LIFE IN AN AQUARIUM: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

These stories chronicle a host of small dramas and problems people create in their lives in order to avoid facing their true problems. My stories show people who are too consumed by their small, self-inflicted affairs to really experience life. Desire is often the device people use to ignore other problems. In my stories, people desire many things: an identity, a certain fruit, an ideal partner, and to find a soul. They use this desire as an excuse to focus exclusively on achieving that desire. Thus, they ignore other problems in life that deal more specifically with their internal character instead of their want for the external desire. They ignore their inability to make their own choices and forge their own identity, their problems with social alienation, their complete lack of substance or morals, or their own life-restricting and crippling, personal qualities.
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The Beheading of Mr. Broccoli

The members of M.E.A.T. were scattered across the dorm room. Franky and Ryan were mumbling to one another over a flank of lamb in the corner. Laura and Susan were giggling by the sofa while gnawing on spare ribs. Joey was doing his duty as designated chef in the kitchen. He was masterful at his craft—simultaneously frying the lamb with one hand while keeping both eyes on the barbequing ribs. Everyone’s plates were filled with meat and the air smoldered with its blazing scent. Biff carefully observed everybody from his seat on the recliner. His nose twitched and he soaked in pleasure from every whiff of charcoaled rib and sizzling lamb. Biff was 5’4, had flaming red hair, wore thick, black glasses and always had on a shirt with some old metal band logo on the front. Somehow, thanks to his erect posture and constant solemn expression, he still seemed like someone to be taken seriously. He accepted a stack of ribs from Joey, thanked him, and made his way to the makeshift podium, which was really two small end tables stacked one upon another.

“Attention,” Biff said, clearing his throat loudly. “Attention please. I’d like to start this meeting of M.E.A.T.”

The laughter and small talk quieted, leaving only the faint sounds of knives separating flesh against ceramic plates.

“Thank you.” Biff straightened and nodded to the crowd. “Well, I’d like to thank everyone for showing up to our weekly M.E.A.T. meeting—Susan and Laura, thanks for buying the meat this week. Joey, thanks for cooking it. I’ve never met a person who could torch animals quite like you.”
Joey couldn’t help but grin. He, and everyone else, knew it was true.

Biff continued. “Today I have the opportunity to introduce, and perhaps induct, a new member. Franky met this young man in an online chat room and has assured me that his love of meat is admirable and true. Everyone, give a hand for Tim!”

The room filled with the sound of applause and forks being clanked on beer glasses. Franky pushed Tim up to the front of the room. Tim was 6 feet tall and towered over Biff, yet Biff was the one who would catch a person’s eye first. Biff stood out—how could he not with hair that fiery? Tim was the kind of guy who looked so average that no one ever remembered him if they hadn’t seen him in a while. He faded into the woodwork. People consoled Tim by telling him that if he was ever in a police line-up he was set because he wouldn’t register enough for someone to point him out. Biff took his hand and shook it with vigor. “So glad to meet you,” he told Tim. “Always nice to get a new member.”

“Especially because they buy the meat for a month!” Susan yelled and pumped a fist in the air.

“Well,” Biff said, chuckling along with the group. “That too. But, seriously now, Tim I know Franky didn’t tell you much. We like to keep things mysterious until we have the new member in front of the whole group. So, let’s start with any questions you might have.”

“Umm,” Tim said, shifting his weight from foot to foot. “Well, uhhh, I was just told that if I really liked meat as much as I said I did that I should come to this meeting of M.E.A.T.—I don’t even know what that acronym stands for. I was just told that you guys are all nice people who love meat, hate vegetables, and are a cool group to hang
with. It sounded like such a unique identity to have. Plus, I’m new to this college, so I’d love to meet new friends.”

“Very well said,” Biff answered back, patting Tim on the shoulder. “And you have the basic concept straight. We are M.E.A.T.—‘Members Eating Animals Together’—and that’s just what we do. A sort of cult of carnivores if you will. There are nine of us, so far, in this club and we are all dedicated to the ideals that M.E.A.T. stands for.” Biff arched his back to ensure good posture and began his well-rehearsed speech. It had originated from an assignment for his Speech 305 class and, with a bit of editing, had proved to be very effective as an explanation for the purpose of M.E.A.T. “We felt the need to band together in the face of this rising health movement that’s sweeping the nation. We wanted to bond against all the admonishments about ‘un-ethical’ treatment of animals and outrage over what is really the natural cycle of life. So, we created this group about eight months ago. We revel in natural selection and are proud products of Darwinism. Humans are strong, we are born carnivores, and we have earned the genetic right to dominate and eat our lesser friends on this planet. All those P.E.T.A. protests that we see and hear in the news, all those anemic-looking vegetarian celebrities who lecture on talk shows. Don’t even get me started on vegans. Every single one of us here was sick to see it. To see the bad rap meat-eaters are always getting. So, we formed M.E.A.T. in order to bask in the company of decent, natural people, and so that we could get together and celebrate what being the top animal is all about.”

Tim felt a quick pang run through his stomach and wondered how to best keep his secret. He decided that a firm, declarative statement would do the trick. “Wow.” His voice had the credulous quality of all new members. “What an awesome concept. That’s
so cool that you guys are so organized and passionate. I hate all that vegetarian crap too!

I mean, I hate it so much! I haven't even eaten a vegetable in a year!"

"Two," countered Ryan.

"Year and a half," chimed in Laura.

"Twenty-six months," Joey yelled from the kitchen.

"Going on three years." Biff took a bow up front.

Biff pushed up his glasses. "Any questions so far?" he asked Tim.

"Well..." Tim didn't want to seem rude, but it was as if a plate of celery was in the room and everyone was ignoring it. "I hate to ask, but why does the girl in the corner have a dunce cap on?"

"Oh, right. That's Trisha." Biff looked over at Trisha, who was sitting on a stool at the far end of the room with a bright yellow dunce cap on. The yellow clashed badly with her bleached-blonde hair and reinforced the fact that her hair color had come from a bottle. "That's our punishment if we catch you eating vegetables. The criminal spends the next meeting after being caught with the dunce cap and the stool and you aren't allowed to talk or eat." Biff leaned over and muttered under his breath. "She says she was starving and just needed something in her stomach. She was participating in an all-day reading convention and there was only an open salad bar. It's a good thing Laura happened to be at the same convention—Laura caught her green-handed and turned her in." Tim pressed his lips together and tried to look relaxed. He sure didn't want to be the one with the dunce cap on.

"Maybe we should do a quick group confessional for Tim?" Joey yelled from the kitchen. "Just so he knows the way things are usually done."
“Good call Joey!” Biff shouted back. “Tim, usually our punishments aren’t so harsh. This is Trisha’s second week like this and next week she’ll be down-graded to something a little less humiliating, but which will still remind her of her sin. This is because she didn’t reveal her crime in group confessional—Laura had to tell us about it. In group confessional we reveal and repent about the last time we ate a vegetable.” Biff’s eyes scanned the group. “Anyone want to volunteer as an example?”

“Sure.” Ryan stood up. “Hi, my name is Ryan and, as I said a bit earlier, I ate a vegetable two years ago. I was weak and I am sorry. My mother had made vegetarian lasagna for my sister’s birthday and she was just so proud of it that I couldn’t turn it down.”

Ryan sat down and Susan stood up. “Hi, I’m Susan and I ate a vegetable ten months ago. It was on a dare from an old roommate of mine. She knew I didn’t do that sort of thing and she appealed to my pride. I shouldn’t have let my pride persuade me to eat that piece of asparagus. I know I was wrong.”

Biff hung his head and took the next turn. “Hello, my name is Biff. As I mentioned, I ate a vegetable three years ago. I was eating spaghetti alfredo and hadn’t realized that there were finely cut onions in it until two bites in. Eating the onions was purely unintentional, but I understand that I should have checked my food better. That was unforgivable.”

The members of M.E.A.T. clapped in support of the volunteers.

Biff straightened and continued. “Basically, Tim, we have three rules. You come and eat meat with us, you party hard, and you avoid vegetables like the bubonic plague.
Meetings are weekly in my dorm apartment and we take turns buying the meat. Except, if you join, you’ll be taking care of that for the next month.”

“Yeah, all this sounds cool,” Tim said, nodding eagerly. “I would love to…. “

“Oh my God you guys!” Tim was cut off by a flustered Maria who had just stormed into the room. “You’ll never guess what I just saw on campus!”

“Maria,” Biff said, a little surprised at the normally quiet Maria’s entrance. “Meet our new member, Tim.”

“Yeah, yeah, hi Tim.” Maria was catching her breath and smoothing back her tangled, black hair. She had very straight bangs that needed a haircut and were thus always getting in her eyes. “So guys, I have a night class tonight as most of you know. Anyways, so I was leaving campus late and passed by that big, open square near Kieran Hall... you know, the one that’s been under construction lately. Anyway, you know how it used to be just a small lunch wagon? I mean that’s where I bought my Teri Beef plates, and bacon fried rice. Well, now it’s a ‘sustenance square’—a.k.a. vegetarian utopia. They painted it all green and crap and built this huge food bar that serves only greens and organic crap and granola! They put up all these tables with health recommendations printed on them. They’ve turned it into a huge space of hell on campus! Is that what my tuition money is going to?”

The room exploded with a unison shout of “What?” The thought of this health movement, of this unnatural folly against man, moving into the heart of their college campus, was infuriating. How dare these veggie freaks take over such a prominent square on campus—it was practically dead center and very close to both libraries and two big lecture halls. How dare they flaunt their pale-faced agenda of rabbit food for
everyone in such open animosity against meat-eaters. And how dare they take out a perfectly good lunch spot, one that used to sell a ton of meat, and turn it into a crime scene! Sacrilege.

Everyone was shouting and Biff felt dizzy with disgust for a second at the crime that had been committed. He knew he had to take control—he was their elected president after all. “M.E.A.T., calm down!” he shouted at the tumultuous room, waving his short arms in the air. “Calm down!” But everyone was too upset to hear him. In a dramatic gesture, Biff took the ribs off his plate and flung them at the wall. They hit the wall like a slap on the face and slid down near the pile of shoes by the door. The room silenced...mouths agape. No one could believe that Biff had just wasted two entirely good, juicy ribs.

“I’m sorry.” Biff said. He was breathing hard with emotion, his thin chest caving and expanding. “I had to do it. I needed order and it was the only way. I think the ribs would agree that they sacrificed themselves for a good cause. The room was out of control...the last thing we need is campus security being called because of noise complaints.”

The members of M.E.A.T. hung their heads contritely and mumbled their apologies.

Biff was pleased with their instant remorse. “I think we can all agree it’s late now, dark, and that there is no reason to leave our fine dinners and go stampeding over there. No, we’ll finish our meals, have good conversations, have fun, and then go to sleep. Tomorrow is Saturday and campus won’t be crowded. We’ll all meet at the, well I guess
it's the 'sustenance square' now, at noon and case the joint. We'll see how bad the
damage is and then decide what to do about it.”

Everyone nodded their agreement and was soon back to eating and talking. But a
damper had befallen the evening; suddenly the meat tasted tough and dry, and chewing
was forced.

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The damage on campus was bad. Right in the middle of the square was a huge, 6
foot tall stalk of broccoli, who was proudly wearing a sign, which read, “Mr. Broccoli
welcomes you to Sustenance Square.” The fake stalk had a puffy, beaded, green afro
adorning his head, black, glassy eyes that looked dead and soul-less, and a giant, red
painted smile that rose from one edge of the afro to the other. It was hideous. A
monstrosity. Biff cramped over a little as if Mr. Broccoli had kicked him in the gut.

Susan looked as if she might cry. “Hold my hand,” she told Amy. Amy grabbed
Susan’s hand and squeezed it blue.

Franky was pounding his chest as if to jump-start his heart and Joey’s legs gave
out—he sat down abruptly on the ground, blank-faced.

Maria shook her head; her face filled with renewed agony. “I told you all,” she
couldn’t help but say through ground teeth.

“This is such, such…” Biff stumbled for the words, “such a disgrace. Such an
admonishment in our faces. This is all because that stupid P.E.A. club has the student
association president in it. And that rich guy’s kid. The one that owns Central Bank.
Look what these money-whores have done! They’re buying peoples’ souls.”
Tim leaned over and whispered to Trisha, whose dunce cap had been replaced by a button on her shirt, which said *Repenting Vege-head*. “Biff has such passion! He’s such an inspiration. I’m glad he’s our leader.”

“Yeah,” Trisha whispered back. “We thought he’d be best for the job because he’s a speech major and all. You should see him when he thinks no one’s looking—he struts around practicing his posture and mouthing the correct ways to enunciate things. But it works because we all think he speaks well and that gives M.E.A.T. a rather distinguished air.”

