the orange hat on. I remember losing my hat one winter and Pops came home from the store with an orange hat like his and I wouldn’t wear it. I couldn’t do it, it was like the hat wasn’t mine.”

“And then one day he wasn’t there and was dead.”

“Yes and no. Yes, one day he was gone and I was sure he was dead, and man I was a wreck. I didn’t even realize I’d feel like that. I couldn’t even tell nobody because it was a little odd you know. But I was wreck.”

“But he wasn’t dead.”

“Naw. about a week later he was back. But he didn’t have the orange hat on, and he’d wave but I never heard him say another word again. Not ever. It’s like he went mute. And then the summer between eighth and ninth grade I saw him only once, and then never again.”

“He died.”

“Well, yeah I suppose. But that first time he wasn’t at the corner was like an earthquake. There was a like a shift, you know. For him and me.”

“Why you?”

“I don’t know; I was what, ten, eleven; what do I know about what I was feeling then?”

“This is big for you.”

“It’s God. I mean, if we’re getting’ real, it should be big for everyone. I mean especially in America. *In God We Trust, One Nation Under God*. God’s woven into the dirt, ya know.”

“Church God and American God aren’t the same.”

“How can you say that?”

“*In God We Trust* is put on money.”

“So? It’s the best advertisement for God. Everyone wants money, so it’s like a little reminder.”

“If you need money to know God, I get the feeling God’s not too worried about knowing you. *In God We Trust* means nothing.”

“I thought everything means something.”

“Nothing is something in this scenario.”

“Shit, did you catch that? Turn that up I missed it.”

“Dispatch, say again.”

“That’s us. Lights up.”

“Seven-truck responding to Courthouse car fire, Lafayette, 10-4 K.”

“Possible what?”

“Say again dispatch? Possible suicide? Is this a jumper up or down? On fire *in* the car? 10-4K. Sweet Mary.”

“People losing their minds left and right, now.”

“Car fire suicide? Isn’t there a name for that. Like that thing the Buddhist would do?”

“Self-immolation.”

“Yeah, that’s it. Mary that’s dark.”

“Take Bowery.”

“Yeah, I am.”

“So this Ezra and Cannarsa are like earthquakes?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Cannarsa’s like the ideal guy right? He’s a great Captain—hell, he could be Commissioner, you know, he’s in with all the right people—and he’s got this beautiful classic Sicilian wife, and, four out of the six girls aside, like, the perfect family.”

“Yeah, Cannarsa’s all right. No ones in disagreement there.”

“But if he’s not saying ‘amen’, and he’s not going to service, then maybe things are starting to go bad. And I don’t know if I could stomach it, you know. He’s always there.”

“Maybe the only thing changing is what he believes.”

“What do you mean?”

“As far as I know, Cannarsa shows up to work, keeps the rookies upbeat and old guys in check, takes his job seriously; if the only thing different is his religious routine, then maybe that’s changing.”

“If that’s the case then it’s game over. I mean Cannarsa’s like the department Cardinal. If he loses his faith then it’s game over.”

“I don’t see that way.”

“You’re not catholic.”

“No, but I consider myself a man of a certain faith. I wouldn’t say I follow any close doctrine of one group or another, but I believe in something.”

“No offence, but if you really believed in something then you’d know why Cannarsa not saying ‘amen’ could be a problem.”

“I’m not saying a man not losing his faith is a bad thing. I’m saying letting a man lose his faith be a bad thing for you is a bad thing.”

“It’s a trust thing. It’s community. Church is a family, and when a head of the family starts cracking it trickles down.”

“Maybe. But a trickle isn’t an earthquake.”

“Whatever, man.”

“What? What do you want me to say? That if Cannarsa’s losing his faith, which may not even be happening, that we’d all have to prepare ourselves for a dark night of the soul?”

“Forget it, you’re right, this ain’t about you or anyone else. It’s about me; forget I said anything about this, I mean it. Everyone just forget it, OK.”

“Calm down, baby, I apologize; you know I’m not trying to offend. Look everything means something, so maybe this means something more to you.”

“That’s all I’m saying, I guess. Faith is huge. Cannarsa’s a God man, I’m a God man, at least I try to be, ya know. Even when I don’t want to be, I try to be. Growing up with my family and Cannarsa’s meant even if you didn’t believe in Jesus you knew he was real. But more real than Jesus is Cannarsa’s faith. For me anyway.”

“So him losing faith is you losing faith.”

“I don’t know, I don’t want it to be, but maybe it is. I just know if Cannarsa were to stop saying the prayers in the morning I’d probably die.”

“Jesus this ain’t a car fire, it’s a car bomb.”

“Let’s go fellas, pipe her up.”

“Jesus what is that, fireworks? Everything’s all up in different colors.”

“Seen it before, celluloid I think. Photos.”

“Are there two people in there? Please don’t let it be a kid.”

“Looks like a dog. Keep spraying fellas. Keep those people back.”

“Sweet Mary, the dog, too?”

“I take it back, I’ve never seen a fire burn like this. Never seen these colors.”

“This guy’s stuffed the car with his whole house. Look at that? Guys got gas cans and liquor bottles in there. What is this a Cadillac I can’t even tell anymore?”

“Jesus, this is money.”

“You’re damn right. It’s a CTS V8; this guy set himself alight in a eighty-grand car with his dog.”

“No, I mean look. The car’s full of money. Cash.”

“What? Good lord. Good lord, you cannot be serious.”

“We got to get a screen up, this ain’t right.”

“All that money. Look at all that money.”

“Get those people back! Man, this a sick world.”

“Look at all that money.”

“It’s nothing, man. Come on. It’s nothing.”

“I know it’s just— he’s like swimming in it, that’s somethin’.”

“Yeah, well it’s all goin’ up in smoke so it’s sure as hell nothin’ now.

“I know, I know, but good lord.”