Laura had moved closer to the repugnant broccoli stalk and reached out a finger to touch it. She quickly recoiled from the touch and sobbed. “I can’t believe it’s really there! The foam feels like dead skin!”

The members of M.E.A.T. stared glumly at Mr. Broccoli. His dark, red smile seemed to smirk and Biff imagined that it was dyed with their blood.

Being their leader, Biff knew he had to be strong. “Don’t worry,” he soothed as best as he could. “This won’t go unpunished. We’ll do something.” His hands clenched into tight fists. “We’ll make our own statement.”

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The week went by and the Sustenance Square was a hit. Every day it brimmed with students and faculty and the organic apple juice flowed. Roughage was everywhere. Students peered at the nutritional information on the tables and would exclaim, “did you know a Big Mac has thirty-five grams of fat? But a salad with vinaigrette sauce has only six?” Then they would warmly slap one another on the back for having made the right choice and raise forkfuls of lettuce and tomatoes into the air. Mr. Broccoli watched it all
with his glassy eyes and grinned extravagantly at his success. The Sustenance Square bustled happily, unaware of a small, dorm apartment at the very edge of campus where revenge was being plotted.

"We need to make a statement," Biff told the M.E.A.T. members. "One that really strikes to the core. One that damages the spirit of that veggie-loving Sodom and Gomorrah so badly that all those wives of Lot can never go back." Biff had been raised a fundamentalist Protestant and had a tendency to lapse into religious analogies when he was feeling especially passionate.

The group looked hopeful; Biff's zeal was inspiring. "Do you have an idea?"

Ryan asked.

"Yes. I think it's pretty clear what the symbol of all that vegetable worship is. Thus the answer is obvious: we must behead Mr. Broccoli. Think about what a statement that will make. Their little version of the golden calf slaughtered."

"I love it!" Amy wailed in excitement.

"Totally rocks, dude." Franky yelled, slamming his hand on the dining table in agreement.

"Ummm, won't we get in trouble?" Tim squeaked from near the front of the room.

"No way. Where's your conviction?" Biff hesitated for a second. "Actually, it's good that you asked, Tim, because this situation especially concerns you."

Tim's mouth opened in surprise, but he remained silent.

Biff moved towards Tim and put a hand on his shoulder. "You see, buddy. We always have a little initiation for new members. Usually they have to go to one of the
P.E.A. members’ apartments—that’s the stupid vegetarian club, they couldn’t even think of an acronym for ‘veggie’ or anything—and leave a brown paper bag full of steaming, hot steak. Don’t worry...we buy the kind on special that expires that day. Or sometimes we make new members pour barbeque sauce over the car windshield of someone in P.E.A.. We’ve all done it—this club started with three members, Trisha, Ryan, and I, and we did the initiation too. But you have the chance for a unique honor. Very prestigious. I want you to be the one to behead Mr. Broccoli. When you do that, you’ll be a full and accepted member of M.E.A.T.—and for your bravery and commitment I’ll even nix your month of meat duty.”

Tim looked a little pale and his freckles stood out. He started to tap his fingers against his leg. “Biff, wow. I mean, that is a colossal honor. I can’t believe you’d put such a statement into the hands of a newbie; I mean I haven’t earned that honor. This is a huge deal. Shouldn’t someone who’s been really committed and here from the start get that privilege?”

“Tim, your words speak true,” Biff struck his most regal pose. “But I feel you’re speaking them in anxiety and fear. Sure, I could give this job to anyone here—but I already know what being a carnivore means to them. I already know their dedication to the devouring of lesser animals. I want tangible proof of yours, Tim. This is a really close group. I would trust any one of these guys with my last piece of sirloin. If there was only one cow left in the entire world I know that they would do the right thing...and eat it. Tim, we just want to trust you as much. We offer a chance for you to realize your full potential. For you to solidify an identity with us. We just want you to be part of the
group. Join us Tim. There's a camaraderie in M.E.A.T. that you don't want to miss out on."

Tim looked at that room filled with these could-be friends. They did seem so close to each other—and Tim hadn't had a real friend since he had moved from California. And, man, he did love meat. It revitalized your blood or something. Brought a flush to your cheeks. But he was nervous. Tim knew he could get in a lot of trouble by going along with their idea and there was still his secret to consider. He didn't want them to know that there was a certain vegetable he sometimes liked. He had denounced them so clearly in his first meeting that he felt he would be shunned to reveal that now. He did hate vegetables—but he had a weakness for Beef-Broccoli dishes. In fact, he ate Beef-Broccoli once a month.

Tim pictured the Beef-Broccoli dish he had two weeks ago at his parents' house. His mom going, *I cooked it just for you since you like it so much,* and his dad saying, with pride, *I'm so glad you have an open mind about food. Not like that sister of yours. Look at this dish! It's the best of both worlds!* Tim felt a block of guilt building in the back of his throat and quickly tried to gulp it down. He shouldn't feel so culpable, after all it was the only time, and the only form, in which he could stomach a vegetable. But cooked that particular way—broccoli was really good. Tim didn't want these guys to catch on... he had to prove he could be as dedicated and extreme as they were. He really wanted to be like them. He knew if he accepted this duty that he would instantly win admiration and be absolved from future suspicion. He had to do it. His social life counted on it.

"Okay," Tim said, squaring his shoulders. "I'll do it. I'll behead Mr. Broccoli!"
The plan to behead that repugnant, overgrown stalk of broccoli quickly became the obsession of M.E.A.T.—and their ideas became more and more extravagant. Joey volunteered a bottle of ketchup to pour over the beheaded stump of Mr. Broccoli for visual effect. Amy suggested stabbing forks around the bloody neck and into the fallen head to represent how vegetarians slaughtered vegetables. Franky loved that idea of turning the cruelty table on health nuts and decided that he would laminate photos of brutally beaten and slain vegetables. He created one with a tomato cut in half, oozing its juicy guts and seeds out, and he photo-shopped a face of intense pain and suffering onto the tomato. Joey pointed out that a tomato was technically a fruit, but Franky defended himself by saying most people thought it could go either way. In another, he juxtaposed a picture of a field bursting full of eggplants brimming with ripe fullness next to a picture of that same field emptied with only broken dirt and small pieces of torn leaves left. Franky made copies and laminated these photos—he was going to put them over the nutritional information on the tables.

Biff oversaw everything. He ordered Ryan to buy latex gloves from the drug store and resolved that the big night would be this coming Sunday. That way no one would notice in time to stop the Monday crowd of oblivious college students coming in for bean-sprouts and bran-bagels. It would be perfect. Biff was going to hide on the third floor of Kieran Hall and use his zoom lens to take pictures of their horrified faces. Everything was set. The statement was going to be made at three in the morning this Sunday.
On Sunday M.E.A.T. gathered at Biff’s apartment to prepare for their mission. Everyone was so pumped and full of vigor. Amy was doing push-ups on the floor to use up some energy and keep herself from exploding. Biff gathered them into a circle.

“M.E.A.T., our time has come. A time to strike a name for this group. To cement our identity. I think we should sing our club song for extra motivation.”

M.E.A.T. had been so busy with preparations for vandalizing the sustenance square that no one had told Tim about the club song. He tried his best to mouth along as they sang:

We will fight for our right to eat the animals
We will never partake in wicked vegetables.
No animal is off limits—they don’t even know how to talk!
As punishment for that we will fry them in our wok!
Broil them, fry them, even barbeque
Grill them, boil them, turn them into stew.
For we are M.E.A.T. and we reserve our right to...
EAT!

Tim could hardly pay attention as they sang—he was getting very nervous. The closest he had ever come to breaking the law was jaywalking across the one-way, extremely low-traffic street that his parents’ house resided on. The closest he had ever come to property damage was when he was eight and accidentally rode his bike into the neighbor’s mailbox. It was slightly crooked after that and he had cried so hard in pain and guilt that the neighbors had made him cookies and bought him milk. Plus Tim just didn’t have any, well, anger inside of him. It took anger, or passion, or something that
Tim didn’t have to wield a knife into a neck—even a fake one. Usually Tim just felt indecisive and lost. But Tim really wanted to be a part of this group. They were so energetic, full of enthusiasm, and, well, *cool*. They were all the things that Tim wanted to be. He wanted to feel their kind of passion. Tim knew he had a problem figuring out his own character in life—it was why he still hadn’t picked a major even though he was a second-year senior. But this was perfect because if he could just do this task he could take on their identity. And by doing that he would know exactly how to act and what to believe in because M.E.A.T. would figure out all those messy details out for him. This was his chance—Tim could feel that with each swallow he took of Joey’s tender roast.

Man, that guy had a talent. He should have been majoring in culinary arts instead of accounting. Tim cut another piece of roast and felt a pang of regret for the Beef-Broccoli of his youth. Sure, he had loved it growing up, but really, Tim tried to assure himself, it was just the oyster sauce that made the broccoli taste so good.

“Tim?”

“Huh? What?” Tim broke from his thoughts as Biff held out latex gloves to him.

“Tonight’s the night, man.” Biff was dressed in all black—except for the Nike swoosh on the left of his shirt. He hadn’t been able to find an entirely black shirt and had been too busy to buy one. “Let’s go do this Tim. Let’s go show those vege-heads what we think about their attempt to infiltrate campus.”

Tim took the gloves. He hated how latex gloves smelled…and that white powder they left on your hands. But he knew he had to be tough—like an overcooked steak. So, Tim shrugged his shoulders in strained nonchalance and said, “I’m ready, Biff. What are we waiting for?”
M.E.A.T. made their way to the Sustenance Square on campus. They passed no one else on their way and the only sounds to be heard were the toads croaking and the wind blowing. Tim began wringing his hands as they neared the square. He took deep breaths and wiped the sweat from his nose and upper lip. In his hand he held the knife that he was to use to cut Mr. Broccoli's neck. The broccoli stalk was made out of some kind of dense foam—but the knife was sharp and long. It would do what was necessary. They reached the square and the group stopped to give one last, appraising look at the foulness of the area. Maria had brought red paint to cover the painted decorations of dancing celery and carrots that adorned the food booths. Tim gripped the knife tightly and prayed for a storm to sweep in. Or even for campus security to come by. But the night remained theirs alone and the moon's light seemed to rest upon and highlight Mr. Broccoli above all else.

Biff rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “M.E.A.T.—let's get to work.”

Franky immediately began taping on his pictures of the tortured vegetables while Maria happily painted over a dancing celery. Ryan was spray painting the ground with “If we're not supposed to eat meat—then why does it taste so good?” and “You might not eat animals—but your ancestors did.” Amy began sticking forks under the area where Tim should have been cutting and Joey held his ketchup bottle and stared at Tim.

“What's going on man?” Joey asked. “This is supposed to be an in-and-out job. Get to it.”
Tim looked at Joey. The guy had seemed so friendly at the meetings—always laughing away behind the grill. But now his face seemed set in harsh lines and his eyes were cold.

Biff turned around from breaking the carrots that he was leaving on the walkway.

“Trouble, Tim?” Biff queried.

“No, I mean yes, I mean no.” Tim took a step forward and re-wiped at his nose. “I mean, I’m getting right on it.”

Tim walked until he was face to face with Mr. Broccoli. Tim was 6 feet tall and stood almost eye-to-eye with the black marbles. Almost, because Mr. Broccoli’s eyes were disproportionately low on his face considering his height. Tim raised the knife to Mr. Broccoli’s neck...right above the four forks that Amy had jabbed into his foam skin. Tim recalled about when he was seven and had watched some school kids throwing rocks at a cat. They had kept laughing and saying that if they killed it they could sell it to the old Chinese man down the street to put in his store. Tim remembered being so disturbed by that incident and saddened by the cruelty of kids. But cruelty didn’t stop with being a kid. Sure, Mr. Broccoli was a fake piece of dense foam, but what kind of animal even pretended to behead something? Why was he holding a butcher knife on a college campus? And why was it raised to a green neck? Tim’s hand wavered. He darted his eyes around. Everyone had stopped or finished and was now staring at him.

“Do it.” Biff whispered.

Tim looked back at Mr. Broccoli, at his own hand raised to this neck, at the moonlight shining off of the knife.

“You can do it.” Biff spoke louder.
Tim thought about how when he was eleven his older sister had declared that she was going to be a vegetarian. She then told Tim he should do the same rather than continue to be a murderer. His parents had shushed her and sent her to her room. His parents were originally from Texas and probably had more red meat in their bodies than water. They had told him it was okay to eat animals because that was the way of the world. The way God intended. That his sister was entitled to her opinion, because everyone should be, but that her opinion shouldn’t affect him. They said everything was on earth to sustain humans. His parents had loved everything edible...including vegetables. Tim remembered how he had requested for his mom to make Beef-Broccoli for his twelfth birthday. The thought of those crunchy, little stalks...

“What’s taking you so long Tim?” Biff began moving towards him. “Just cut that monstrous vegetable down. Are you scared? We’re all taking a risk here. They’ll never know who did this.”

“Maybe...” Tim started to stammer. “Maybe everyone is entitled to their own opinion?”

“What?” Biff’s face scrunched in disgust. “What are you saying? Are you a veggie lover?”

“No, no!” Tim put his hand with the knife down. “I’m just saying—what does it matter if they like vegetables? We don’t have to.”

“Veggie-lover!” Biff spat the derogatory term at Tim’s face and grabbed the knife from his hand. Biff pushed Tim down and, in one great arc, slashed at Mr. Broccoli’s neck. The knife jammed half-way and Biff slashed again and again until the head tumbled to the ground. He kicked Mr. Broccoli’s head and stomped on it with one black
boot. Joey rushed up and squirted ketchup all over the stump and out of Mr. Broccoli’s mouth—which now, upside down, was a freakish frown. The head had rolled till it was across from Tim, who was lying on the ground, and the dead, open eyes stared at him. Tim gazed into those dark pools and took a stiff breath because the moonlight lit them in such a way that they appeared to have pupils.

“I’m sorry,” Tim whispered to the open eyes.

“You should be!” Biff yelled and spat on the ground. “All the members of M.E.A.T.—let’s get out of here!”

Biff and M.E.A.T. ran off towards the dorms hollering with adrenaline.

Tim rolled over on his back, closed his eyes, and let his body sigh.

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The next morning a crowd gathered at Sustenance Square. They were shocked and appalled to see that such vicious undertakings had occurred. One sensitive, willowy vegetarian almost fainted at the sight of Mr. Broccoli’s cut head. A freckle-faced one holding carrot juice went up to the headless body and cried. The gatherers were too busy mourning their way of life to hear the click and whirr of a camera shutter from three stories up. Or to notice that three or four people at the very edge of the crowd seemed to be smirking.

“We’ll rebuild this!” One vegetarian took a stand in front of the crowd. “We’ll heal this like a torn crop. It’ll be bigger and better than before—and with security!”

The smirking and the camera clicks stopped.
While the crowd was being reinvigorated at Sustenance Square Tim sat, alone, in his kitchen. He was preparing a meal to eat while chatting online. Tim placed the plate in front of him, took a deep breath, and bit into the broccoli, carrots, and cauliflower that he had bought from the store an hour ago and steamed on the stove. He had jabbed tiny pieces of each with his fork and was slowly closing his mouth around them. It accompanied the pork chops that he had fried up earlier. His throat constricted a little at first and his eyes watered a bit, but after a while the food found its way down. *This isn’t so bad,* Tim thought. *And I chose to do this on my own.*

Tim was hoping to start a new page in his life. Turn a new leaf. As he cruised the chat rooms and websites online he felt stronger than ever before. He could figure out his own life; his own individuality. He didn’t need dumb, over-bearing, angry meat-eaters to tell him what to do. Tim continued searching and thought about what *he* wanted.

“Well, we should all be delighted to have a possible new member joining us today. Everyone, I would like to introduce you to Tim!” The leader of P.E.A. joined her group in applauding loudly.

“Tim, we are P.E.A.—the Protecting Every Animal group. Usually we would give you a full explanation of what we stand for and what we do, but you’ve joined us at an interesting time. We have some—vengeance—that needs to be taken care of and time is of the utmost importance.”

“Don’t worry,” Tim told the group in a solid, confident voice. He wasn’t worried about his “secret,” or anything, at the moment. “I think I know what’s going on.”
Misunderstood Mango

If man’s, and the world’s, downfall began with the apple, then Lucy’s certainly began with the mango. The mango is a much sweeter, juicer fruit and, seemingly, a more acceptable response to temptation so Lucy can hardly be blamed. The tangy, sugary flow from the first bite is enough to easily hook an addiction that could rival that of our more well known nemesis. But here is an offering that won’t linger in your clothes for up to a week in a way that makes many want to set the fire alarms off and evacuate. Here is an offering that won’t pollute the air or stain your teeth yellow. No, its symptoms are much more subtle...and the desires built from the mango are much more dangerous in their intensity and ability to fester deep in a mind until ripe enough for action. Indeed, the mango may be the driving force behind many, but for now we will focus on its effects on little Lucy.

Lucy was born a happy child who, quite unfortunately, had a coloring similar to a ripe Hayden mango. It seems she was marked since birth to this inexplicable tie that would compose and configure her life forever. Her skin, an orangey-yellow due to a mild form of jaundice, required Lucy to be baked twice a day in early morning and mid afternoon sun. She was born in early June and her neighbor, from three doors up, had a mango tree in full bloom. Lucy had the privilege, or in this case torture, of living in the land of Kaimuki—home of the most luscious and sought after mangoes on Oahu...or anywhere really. But there was something particularly potent about this tree. The intoxicating scent would flow in through the open windows, warmed by the gentle sun’s
rays, and inflame within Lucy a desire that she was too young and unaware of to know or act upon.

Growing up, Lucy would catch a whiff of that sublime scent every late May to early August without ever knowing what it was that caused such an immediate reaction to her sensory glands. Her nostrils would widen as much as possible to allow the full extent in, her heart would patter with wonderment, her skin would feel a tiny itch just below where a person could scratch from that feeling of wanting something, but not knowing what. As with Pavlov’s dogs, salivation became the response to the mango’s cruel conditioner. Lucy’s mother had an intense aversion to mango, as some do—perhaps those who know true evil in all its disguises and forms. Lucy’s mother would break out in wretched rashes at the mere touch of a mango. Thus no mango ever entered the Longhen property in any way or form. Her mother had formed an early hatred of that sweet devil and had banned the word from her lips before grade school had even been completed. So Lucy grew in want, inflamed, and never knowing why.

Lucy’s first encounter with the mango was at the age of six. She discovered that it was the root of her one true early-childhood angst. While kept fulfilled and sated with warm milk, endless cheerio necklaces, and multi-colored Gummi-Bears, she knew the one missing link. The mango. It was so close, only three houses in a direction her mother had never walked, but also the proverbial so far. Her playmates down the street had been telling her wonderful tales of that magical mango and its exhilarating effects. Apparently their mothers had kept them quite well in a mango supply. But no, they told her, that is not the point. The point was that the mango tree up the street was the mango
to be had. It was the only one that would do. The godfather of all mangos. There they were, entrapped within their overgrown and fenced garden of Eden.

Why, six-year old Lucy asked in all the innocence of those who haven’t yet gotten, and lost, a taste of their true desire, don’t you just eat that mango? What is so good about just that one anyway?

The other children laughed like cynical and jaded old pros. The poor girl. She didn’t know. That mango tree was one of a kind and produced the elixir of all mangos. The Holy Grail. There was none like it. A mad professor from the local university had once lived there. He spent all his days combining plants, grafting barks, playing with chemicals, and creating what was never meant to be. Out of it came that mango tree. A creation earth should have never seen for its bewitching aura and mind-altering offspring. Of course this is an embellishment upon their limited words to impress a more actual and descriptive depiction of what was meant, but the feeling, no matter the words, was understood. It must be that one, they said. It is the best. Unfortunately for our dear Lucy it was also, apparently, unobtainable. The old lady who lived there guarded it like a hound...and with a hound. They had tasted the forbidden fruit on occasion from when one would fall stray and somehow land in the street. Even dented and dirtied the truth of it was undeniable; it was a thing made by the gods.

It was then the thought entered their growing minds with a devious intensity far beyond their years. Why not get this newcomer to do our dirty work? Go get the mango, they dared her. Get it and don’t get caught. We dare you. We double dare you. Think how good, just think how extremely good it will be.
Lucy had no chance. How do you deny your fate? She and the mango were destined to meet.

Lucy crept up the street towards the old lady’s house. With each step her nose twitched a little more, her eyes watered with their hunger. Lucy had never walked up the street. Her mother told her bad things lived up the street that could hurt and destroy curious little girls. Lucy had had a little fluff of a cat when she was four. She loved its teeny, black eyes and the way its tongue would scrape her finger. One day the cat disappeared altogether. Her mother had said it was because the cat had gone up the street.

And here she was, up the street, and in front of the most magnificent sight she had ever seen. It was mostly hidden by the house next door and you could only see a splatter of leaves until you were almost upon it, but then, two more steps past that three-story monstrosity, there it was. Golden, glowing fruit. Bristly, green leaves drooping down as if trying to touch her. A snarled and twisted old trunk that looked like many a person had been captured in it. Those delectable mangos, dangling delicately on the tiniest little strands, but wholly out of Lucy’s reach.

A leaf blew down and grazed her cheek.

The wind ruffled the tree so that the mangos swayed back and forth, back and forth—taunting her slowly.

Lucy, hypnotized by their melodic movements, never stood a chance.

There was a wire fence wrapped securely around the property, but Lucy was little for her age, and she could see a tiny tear in one corner that was almost hidden by a pile of
rocks and old leaves. She proceeded to that tear and squirmed her small body through the opening. Lucy was in. The tree was fifteen feet away. The dog was twenty.

Lucy was frozen in a stealth position—her little hands open, ready to grab, her knees bent, ready to run, and her mouth agape, ready to either scream or take a gnashing bite into whatever mango she could grab. But the dog. The dog was a massive mountain of sweaty black fur, slavering yellow teeth, and glaring red eyes. Lucy couldn’t breathe, even her curls shook of their own volition as she and the dog stared at each other. Could she make it to the tree, back, and then over the fence? Could she?

Lucy had a feeling the answer was no.

The dog had begun a low snarl that made Lucy think of the jets that flew over her elementary school. That reverberating, encompassing noise that for an instant trembled done to the bones and then disappeared. Except, this time it continued...and it was growing louder.

The moment had come. The first lesson in life.

Lucy made a run for the tree, her little legs pumping faster than she had ever tried to move them before, her tiny arms swinging like propellers. The dog hesitated for a moment, as if he hadn’t thought for a second that she would have had the guts, and then he was on the move. He ran for an interception and was blocking her connection to the tree...to the mango...to the fiery fruit that flamed Lucy’s dreams.

Lucy had a choice in that instant. And she chose life. A life which would continue with a burning, internal pain, but without the certainly promised external one of that mammoth, black beast.
She ran for the fence. She could feel his spit fly onto her leg. She could feel the humid, rank breath. And then, as she was climbing through the hole with one limb still dangling out, she felt the blazing tear, the intense fire of her flesh ripping and of her blood scorching the wound. It was not the dog that had caught her, but the jagged fence. But it didn’t matter, the gash was there either way and Lucy’s desire had been tempered, for now, by the manifestation of this physical pain, one which finally did not clutch at her heart or taste buds. It was a powerful sensation, strong enough to still the mango... for the time being.

Lucy was never quite the same. Her smile now only twitched at the edges with half a dimple showing instead of pulling up towards her eyes. She would sometimes wander up the street to gaze longingly at the magnificent bundle of collaged leaves and luminous mangos. But her will had been broken by blood and fear. The old lady had installed a new fence with thick metal wiring and strong wooden boards. Who knew if she had secretly witnessed Lucy’s daring escapade or if she had simply felt that it was time for a new fence? Either way, it was there. It was so tightly woven that Lucy never saw the dog again. But she could still hear his growl. Even though she stood across the street he would let a low tumble loose knowing his prey was near. That rumble stilled little Lucy’s skin. It tensed her young neck into a tangle of veins and goose-bumps. Lucy had been broken. She would dream nightly of her unobtainable craving, but Lucy remained passive and settled for just fantasizing and imagining about how sweet it would be to bite into her coveted mango. Maybe dreams are not meant to be achieved. What
then, Lucy would ask herself later in life, would we aspire for? What would keep us going?

The mango did keep her going, but in that distant way of a long gone love who is overseas with no return date.

Lucy’s family moved to the mainland about a year after her failed mango attempt. They picked up and placed themselves in a new state, a new town, and a new place that held no mango trees. Without the presence of the malevolent mango, her constant torment, being near or visible, Lucy began to bloom more like a typical girl. She played soccer, skinned her knees in bike collisions, brought home A’s and B’s, and took up the clarinet. However, tell tale signs that the mango would not easily be forgotten were everywhere. They could be spotted in her wardrobe, which consisted almost exclusively of yellows, oranges, and reds. One could see them in art class when, even though the teacher had them drawing apples and pears, every drawing Lucy ever produced resembled, exclusively, a mango. Signs of her dedication were visible in her self denial of any other fruit. Lucy, if nothing else, was loyal to her true love.

There were also subtler signs of the mango impact on her life, of that fatal link that started years earlier with wafting winds bringing succulent smells to a tiny baby: the look in Lucy’s eyes whenever someone spoke with true joy, with that pride of having accomplished, at least for now, exactly what they wanted in life; the twinge in Lucy’s lips whenever one of her friends would introduce her to a new boyfriend or talk about their latest crush. Lucy’s will, once broken, could never be applied to anything with the same intensity and zeal of its original state. And so she never seemed to apply it at all to
matters of passion. Thus Lucy remained un-picked in matters of boys and dating. She spent prom night finishing a poetry booklet for English class. Her haiku entry would later win a prize from the school literary magazine. It was simply titled “Mango.”

_The sweet, luscious smell_

_Draws me close, tantalizing._

_Filling all senses_

Upon reading her mango haiku, her English teacher mentioned that a family, the Shimizus, were giving away mangoes because the father was allergic. He had bloomed red and splotchy upon his first bite and now the rest of his family feared trying this invasive and reactive fruit. Lucy had wondered where they had gotten mangoes from. They were rare…and very expensive if found at the grocery store. Oh, they have family in Hawai‘i, Ms. Smith had said. I bet they had them sent over.

Lucy’s eyes had glazed. She heard no more from Ms. Smith. Mangoes, from Hawai‘I, being just given away. The atrocity. The sacrilege. Oh well, Lucy’s legs started moving, that’s the Shimizus’ lost.

She knew where the Shimizu’s lived; it was only two streets away from her house, and, indeed, they did have family in Hawai‘i. Lucy remembered seeing their sons, after every Christmas, with new aloha shirts to. It made them the hit of the school when they showed up every dreary January in those bright, flowered shirts and holding pineapples that their relatives had sent over. People would crowd them in the cafeteria for a piece of the pineapples, but Lucy would move slowly backwards, until she was in the opposite corner and away from those needed, horned pin cushions. Lucy dutifully
remained true to the mango, even after five thousand miles. She couldn’t help it—with the first sniffs of her infant nose she had been bound by the cosmos to her one, true love.

Lucy’s little feet kept on padding toward the Shimizu’s house. She was so excited that every ten seconds she would grab her chest to hold her heart in. She did not want it to leap out and make her waste time collecting it when her feet should be moving only forward. She dashed through a crosswalk when the “don’t walk” sign had already begun blinking. She streamed through a small intersection without even blinking. Lucy was on a mission—there was no time for thinking.

And then she was there. The Shimizu’s house. It didn’t have a mango tree, or a dog, but it did have a high, foreboding fence. The kind made of black iron with pointed tips. Lucy felt her knees knock just a little. She tiptoed up to the fence and peered through at the two-story, brick house. It looked like a prison—her poor, captive mangoes!

Lucy bravely opened the gate and quickly hustled through.

The house was looming; all of the windows were shut.

Lucy placed her left hand on her right hand’s pulse, with each beat she could feel the desire throbbing in her veins. She held on to that feeling and walked forward.

As Lucy neared the door she could see a basket tucked away in the corner, with a thick towel enfolding the contents. She was suddenly confused. She twitched her nose. Nothing. Could those be the mangos? And if so, why wasn’t the smell tickling her nostrils? Perhaps she was at the beginning of a cold. What else could it be?

Lucy crept up to the basket and daintily folded back one edge of the towel.

And then she crumpled to the floor; her legs bending beneath her.
Lucy stared woefully into the basket, into the space where the towel was now bent back.

Her face fell—the color leaving like a dozen shining, ripe mangoes blown off an old tree. What was left was dulled and empty, void of new life.

There were indeed mangoes in the basket. Small, green, shriveled old mangoes that had obviously been bought from the grocery store. They had no smell other than that of the air-conditioner which still clung inside the crevices of their wrinkled skins. They were the typical mangoes for these parts—tasteless, listless, and deformed. Instead of gleaming, minute suns they were dark, leathery, pits.

Lucy would find out later that the Shimizus had bought the mangoes from the grocery on a whim to try something new. Their Hawai‘i relatives had nothing to do with it. But the damage was done. Lucy, crestfallen, had shed several tears. And she vowed for no more. Lucy swore to not think of the mango again. It would be banished to the far-depths of her mind and hidden away in those dark recesses.

Lucy, not so little anymore, graduated from high school and, having had the choice of which college to attend, had chosen one in her original place of birth. In the homeland of her ever-tempting torment, of that sumptuous mango that had caused yearning to become equivalent to breathing in Lucy’s vacant body. Lucy no longer consciously thought about the mango, however, she couldn’t help that it still silently ran within her, biding its time. The desire was always still itching at the tips of her fingers. Maybe knowing that there was such thing as too much torture, she lived in an apartment building in Manoa, which was far enough from the old mango tree and nearer to campus.
The other tenants seemed to like her in general. She would nod and smile in passing, but she had withdrawn back into her shell and no close connections were made.

Then, one day, Lucy met a man. A young one, also in college, who was full of promise and life. And who radiated an appeal like no other. He was helping his sister move in on the lower floor and Lucy had been transfixed by his tousled hair, his slouching stance, by the way he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand after tanking down glass after glass of water. He had been drawn to her too. He may have liked her shy, but shimmering dark coffee eyes. Or the quiet way she folded her hands in front of her when talking to someone and how she would dart her eyes at the floor rather than face them. Or maybe he knew that she was more than she seemed—that she was someone capable of intensity and depth like no other. However the fates decreed it, Aidan and Lucy fell for each other fast and hard...like two mangos, way overripe, that should have been plucked long before.

They went on chaste dates that complimented Lucy's sweet nature. To the movies, holding hands only, or to dinner with Aidan dropping her off immediately after they were done. Lucy's heart tickled when he was near, her constant blush a rosy pink. Aidan, smitten and sold on her, would open every door and would have thrown every jacket he owned on the ground, but it never rained. And then, finally, he took it up a notch. Aidan invited Lucy over to his house, intimate and alone, for a home-made dinner. He fumbled every word on the phone, and she giggled every response, but somehow she arrived Saturday night for whatever it was that Aidan was going to concoct.

Lucy rang the bell with a twitch in her finger and then clasped her hands together in front of her orangey dress. Aidan tripped over a chair, his bag, the rug, and his shoes
on the way to the door. He opened it and welcomed her in with about ten different
greetings. So good to see you, glad you’re here, why don’t you come in, how was the
drive over...each one overlapping the next until Lucy was not sure at all as to what he
had said. Their gaze tangoed around until it settled straight, eye to eye. A calm
permeated the room. But that was not all. Now that Lucy had stepped into the hall, a bit,
and had gotten over the initial rush of Aidan’s glazing green eyes, she could smell
something else pervading the small house. No, she thought, it couldn’t be. This is
another cruel trick—a premonition of heartbreak. Lucy’s teeth clenched top to the
bottom and suspicion rummaged over her heart. The mango. She knew that smell; she
knew it better than anything else she had ever known. It was here. It was near.

Lucy turned into the dining room and there it was, sliced, diced, and chilled on the
table.

No, how could it be...after all this time? Lucy’s mind had flown to another
dimension, where it was trying to figure all the logistics out. There was no doubt about
it; she would know that inimitable mango in a sea, in a cosmically incalculable flowing
sea, of mangos. She could fish it out. But she didn’t have to...it was being offered, free
of liability or effort, on a plastic china platter.

Aidan, being one of sound mind and with eyes for observation, noticed that
something was up. He was worried about this reaction. Do you not like mango? he
asked, seeing the look of disbelief and mistaking it for horror. I promise you’ll like this
one, it’s a special breed, one of a kind, from my grandmother’s tree. Aidan was nervous,
tugging at the bottom of his shirt and stretching it out. Just try it, Lucy.
The irony of his words were not lost on Lucy as her brain was still allowing for the processing of new information. A knowing smile tugged her lips, beaming a long hidden dimple into full blast. She wanted nothing more than to grab that plate, take an extended sniff of the superb, sumptuous smell, and then devour all of the contents—leaving not a single remnant or remainder. Lucy’s fingers twitched, her mouth a sea of liquid in anticipation. But somehow, something was holding Lucy back. She wanted that mango, but first....she wanted something else. Lucy swallowed and steadied herself. Her mind had decided to give up and her body just took over. It moved her to the table, towards the mango—towards that glistening, dewy glow of the fresh cut. Towards those pale, orange squares that sparkled in the dim light. But then her body pulled her to the left and right into the arms of Aidan. In the moment she touched him, arm to arm, nose to nose, Lucy was not surprised. The feeling was sublime. Her senses were struggling to keep up with each new sensation.

The kiss was a culmination of every want and desire Lucy had ever felt.

The yearning, that soft patter that was always reverberating in her veins, finally stopped.

Lucy’s longing, that carnivorous craving that ate at her dreams, was sated.

Their lips parted; their breathing heavy. Aidan was still a gentleman; he touched her cheek with his hand for just an instant, and then led her to the table. He seated her in the cushioned chair and together they shared the mango. It was delectable, delicious, and a nice side benefit.
When Science Shorts

Natalie and Francis had managed politely to avoid each other, so far, for eleven days.

Francis would come home early from work and review notes and make revisions. He would be in bed by nine o’clock each night. Natalie would then come home at nine-thirty, after solely supporting the small coffee shop across the street, and watch late night TV and infomercials until she fell asleep in the den. Francis would wake up at five every morning, tip-toe past the den out to the garage, and head to the University of Hawai‘i where he worked as a professor of entomology. Natalie would sleep until ten in the morning, then leisurely make cocoa and biscuits before also heading out to her job at the university, where she worked as a professor of plant and environmental protection sciences.

They worked in the same building. Natalie was one floor up.

Their avoidance routine, since each knew the other’s habits, became a simple matter. Francis knew Natalie liked to take a late lunch at three, so he would be sure to stay in his lab at that time so as not to run into her in the hallways. Natalie knew Francis always took one last trip to the business office at four-thirty before leaving work, so she sat in her lab and checked email during a buffer period. The silent plan was made especially easy by the fact that Francis was a man of strict routine. Greenwich, England should have been set to his schedule. It was never vocally agreed upon to not see each other, talk to each other, or acknowledge each other’s existence, but it was going as smooth as syrup.
Francis was annoyed, however, with the knowledge that their problem had, as most problems do, stemmed from something rather small and insignificant. Something that they both might have looked back on and laughed at—if it had not been for the eleven days. Now it was a matter of the worst kind…pride.

Francis had been studying a moth—a new and unknown species of moth. As an entomologist it was what he was paid to do, but the difference this time was that he had kept this secret for six months, a secret from his lab, the department chair, and, worst of all, his wife. And his wife was French, therefore a nosy, moody woman who would not take the insult of being held in the dark lightly. Francis often wondered why the secrecy as he sat alone every night at six to eat his dinner of Marie Calendar microwavable dishes—but really it was because of such a combination of things that just one was impossible to single out to blame. And blaming all would mean an irreparable change to his lifestyle if he wished to fix the problem. Thus Francis mulled over the possibilities and probabilities of this problem, every night, with each beep-beep-beep of the microwave, without ever determining an answer.

The moth in question was unique because it was a water moth that was born and lived its life, until pupating, in the middle of or at the edges of flowing streams. He had been studying it, scientific name *Hypsomocoma*, for quite some time, and this little moth had fascinated him by the evolutionary and adaptability possibilities it presented. Francis had spent months scouting the woods and streams around Hawai‘i looking for the little critters. Already, he had documented several shifts in climate and water placement depending on the area and which streams they were in. Originally, he had found them only in center rocks completely surrounded by water and half submerged. They liked to
lie on the shaded underbelly in the tiny groves and dents that occur in some rocks due to friction over time. But lately, in cooler climates, he had been finding them embedded on flatter, more accessible rocks at the edges or several feet away from rivers and he concluded that while they could live submerged in water, they seemed to need only the mist and moist temperatures. This was striking and exciting news to him, to see their adaptability to both climates and the indications of their evolutionary progression. His original error in habitat identification was due to his mis-identification of their natural food source. Initially, he had assumed they fed on moss, because the original rocks were heavily covered in moss that also filled the grooves on the rocks. But in his new field sites, with the moths away from the river, he found that they lived on rocks with absolutely no moss. He deduced that it was lichen that the *hyposmocoma* were living on and trial experiments proved this to be true.

Francis had felt this was a systematic entomologist’s dream in evolutionary adaptability and subsistence. Just the fact that the moths could live in water, a very rare trait, was something to take notice of. He wanted to learn more before properly presenting at either an acclaimed conference, like the International Congress of Entomology, or publishing in a highly respected journal, like the *Annual Review of Entomology*—with an impact rating of five! The department chair was notorious for pressuring his way into co-authoring while doing little or no work, and getting half the recognition, and his lab, while brilliant and productive, was notorious for friendly gossip.

And his wife. His beautiful, much younger, ambitious, Natalie—who worked in, basically, the same scientific field except that she was studying the effects of saturating soil with lime to deflect the ever-growing population of coqui frogs. Natalie, he
suspected, was sleeping with the department chair behind his back. Francis didn’t care about that; his feelings of detachment from Natalie had been well formed since they had been first dating. He had always known it was more important to be clinical and detached about *everything* that could interfere with his research, rather than let feelings get in the way. But he *did* care about his work and it not leaking out.

On the day the first domino fell, his schedule was cramped with a couple of grad committee meetings, his weekly seminar class, and a meeting with the Eppendorf sales rep over a faulty gel visualization system he had bought—and at twelve thousand dollars, it was no joke. He needed someone well acquainted with molecular sequencing to extract the DNA of his latest *hyposmocoma*, before the samples were contaminated amid the humid air, and sequence it. The lab had been in a heat wave due to a broken air conditioner and an over-crowded fridge filled with his other leaf-hopper and meely bug grants. He had only one working gel visualization now, thanks to this new development, and needed someone who could use the extracted samples to visualize the DNA and proteins under the UV light and take pictures to assess PCR success and concentration within the samples. Natalie was an expert at all of this since she had roots in molecular science and would have been the most natural choice to ask—but instead Francis decided to call in a favor from a professor in Natural Resources and Environmental Management who he knew could do the job. Somehow, as these things always do, word got back to his wife, in a joking way, of how Dr. Dreyer had to “save” the infamous Dr. Francis Handler—who was well known for always working independently, as he liked things exactly in his systematic fashion. An innocent joke with his wife, as Dr. Dreyer ran into
her on the way to see the fiscal officer about financing some purchase orders turned into eleven days of non-existence.

And the other thing was: these eleven days had become the best in a long time.

Francis was still unsure as to why she had married him, but he knew why he had proposed. He wanted a lady at his intellectual ability who understood the seriousness of invasive systematics and his work. He wanted a beauty that would make the other, older and dried-up professors twitch just a little with envy. And most of all, he wanted someone to just come home to. Or, at least, he thought he did. But, he had been feeling a bit sentimental at the time when Natalie arrived at the college. He had been sick of an empty house, of listening to creaking walls with no laughter to cover the noise, of always having to be the one to unlock the door. Every day he would reverse into his parking space, grab the newspaper, unlock the door, and then sit with a cold tea and read about international and environmental news. Francis had often thought of how nice it would be to come home, every now and then, to an already unlocked door, with just the screen door letting the breeze come in. But Francis was riddled with various traits of OCD; he was a control nut. And, after six months of marriage with a self-proclaimed “free-spirit,” Francis was reaching a precipice. He needed his mail in the same spot, his cups drying on the rack and the dishes put away. He needed the door closed if it was a too-windy day, and he hated seeing nail clippings on the floor. It bothered him that Natalie would leave the screen door open along with the unlocked front door. Why would a reasonable person do that and let dust in? His married lifestyle was bringing back painful reminders of the life he had thought long gone. He had moved to Hawaii because he had been sick of his “hippie” parents back in Berkeley. They, like Natalie, had a careless disregard for
everything except their work. His parents always had their laundry strewn about, left half-finished drinks and opened bags of food lying around the kitchen and bedroom, and never seemed to comb their hair. Francis had felt like a maid for most of his childhood as he would follow them around, picking up and putting away whatever disaster they left in their wake. Their favorite words to him had been, ‘darling, loosen up!’

Francis was also a bit paranoid. He had been ever since his older sisters had conspired to make his mother believe that he was the one who had broken the “nice” dishes. His sisters, little tornado-like terrors, were fighting and making a mess per usual and had hit the dining room cabinet. The china dishes had flown off their stands, hit the glass doors, and shattered all over the inside of the cabinet. The plates had seemed as delicate as butterfly wings. His devious sisters had concocted a story about how Francis had been doing yet another experiment and that this one had happened to involve how much velocity would be needed for an impact to shatter dishes while still inside a cabinet. Luckily, his parents didn’t buy it, but Francis had never forgotten the conspiracy attempt.

Yes, Natalie uncomfortably resembled his family in her haphazard ways and in her, still unproven Francis had to admit, attempts to diminish his position and respectability by sleeping with the department chair. Plus, Natalie was so ambitious, as the young usually are, and was always too wrapped up in her own world of research to take much note of his—unless, as he now knew, he actually didn’t tell her what was going on so that she could ignore it. He remembered the first time, two days after their marriage, that he had noticed her selfish streak.

He had run to her lab upstairs with gleeful news on some research that he had been conducting.
“Natalie,” he had breathed heavily, from jaunting down the flight of stairs, “it’s all been working out so well. I extracted the PCR from my final samples and sequenced for enough genes to align them across the different varieties of leafhoppers around California and I think I’ve managed to determine an evolutionary relationship, finally, between the new breeds in the north. This will definitely extend my grant monies for another two years!” His words had run out all in one, long and excited breath.

Natalie had been bent over her desk, papers surrounding every part of her, and had only mumbled, “That’s great, honey.”

“Natalie, have you even listened to what I said? You know this is my largest grant.”

“Honey,” she had said, still not looking up, “did you know that this damn frog is right up there with rats, cockroaches, and humans in the ways of its adaptability?”

Francis had been stumped. Was she playing around?

“And, honey,” Natalie had said, finally turning around, her eyes filled with delight at discussing her own work. “Did you know that the coqui’s screeching mating call can reach between seventy to ninety decibels? The federal government requires that workers wear ear protection if the noise in their surroundings reaches eighty-five decibels.”

Oh yes, Francis remembered that day well. Natalie’s insistent, relentless research on the coqui frog—research which she deemed far more urgent and important than his. How often had she repeated the same story over a late-night tea about the thousands of coquis that have infested the Hawaiian islands...especially the Big Island. The frogs, scientific name *Eleutherodactylus coqui*, have very few natural predators in the islands due to the lack of snakes or tarantulas and thus their population abounds freely and fast.
He had listened to her through the caffeine spray trials, which produced heart attacks in coquis, but were then banned due to animal rights activists and federal pesticide regulations. He had been there for her after the citric acid trials, which worked wonderfully, but harmed flowers and other fauna that came into contact with the spray. And now he had supported her with open ears and a quiet mouth through the latest lime spray testing, which was proving to be most effective in an all around manner, but yet hydrated lime couldn’t be used to kill frogs except for research purposes due to legal matters. For this past year of marriage he had listened to it all, and told her everything he did while she watched reruns of The Golden Girls and nodded, saying “uh-huh, sounds great.” Everything except for that one little moth—and it had, to quote Frost, “made all the difference.”

Now, on the eleventh day, Francis was home at five o’clock, eating dinner, and thinking about what to do regarding Natalie. The funny thing was that despite this silence, his growing annoyance and disgruntlement towards her, and his suspicions of her affair, he didn’t want a divorce. Francis liked things to look nice and being married to an intellectual and beautiful woman looked very nice. Having her in appearance without the bother of conversing or interacting was turning out to be twice as nice. He had always kept a journal on Natalie—from when he first noticed her—but he had been writing in it more religiously since the silence in case any great thoughts or solutions presented themselves. Or, as a second purpose, if he needed evidence, to look back upon for proof. One couldn’t win an argument without well thought-out logic, and good examples, and thus he kept track of everything he could use as proof of his decided righteousness in her very wrong situation.
Francis took the journal from its hiding place in the linen closet (Natalie never cleaned or did household chores) and sat down in the old, beige recliner in the living room. He began to thumb through it; He felt that in order to fully analyze where things went wrong he would have to start by looking at early entries.

Entry 1: I noticed the new professor in our department today. She walks very well, each foot in front of the other. She likes the color pink—as evident by her pink gemstone necklace, purse, and painted nails. Professional women always feel they have to wear black, brown, grey, or dark blue—you can only tell what color they really like by the accessories. (Note: Buy her pink flowers as a welcome gift.)

Entry 5: Talked to the new professor today. Her name is Natalie Catherine Deneue. I invited her to lunch. She likes hamburgers with the tomatoes on the side and no mayonnaise. She seems to like Kahala Mall as perceived by her mention of it twice and no mention of any other. She likes to go after work and hit the coffee shop. She arrives at work late and leaves late. (Note: Stop by coffee shop some day after dinner and the six o'clock news.)

Entry 10: Fourth date with Natalie. She looks up when she laughs. Likes the woods and mountains versus the beach. (Note: Offer up a good hike, maybe the one in Aiea, as next date.) Seems to like older, father figures. (Note: Give her advice and guidance on how to work with rules of department and with secretaries). Likes books by Nabokov. (Note: Read some books by Nabokov—he was an amateur entomologist. Find some of Nabokov's books with entomological origins.)

Francis put the journal down and scratched his chin. How could he have been so wrong? He had kept such specific notes, and made such accurate observations—how
could he have been wrong as to how Natalie would turn out? So lively, energetic…it meant chaos and a mess for him to always clean up. It had seemed like such a plus at the time. His careful analysis of her had caused him to win her over easily—the seemingly psychic man who knew everything she wanted and liked. But Natalie couldn’t be kept in a cage and observed for long—right after the marriage he soon discovered he had no idea how to keep her. Francis turned to the journal sections on the eleven-day silence. He had been keeping tracking of them day by day to see what he could learn of her fight strategy.

*Day 4: Natalie has, apparently, over the past three days decided to mumble to herself in French so that if I (and I do) overhear her in the night I will remain in the dark. She builds her defense and cleverly keeps it to herself while flaunting the words throughout the still hallways! My mother always told me to beware of foreigners. It is no matter though as I have taped some of her mutterings and had one of the graduate students in French Studies translate. Below are the written translations in French and English for posterity.*

"Salo suffisant. Il croit qu'il a toujours raison. Mon père a toujours dit que ce philosophe amène a une vie miserable." --*Conceited bastard. He always thinks he is right. My father always said that kind of thinking led to a miserable life.*

"Peter me comprend meilleur et il ne remets pas tous les choses que je touche à leurs places originales." --*Peter understands me so much better and he doesn't keep putting everything I touch back to its original place.*

"Si Vous cachez quelque chose de ta femme, elle va cachez deux fois de vous.” --*If you hide something from your wife then she will hide twice as much from you.*
"Je me demande où il cache le céréale? Je me parie qu'il se lève tout juste pour le faire. Je vais cache les timbres et il deviendra fou! Il est si particular des petites choses."

--I wonder where he hides the cereal? I bet he wakes up early just to do that. I will hide his postage stamps and it will drive him mad! He is so picky about little things.

That is all I've got. She has uttered nothing today. I think she can hear the clicks of my tape recorder and has stopped due to this new information. It doesn't matter as that I have already found a new storage place for my postage stamps that she will not find. Everything else is redundant knowledge.

Day 7: Natalie has been leaving her shoes in the house—undoubtedly just to annoy me. The soles are especially filthy and look as if she has purposely walked through dirt to get them that way. I can see scuff marks in our front lawn that match the heels. I ran into Peter today and told him that I think he is not routing the email properly depending on hard and soft faculty and their designated obligations. As department chair I see this as his duty. I stressed the words emails and not routing properly in the hopes that he will wonder if I have accidentally received some that I shouldn't have. Just me, dropping a subtle hint about forbidden correspondence. I have not, incidentally, ever come across indecent emails between him and Natalie, but it is never a bad thing to shake the man up a little. I'm sure they exist. Proof will come in time after further research.

Day 9: Someone told me today that coquis were now real estate deal breakers. If someone knew they were in the area the contract could, and probably would, fall through. I bet Natalie started this bit of information and has been sending it around. She probably thinks her work is even more important now—saving the real estate business,
the local economy, and uniting people with lovely, screech-free homes. She is not a true environmentalist. She has never once mentioned to me the distinct possibility of the coqui wiping out the specific insects that our rare birds rely on. Her soul has been sold for money, profit, and seeing her name in as many journals and newspapers as possible.

“What are you doing?”

Surprised, Francis quickly shut the journal and looked up to meet the eyes of Natalie.

Natalie stood in the doorway, the screen door wide open behind her. “It’s nine o’clock—shouldn’t you be in bed by now?”

Francis quickly looked at his watch and then stared in disbelief. It was nine o’clock—the unspoken time that designated that he should be in bed with the door closed. Francis shook his head...had he really been so caught up in those journals that all this time could have passed?

Natalie stepped inside, her platform heels still on, and peered at Francis’ lap. “Is that your journal? The one you keep of me?”

“You know about this?” Francis had suspected, but never really believed it to be so.

“Of course,” Natalie scoffed. “You’re not the only researcher here. I know how to collect data too.”

Francis was stumped. He suddenly felt that maybe he didn’t have the upper hand.

“In fact—I keep a journal on you. From the day you first asked me out. But lately it keeps saying the same thing over and over.”
Francis knew she was taunting him—tempting him to ask to know more. He didn’t want to fall for this trap, but he was extremely curious. He told himself a good scientist will do anything to get proper data—and this was needed evidence, but for whose case he wasn’t sure.

Francis straightened in the recliner to try and look distinguished. “And what might that be, Natalie?”

“How un-adaptable you are.” Natalie threw her purse on the couch and took three more steps. “How completely un-adaptable you are to change, to new environments, to new situations, and to new people. I have been thinking recently that if the human race had been designed like you we would have been wiped out centuries ago. There would be Neanderthals running around instead of Homo sapiens.”

She was studying her nails while she said this last bit—as if he weren’t important enough to acknowledge. “Isn’t it ironic?” she continued. “That little moth you love so much is exceptionally adaptable.”

Francis stood up from the recliner in frustration. “Me?” His voice was thick with constraint. “Me! Un-adaptable. Well, how about you? I haven’t seen you change a thing since we’ve been married. Have you tried to be a little neater? A little more conscientious of other people’s feelings? A little less flirtatious with our Department Head? And for the record—the coqui frog is also highly adjustable. Maybe you should take a clue from your own research.”

“Ha!” Natalie threw up her arms. “I knew you thought something was happening between Peter and me! Have you been spreading rumors? I have been getting glances in the hall lately and I just know you are whispering taints against my reputation.”
“They glance at you because your flirtation is so obvious. It speaks for itself.”

Natalie began pacing—still with her shoes on. Didn’t she know this was Hawai’i? Not France or the mainland? She began talking as if Francis weren’t even there, “Unbelievably stupid! Did he ever stop to think that maybe I talk to Peter because he is my only friend? Certainly I cannot talk to my own husband. This husband that cannot accept the fact that life must change when you are married. That this house isn’t his own ‘bachelor pad’ anymore. That I have a right to be here and live as I wish. I can’t believe I ended up marrying someone so similar to my parents. Why is the world filling up with control freaks? How could I have let myself pick such a husband?” She stopped, though was still not facing Francis and enunciated very carefully, “A husband that does not understand that I am not one of his research projects.”

Francis stepped into her path. “Quit it. I am not some child to be ignored. If you have something to say—say it to me.”

Natalie crossed her arms and fixed an affronted stare on him. Suddenly, she cocked her head to one side and blurted out, “Do you know why I married you?”

Francis snickered—the poor girl was about to have her dreams crushed. “Of course,” he said, suppressing his smile for later. “I analyzed you perfectly. You fell in love with me. But I put on a show for you because I wanted the beautiful, new, young professor for my wife. You’re good for my status.”

“Ahh, Francis,” Natalie said, sighing. She looked almost whimsical at the moment. “We are really so much alike.”

Francis shook his head. “We are nothing alike. You’re a hurricane blustering up everyone’s life. I’m the storm cellar that always survives.”
“Dear, Francis.” Natalie had pity in her voice. It disgusted him. “I married you for my status. You’re a distinguished professor already tenured and well-received in the department and in the academic community. It’s a sad fact that women are still more highly regarded if they have a husband such as you. Who knows? I might have married Peter if he weren’t already taken. I thought, however, that we’d live a nice life in intellectual companionship.”

Francis’ mouth opened, but he had nothing to say. It was an unexpected blow. After all his careful observations? His detailed notes? His heart felt bitter—she had been a great actress.

“Yes.” Natalie let a laugh escape and then stifled it because that was beneath her. But her lips still twitched. “I studied you so well. Older, all alone...basically dying for a companion. But so pretentious that you would only have one that would be admired. One who was smart and beautiful. I knew you would fall for me. Every day I did a little something to encourage you. I would talk about my passions, my favorite books in order to give you an opening to talk to me. I would hint about what kind of things I liked so that you could have the chance to buy them for me. I knew you would bite. Its like expecting a nezara bug to not bore through a macadamia nut—if the nut is right in front of it then the nezara bug always will.”

Francis decided that he shouldn’t feel so bad about reading her so wrong—after all it turned out his data was flawed. She had been feeding him false information and fraudulent facts. How could a scientist be blamed for a misleading hypothesis when he, himself, had been mislead?
“Did you know your moths killed my frogs?” Natalie broke his reverie with her loud announcement.

“What?” Francis was confused by this topic change.

“Your moths. I had to feed them one day and had run out of crickets. So I borrowed some of your *Hyposmocoma* moths—the ones who wouldn’t fully pupate so they were worthless to you so don’t blow your lid—and they killed my frogs. They’re poisonous to them. Did you know that?”

“So what?” Francis raised his hand with a flippant ‘who cares,’ “You want to kill the frogs anyway.”

“You’re so narrow-minded. I’m talking about how I feel.” Her face had such emotion; it radiated from her pores. “You are poison to me. You poison my life with your lies and your disapproving looks. I’m a free spirit, Francis—and you are trying to hold me down. Chain me to a test tube. Your methods are poison to me.”

Natalie paused and was abruptly calm again. “It really is my fault I suppose. I studied you so carefully. I thought you would be the perfect fit for what I was looking for. How could my hypothesis be so wrong? I knew you were obsessively organized and isolated, but I didn’t factor in the variable of you trying to control my life too. Make me like you. I can’t believe my theory on you was so far off. What kind of scientist am I?”

Francis’ rage, all his feelings of outrage and disbelief, began to calm. He realized she had been right...though he would never tell her. Despite their obvious differences, which first captured the eye, they really were too much alike. Stubborn to the core. Analytical in every way. It was just too bad that the hypotheses they were testing on one another had been so far off. He sat down on the couch and felt only resignation.
“What kind of scientists are we?” he muttered--no longer to her, but to the world in general. “Who can control everything, but our lives?”

Natalie seemed resigned too as she sat down at the far end of the couch. “The kind that must move on to new projects. New research. We can control that and it is our lives.”

And they sat, at each end of the couch, looking at the blank wall.
Charlotte Kensington was lounging gracefully on her white leather sofa as she sipped a chilled jasmine tea. She wasn’t sure if tea was in vogue or not, but her yoga instructor had assured her that drinking it was the final step to cleansing out impurities after a long, serene session. She was feeling especially relaxed and was imagining herself in the moment of zen when the phone’s delicate jingle sounded.

She carefully placed her porcelain tea cup on its matching saucer and leaned over to answer.

“Hello, Kensington residence, Charlotte speaking.”

“Charlotte, honey! My dear, you’ll never believe the good news.”

It was her divorce lawyer, Merle, who faked an intimacy that did not exist in order to purposely annoy Charlotte. Charlotte was always on the verge of firing her, but she was just so damn good at wringing out money and assets. Plus, since Merle was in the despised, soul-less profession of being a lawyer, Charlotte felt she could speak to Merle however she wished. Being nice to Merle wasn’t going to get her in a higher social circle, so why bother?

“Cut the crap, Merle. Did I get what I wanted or not?” Charlotte looked at her perfectly French-manicured right hand and started to think she should have picked ivory for the base.

“Oh dah-ling, no pleasantries? After all we’ve been through?” Merle’s voice had that French, nasal quality which irritated Charlotte.
“Please. What ‘we’ve’ been through is three divorces that have made you very rich—thanks to me.”

“But sweetheart,” Merle cackled on, “they’ve made you richer.”

Charlotte sighed silently in agreement. “Which would be the only reason I keep you on my payroll. Now answer my question or you won’t be around for the fourth!” It must have been the twentieth time that Charlotte had threatened to fire her.

“Well, sugar, I always speak in confidence of having a next call. Especially because I got you everything, e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g, on the list. Yes, I am simply the best. Well, everything mais, la maison à la Hamptons.” Merle had a tendency to always deliver bad news very quickly in French. Charlotte did not speak French. And yet, Charlotte had an uncanny ability to be a universal translator when it involved foreign languages, bad news, and Merle.

“The Hamptons house!” she shrieked in the phone. “That was my favorite. My very favorite—do you understand?”

“Now, now. Calm down,” Merle said, attempting a soothing voice. “You got your requested alimony, extra for jewelry expenses, the penthouse on Fifth avenue, a share of selected categories in his stock portfolio, and the Boston terrier!”

“Charles doesn’t count; he was mine to begin with!” Charlotte couldn’t believe all the excuses coming out of Merle.

“Really Charlotte, considering your roots, you’ve done amazingly well for yourself. Maybe I should have gone into the ‘professional marriage’ market.”

Charlotte couldn’t believe Merle had sunk so low. Damn, sneaky lawyers. It should be illegal to search into someone’s past. Charlotte liked to pretend that she had
always been filthy rich. It had been almost fifteen years now and all the Egyptian cotton sheets—500 thread count, bottles of Cristal, and mink fur coats had made it easy for her to forget her previous life.

Charlotte, for once, had no come-back so she slammed the phone down, and managed to pout without causing any lines on her face. She closed her eyes and mouthed the words I'm fabulously rich. I have secure stocks. My skin still looks like a teenager's.

She looked up to see the maid staring at her. Apparently Esmer—whatever her name was—Charlotte could never keep the help's names straight, had wandered in while she had been on the phone.

Charlotte was enraged. She'd lost that sweet Hamptons house, lost her “zen,” been insulted by someone she detested, but, unfortunately, needed, and now the hired help was having the nerve to stare at her.

She reached for her jasmine tea and threw the porcelain cup at the maid.

Esmer-whatever quickly jumped to the right in surprise of the cup, but not of the action.

“I don’t pay you to stand around and do nothing. And I especially don’t pay you to snoop on my phone calls and make little ‘judgment’ faces. Get the hell back to work!”

But the maid did not move. She just continued to stare at Charlotte…and she looked, Charlotte had to think for a moment because she had come to associate the working-class with not having the capability to display powerful feelings; she looked angry.

“Esmer…ma…elda, whatever, get back to work right now. Clean up the tea and cup or get out of here and I’ll be sure to see that Immigration looks you up.”
“My name is Nancy.” She was practically shaking, in a silent, controlled way.

“Oh.” Charlotte was momentarily thrown. It must have been the last maid who was a Esmer-something. “No matter. Do as I say.”

Nancy did not look away. “I was born here, in New York.”


Nancy threw her duster on the floor. “I quit.”

Charlotte opened her eyes wide and mocked an expression of caring. “Oh, I’m so sad. My heart is breaking. Now get out!”

Nancy was taking deep breaths and her face was becoming very flushed.

“You are such a bitch,” Nancy stated with an icy quality.

Charlotte had almost forgotten about the maid since she had expected her order to leave to be the last transaction between the two and was now actually silenced by surprise. No one talked to her like this. And a maid? She could buy and sell her. How dare a maid speak so rudely!

Nancy’s lip was quivering. “You were so mean to Mr. Kensington. He was such a gentleman! Such a good man! You are so beneath him.” Nancy looked as if she were about to spit in disgust.

Charlotte paused for a second longer and then---she laughed. She laughed and laughed and then began to worry about the laugh lines it would cause.

“What’s so funny?” Nancy’s eyes were raging.

“Oh dear,” Charlotte said, trying to suppress the last giggles. “You are so pathetic! Oh my, I can’t—it’s too funny!” Charlotte gained a semblance of control and sat up. “Oh, I knew you and Patrick were screwing like rabbits! I should have guessed
earlier, the way you paid extra attention to him while waiting on him at dinner. Did you
guys fuck in his office? On his desk? He loves that, you know.”

Nancy’s mouth dropped open slightly, but no words came out.

“Oh, you didn’t know!” Charlotte almost had a fit again. “Did you think he
loved you? Is that why you’re trying to stand up for ‘your man?’ Well, honey, you
weren’t the first. Or second. Or third. In fact, the only privilege you had was being the
only one I didn’t know about during the marriage. I wish I had, since the other three
helped get me all of my settlement. If I could have added you to the list I probably would
have gotten the Hamptons house!” Charlotte frowned slightly here, mulling over that
lovely, lost house. Such a nice rose garden.

Nancy looked crestfallen. The wrath of her attack had been subverted. She
turned to leave. But as she headed towards the door she stopped to look at Charlotte one
last time. Nancy’s face had something in it, which Charlotte couldn’t quite place, but
which caught Charlotte’s full attention. Somewhere in her life Charlotte had seen that
look before....

“You are a wicked lady. You have lost your soul. I can leave here with dignity
knowing that I still have mine. I do things for love, not spite. It is you who are pathetic
and I will pray for you because I feel sorry for you. I will pray for your soul.”

That said, Nancy left. With just a click of the door.

Charlotte, still lounging on the supple white couch, didn’t know what to do. For
some reason she felt, well, a little worried. No one had ever told her that before. Only
lawyers were soul-less, and that was only because they sold them or something. And
then Charlotte finally placed that look, which had been on the maid’s face. Pity.
Charlotte had seen that look before back when she was eighteen and parading around with a fake Coach bag. An older, obviously wealthy, lady with a real Coach bag had given her a look of pity as Charlotte had passed her by. From that day on Charlotte had sworn to never buy another fake. It would only be the genuine “real-deal” for her. Charlotte remembered that look well, so it was definitely pity. But how could that be? A poor, maid pity her? Look at this apartment; it was the size of a museum! Her diamond bracelet cost more than a year’s salary for that maid! No, a maid could not have pity for her. Unless, Charlotte began to fret, the maid really did have something that Charlotte didn’t. Charlotte couldn’t stand the thought of anyone, especially someone so mundane, possessing something of prestige—and certainly a soul was prestigious. Especially if she was going to take such glee in the fact that Charlotte was empty-handed. Well that’s silly, Charlotte thought, my soul must be priceless. I bet it’s encased in platinum! But when Charlotte tried to think of where her soul was, or even what it was—what did one of those look like anyway—she couldn’t. Maybe she had lost her soul! That sounded like such a terrible thing. It was probably a highly coveted item...especially one of her stature and worth.

Charlotte sat on the couch for a full half-hour thinking about how she had lost her soul.

Where could she find it?

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Charlotte went into her master bedroom and entered the walk-in closet. As she opened the door and stepped in automatic lights, soft lights, which are better for the
complexion, went on and illuminated what her latest ex-husband had called “the cavern.” Charlotte figured that she must have lost her soul recently because no one had ever told her this before…and certainly one of her dear, close friends would have. So, she must have lost her soul only just of late. Charlotte decided the only answer possible was that she must have mistakenly left it at one of the places she went to this week. Thus, all she needed to do was simply re-trace her steps and see where her soul might be. And, naturally, Charlotte needed the “right” outfit for such a search.

Charlotte had never lost anything before worth the trouble to actually search for—everything could be re-bought. But she didn’t want some skanky, street market soul; her soul was definitely a valuable rarity. After all, it must have been the thing that gave her the strength and wits to succeed so wonderfully in life. No, in this case she actually needed the original back. Charlotte shuddered as she remembered her roots—how awful to grow up so poor when she always knew she was destined for, and deserved, better things. Really, she thought, one bathroom for a three bedroom house? Ceramic dinner plates vs. china? Having to buy a prom dress from Macy’s instead of Gucci? How ever did I survive? Charlotte shut her eyelids, risking the chance of smearing mascara under her eyes, and had a rare, sentimental moment as she thought about how lucky she was that her parents had died in that car crash. The insurance money had been enough to help get her foot in the door. It had bought her the right kind of clothes, let her socialize at the right kind of places, and gave her the opportunity to meet the right kind of people. Charlotte was certain that her soul had played a big process in all of this. It must be such a decadently wealthy, absolutely stunning soul because it had fueled the restless drive to earn her right place in life.
Charlotte opened her eyes and checked for make-up smudges using the closet’s mirrored walls. She brought her mind back to the mission at hand as she appraised her luxurious wardrobe. How did one dress to search for such a thing? Not formal to be sure, but not too casual either...this is an exclusive soul, it deserves better than a plaid Burberry. Charlotte assessed her belongings and let out a sigh that echoed throughout the cavernous closet. Five years earlier, at twenty-six, she had been a size two! Now everything she owned was a size four.

“Everything went downhill after thirty,” she muttered to herself while trying to pinch her sides for fat. Her fingers were unable to grab anything so Charlotte felt better and searched on for an outfit.

Charlotte let her fingers slide over her semi-casual tops rack and stopped on her newest Prada purchase, a luxurious cardigan that was jeweled along the connecting front. Perfect! She had gone to the Prada store four days ago; it would be the first place to start her quest. And what was more fitting than wearing part of their newest line?

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Charlotte stepped out of the mirrored elevators in her apartment building and glided towards the marble exit. The doorman, some young boy who looked like he came from Kansas, or somewhere equally horrible and plain, held the door open, and Charlotte breezed by him without so much as a blink.

Charlotte stepped up to the curb to hail a cab. She wished miserably that she hadn’t canceled her car and chauffeur when she married Patrick. She had been so busy since the divorce—a new divorce meant a new wardrobe, haircut and color, and at least
one new Tiffany bracelet—that she hadn’t gotten around to acquiring a car of her own again. It was really too bad; Patrick’s driver had been the best at finding short cuts, and his Rolls Royce had been so decadently sweet compared to her old Lincoln Town car.

The cab came and some Arab was in it. Charlotte just stood there and waited until he got the hint and came out to open her door. She knew he would; his kind took one look at expensive clothes and thought one thing... Big Tipper. Charlotte crinkled her nose while getting in the cab—at least the seats were clean. Charlotte thought, *If they’re going to come to my country than the least they can do is open doors and keep things clean.*

“Prada store. Madison Ave.” She sat very upright to keep as little of her as possible from connecting with the cab.

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Charlotte threw in a ludicrous tip along with her fare and then walked into Prada. She was always ambivalent about tipping; she wanted to give little because she felt they weren’t worth it, but she also desperately loved to show off her wealth and her careless disregard for it. The latter always won out in the end.

“Charlotte! Sweetheart!” The salesman rushed over and began waving his hands, “What luck, twice in one week!”

Charlotte smiled her practiced “benevolent” look and pretended to admire a chiffon skirt on a mannequin.

“Now that, that is you!” The salesman fluffed it out for a better view. “Size four, yes?”
“Oh, I’m just looking today.” Charlotte wandered over to the shoes. “I practically supported this store that last time I was here! But, by any chance, did I forget anything last time?”

“Forget anything?” The salesman laughed, a very phony and for show kind of laugh. “Oh honey, we watch all our customers much too closely! You didn’t leave anything but two-thousand behind, part of which was for that be-you-ti-ful shirt.”

“Hmmm.” Charlotte’s heels clicked on the floor as she continued to walk. “Well, if you’re sure....”

“I’m sure sweetheart. Now, would you like some champagne while you browse?”

The salesman gestured toward the counter.

Charlotte looked at her Rolex. She could barely read the hands, but it never mattered. “Oh my, late for my appointment!” She clicked on back towards the front entrance, “Toodles!”

Charlotte exited through the glass doors as she heard the salesman yell, “Bye, hon! See you soon!”

Charlotte wandered down Madison Avenue for a bit. So her soul wasn’t at Prada. She supposed that would have been too simple and, as any well-bred lady knows, life is never simple. Charlotte paused to think about where to go next. She was starting to feel a bit like a common person—traipsing all over Manhattan doing her own errands! She had sworn fifteen years ago to never do menial work, such as errands, again. But, there was no one whom she could think of that she would trust with this mission. Charlotte sighed; it was one in the afternoon and still no clue. Perhaps the SoHo house. She had been
enjoying their rooftop pool just the other week. And any time was a good time for a quick spa visit.

“Miss…” A man with (fake) gold chains was trying to get her attention.

Yes, she would casually browse through the SoHo house. Now all she needed was to get a damn cab again.

“Miss…”

Charlotte spotted one out of the corner of her eye. “Stop!” She attempted a run, really an impossible feat in her three-inch Jimmy Choos, down the street.

“A dollar please, miss…” said the man sitting in the corner with an open sax case for collection. He watched her hop in the yellow cab.

***

Inside the SoHo house Charlotte realized she had no clue where to look. She wandered around the club rooms for awhile, glancing in corners and stopping every now and then to peek under one of the many plush sofa pillows. She slid next to the potted plants and let her eyes dart down through the leaves. She pretended to need a towel for the pool and quickly scanned the stack. Nothing! Just evidence that the club should really water their plants more.

Charlotte wandered into their entrance bathroom and washed her hands in the marble sink. She sighed deeply.

“Where do people lose things?” she muttered aloud as she dried her hands and then threw the towel in the laundry stack. Charlotte watched the towel sink in the bin and
then shifted her eyes to the waste basket. Well, her mind was slow to form the thoughts. *If you drop something doesn’t someone clean it up and throw it away?*

Charlotte stared disdainfully at the small, gold bin. She tiptoed closer to it and leaned down to sniff the air. Not too bad…it was heavily sprayed with some kind of cheap perfume. Charlotte hurried to peek under the other stalls. Empty. She opened the main door a crack to see if anyone were coming in. Coast clear. She went back to the tiny waste bin.

“Eww,” she whispered to her reflection in the mirror. “Let’s get this over with.”

And with one perfectly French-manicured nail she lifted the lid and peered in. All she found were crumpled tissues and a hand towel that should be in the laundry bin.

“Hmmm.” Charlotte tipped her nail to lift up the hand towel and….

“Ewww!” She slammed the lid and rushed to the sink where she proceeded to use the rest of the soap in the dispenser on her right hand. A bloody string! There was a tampon buried in there. Disgusting. Oh-so vile. She scrubbed harder, risking damage to the sleek manicure.

Charlotte dried her hands and threw the towel on the floor. She felt insulted and wanted someone to suffer as she had. She knocked the bin of fresh towels over and left for the front desk.

“Excuse me,” Charlotte snapped at the lady sitting in front, “you should really fire the maid who cleans the bathroom. The one around the corner. It’s filthy and I shouldn’t have to see that.”
The lady stared at Charlotte in confusion. Why was she yelling about a clean bathroom? The lady had just been in there ten minutes ago due to menstrual needs and it had been spotless. “Looney,” she griped as Charlotte left in a clatter of stomping heels.

This search was so upsetting! She had wasted half a day and what to show for it? A ruined manicure, a slight taste of bile in the back of her throat, and two increasingly swelling ankles from her strappy Jimmy Choos. Where else could she go? She suddenly remembered that she had no clue as to what her soul even looked like. Or anyone’s soul. Really now, where did people even get them in the first place?

Charlotte never went to church; she knew it was a good place to get dressed up and display your newest commodities, but she hated seeing all those old people. Old people in head-to-toe Chanel were still old people. And what was the point of throwing money in that silly wooden bowl that went around? So some priest could get fat and rich off of her money? He already lived and worked in a place that rivaled her apartment in decadence and far exceeded it in expense—as if he needed her money. But the nagging feeling that church might be the place to look couldn’t leave her mind. So Charlotte sighed another heavy sigh and hailed another cab.

“St. Patrick’s Cathedral,” she muttered sullenly, “and step on it!”

***

Standing on the steps of the cathedral Charlotte stood in mixed awe and jealousy over the intricately carved doors and fabulous architecture. Maybe they had stolen her soul to add even more class to the place! One never knew with these religious types.
Charlotte imagined that her soul had a perfect mix of old-world wealth, like the cathedral, and new-world sleek sophistication, like a Tiffany bracelet. She suddenly visualized sparkling, princess-cut diamonds, bands of platinum, and delicately carved designs of angels. She smiled and thought, what a soul I must have! Charlotte clicked up the steps and walked into the massive interior. All the gold-plated candle holders and marble statues! The entire cathedral was lined with tiny rooms, each containing something more rich and impressive than the next. Charlotte’s fingers twitched.

“Excuse me ma’am, would you take a picture of us?” A tourist couple smiled their shiny faces into hers.

Charlotte gave them a wide-eyed, horrified look and hurried away toward the confession booths. Who knew where those tourists were from and where their hands had been? One thing was sure—they had been on that cheap camera!

She smoothed her perfectly coifed hair as a precautionary measure. If she had to talk to one of God’s workers, she might as well remind him what he was missing. Charlotte carefully opened the booth door, using as little contact as possible, and sat stiffly in the old, wooden chair. All that richness behind velvet ropes and the seats they let you sit in might as well have been from Goodwill! Lord knows these people were soulless...

“Yes, my child?” The humble voice rolled in through the grated screen.

“Well,” Charlotte said, sitting up even stiffer, “I have a question.”

“Yes, my child?” The voice was so hushed. So secretive.

“Um,” Charlotte said, wishing she could just hire this guy so then she could demand an answer and boss it out of him. “Does everyone have a soul?”
“Of course, my child.” *Concise bastard* she thought.

“Well, how do you know when you have it?”

“God lets you know. He lets you feel it.” The monotonous voice poured on in Charlotte’s ears.

Charlotte twisted a finger into her curls, risking one turning the other way or, gasp, un-curling. “Yes, yes. But, for instance, what does it look like? What does my soul look like?”

“Souls come in many forms. They are transcendent.”

“What?” Charlotte tried to suppress her frustration and spoke slowly. “What does that mean?”

“You can’t see one, my child. Only God can. And you only when you join him.”

Charlotte didn’t feel like dying anytime soon. “But how can I see it now! What if I *need* to see it now?”

“On earth one can only feel the soul or the acts of the soul.”

“So what does it feel like?” She had to bite her teeth down after each word to not explode.

“The feeling is strong. Powerful. There is energy, a pulse. You can hear the singing of God’s glory in your ears. You can feel the vibrations in your bones. You will know my child.”

“Jesus, why didn’t you say so in the first place?” Charlotte rushed out of that claustrophobic, little box and left the door hanging open as she parted the crowd of tourists. Energy and pulse? Hear the singing? Feel the vibrations? Obviously he meant a rocking night club—and only one was currently hip enough to hold her soul.
Charlotte got into another cab and was in such a euphoric rush that she didn’t bother to give the driver a condescending look. “Upper East Side,” she said, as her mind processed. She needed to get home, have a nice meal, get decked out, and then head on to Bungalow 8!

***

After the cook had served her a nice four ounce filet mignon, with a side of caramelized onions, Charlotte began preparing for Bungalow 8. She made a mental note to get a new maid as soon as possible; she didn’t like how the cook sloppily folded the napkins or how she poured the wine. Charlotte dialed her friend, Susan, as she applied her first base to her face.

“Please leave notification of your purpose for calling. I am currently unavailable in presence. Beep!”

That girl, Charlotte’s mind winked at Susan’s eccentricity as she smeared on some concealer, and she always screens.

“Susan, honey, answer your phone.”

“Darling!” Susan’s voice trilled over the lines. “How ever have you been? Did you take Patrick to the cleaners?”

Charlotte relaxed, and her eyes twinkled, as she remembered that earlier victory—funny, it had been off her mind all day! Usually she would have called Susan immediately. Stupid maid.

“Oh yes. I got everything except the Hamptons house.”
“Oh no! Darling, I did love our last summer there! It was so charming! And that opening fountain....”

“I know,” Charlotte said, shrugging at her reflection in the mirror across the hall, “but you can’t get everything, I guess.”

There was a long silence. Charlotte, distracted, barely noticed the break in conversation; she was looking in the mirror and wondering if she needed more collagen.

“Hello?” Susan asked. “Is this Charlotte who called? Did you just say that?”

“What?” Charlotte snapped back to the phone call. “Oh, Susan, we need to go to Bungalow 8 tonight! How about in an hour? I’ll take a cab to your place.”

“Fabulous, darling!” Charlotte heard Susan’s pitch sky-rocket and cringed in response. “I’ve a new pair of Christian Louboutin’s that I’ve been dying to wear. Perfect!” Susan paused, and then sounded confused; “Why would you take a cab, darling? Did Patrick get the car?”

“Oh, yes...I’ve been taking cabs all day.” Charlotte’s nose wrinkled a bit to think that she had automatically suggested a cab. Of course, Susan had a car.

“Too bad darling. That chauffeur was so handsome...those cheekbones! Well, I’ll have Leon drive us! No need for a cab—you poor thing, you!”

“Sounds good,” Charlotte said, feeling weird suddenly, and couldn’t place why. “I’ll be ready in an hour.”

“Ta, ta darling!” Susan’s piercing words rang in Charlotte’s head.

***
Charlotte was still carefully painting her face when she heard the buzzer alerting Susan’s arrival. She took her time applying the finishing touches to what she considered to be her finest masterpiece to date. Her cheeks were glowing with a hint of pink and no trace of shine. Her lips achieved the impossible feat of having a sort of matte-glossy finish. Her lashes were thick near the eye and then stretched and separated as they reached out. And her eyebrows had been plucked into the perfect half-moon arch, which really added a sharp contour to her cheekbones. Yes, she had only looked better at her second wedding. Time was certainly adding new talents to her hands.

Charlotte grabbed her Louis Vuitton clutch and sashayed all the way out to Susan’s car.

Leon, looking smart in his freshly pressed suit, held the door open and tipped his cap.

“We’re going to West 27th Street,” she told him as she hitched up her dress a little to get in.

“Yes, ma’am,” Leon said, nodding formally. “Bungalow 8.”

“Well, very good,” Charlotte managed to say before being cut off by Susan’s screeching voice.

“Darling!” Susan leaned over and air-kissed both of Charlotte’s cheeks. “Don’t you look fabulous? Like the best preserved jelly on the shelf!” She patted Charlotte’s hand for emphasis and let out a rather satisfied “hmmph.”

Charlotte was still wondering whether she had been insulted or not when Susan continued.
“Darling, I just realized that we’re both single tonight! How long has it been since things lined up like that? This is perfect—we can buffer each other and leave with the creme de la creme tonight!”

Charlotte opened her mouth to say that she didn’t really feel like looking for some man tonight. She had bigger issues, but....

“Yes, Darling.” Susan seemed to get louder with each sentence. “But I get first pick! Your latest, Patrick, was certainly better than my dear, departed Harold. Therefore I am entitled to top selection—can’t hog the gene, or wealth pool now!”

Charlotte’s mind wandered as Susan chattered. She wondered if Susan could help her with her soul quest. She could definitely badger anyone into confessing if they had seen it or not. Charlotte felt her heart give a little jump of excitement at the thought that maybe she would finally find her soul. A jump usually reserved for when she received a proposal from a top wall-street banker or a man with family money. Charlotte once again visualized a gleaming, shining soul, perhaps with emeralds—or a yellow diamond. *That would be nice, she thought. They’re so rare and so expensive! I bet its four carats or more!*

“Oh, I am so thrilled that you called!” Susan’s voice broke Charlotte’s reverie and Susan pulled out a hand mirror and began staring at her pores. “Yes, such a good idea for tonight.”

Charlotte had lost interest and watched the street lights blur by as Susan chattered on. She wondered if maybe a soul looked like a blur of light, and if so, how did you catch that?
Bungalow 8 was trendy enough to have a long line, but exclusive enough that no one who didn’t look like a supermodel even bothered to come. The inevitable “no vacancy” sign was flashing up front, but Charlotte didn’t worry. The bouncer knew her well and she flirted with him enough to always gain immediate entrance. Or, if he happened to be irritable that night, she would just slip a fifty into their handshake and all was set.

“Dear Lord,” Susan mumbled, “Chelsea’s really falling apart. I saw a girl in line wearing a shirt from the Gap. How the hell does she expect to get in?”

Charlotte snickered along with Susan; it was a sight to see. Poor girl, wasting her time.

They walked up to the granite doorway with the potted palms and Charlotte plumped her lips and pouted for the bouncer.

“Sam, look at this line, I came straight to see you.” Charlotte stood straight with her chest pushed out. “I couldn’t wait in line wearing these.” She lifted one perfect Manolo-clad foot and dangled it a bit off the ground.

“Sweetheart,” he said waggling his eyebrows, “I never look below the hips. And those hips are looking fine!"

“Oh, Sam.” She cocked her head to the side coquettishly. “Such flattery. I should be letting you in.”

“Oh, anytime baby.” He kept waggling his eyebrows. She hated that. How much longer did this have to last?
“So, my friend Susan and I are going in...we’ll send someone down with a drink for you.”

Sam’s eyes had risen to the area of her cleavage. “Can’t drink on the job, baby. You go in and have a nice time....be sure to think of me when you leave.”

Charlotte grabbed Susan’s hand and swung her hips with extra force as she walked by. “Thanks, hon,” she shouted over her shoulder, but the noise from inside ate up her words. And besides, Sam was already staring down the next hottie’s dress.

They headed upstairs to the VIP bar. The décor was reminiscent of Old Hollywood and the Beverly Hills Hotel—very classic. And where better for a classic soul to be hiding than here? If nothing else, her soul had exquisite taste. The music was rocking, the drinks were flowing, and the people were beautiful and refined. Yes, this had to be it. Finally.

“That guy over there,” Susan said, tilting her head to the right. “He’s cute and that Gucci suit is from the newest line. I’m going to go ask him to buy me a drink.”

“I don’t know, Susan,” Charlotte said, peering to get a better look. “He looks awfully uptight and pretentious to me.”

Susan gave her a wondering gaze. “What is wrong with you, my dear? That’s how all the rich men look! Why, you’ve always said you wouldn’t even think twice about a guy unless he had that uptight and pretentious look.”

“Oh.” Charlotte thought that maybe she needed a drink. “You’re right. I guess my mind’s been busy and I forgot.”

“Forget your guy-glancing motto? And since when has your mind ever been too busy for snagging a new, wealthy guy?”
“Um,” Charlotte said, but didn’t like how this conversation was unfolding. She suddenly felt disoriented and completely unlike herself. She decided she needed to get rid of Susan because Susan seemed to be causing this ill effect. “Susan, I think that blonde in the corner is heading towards your guy. You better get there first and cut her off.”

Susan’s head quickly swung to the left to check out the situation. “I see her. Little tart—her dress may be Dolce and Gabbana, but it’s from two seasons ago!” Susan turned to go.

Charlotte waved her hand in a dismissive notion. “I’ll be at the bar.”

She figured that the bartender was the one person who must know everything about a club. He was worth questioning…and maybe she could score free drinks.

“Hey.” Charlotte batted those long lashes. “I’ll take an apple martini.”

“Got it.” He turned to grab the glass. “Coming right up.”

“So,” Charlotte said, using her hand to brush her curls back, “this is a pretty rocking night.”

“Yeah, but not as busy as usual because it’s Wednesday night.” He put her drink on the table. “Here you go. Ten dollars.”

Charlotte frowned, but quickly recovered her practiced smile as she searched for the cash. She hadn’t paid for a drink herself in quite some time.

“You’re new here,” she said as she threw fifteen on the bar.

“Yeah, pretty new.” He started to look more interested.

“So, what do you think? This place has got a lot of soul, yes?”
“Soul?” The bartender had a look of suspended disbelief, his jaw dropped and there was a questioning crinkle between his brows. Then he burst out laughing.

“What? What’s so funny?” Charlotte was starting to feel indignant; she wasn’t used to being laughed at.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” He grabbed his side, still laughing. “That’s normal for someone like you to think, I guess.”

“Explain yourself!” Charlotte was gripping her martini glass dangerously tight.

“Well.” He was calming down. “Why not? I hate this job anyway. All you rich bitches who think you know everything in life—when all you know is how to swipe a credit card. Now, you claim to know what ‘soul’ is.” He leaned forward and Charlotte recoiled backwards from that plain, working-class face. “I’ll tell you who has soul. There’s a jazz man who hangs out nights at the lower level of Penn Station. You should hear him play—now there’s soul. More than his fair share. Soul that shines. The wanna-be crap that they play at this place might as well be that crap still left over in the toilet bowl.” It seemed that once the bartender had decided to let all loose he couldn’t stop.

“All of you people are soulless wretches. I’m sick of having to smile and play nice to such plastic faces. You’re the last one I can take—surface-shallow bitch pretending to be so ‘deep!’ Oh yes! Pretending to know all about soul! As if you had one!”

Other customers were looking and he started to walk away, but Charlotte was desperate.

“Yes, that’s the problem!” She grabbed his sleeve and then grimaced at her action. “I’ve lost mine! Where is it? Some jazz man has it you said?”
The bartender paused and smiled wickedly. “Oh, poor thing! Lost your soul!” He shook his head in wonderment. “Yeah, why don’t you go check that sax man out tonight. He’s three levels down the subway, Penn station, E-line. Have fun!” The bartender mocked an excited face and left.

Maybe, under normal circumstances, Charlotte would have caught his mockery, but the lights were dim, the music was loud, and she was just so ecstatic to finally have a lead on her soul. *Some Jazz man with more than his fair share!* Her mind raced as her body moved downstairs. *Did he think if he stole rich and distinguished souls that it would rub off on him! He should know better. It takes breeding.*

Charlotte exploded out of the club door in a burst of big hair and heavy breathing; she had to find a cab. She ran into the street and just dodged being hit by one.

“Get some glasses!” she yelled at its taillights.

Charlotte waved frantically at two, but they passed her by.

“Bastards...oh shit!” She realized her hair was starting to frizz from the rushing and the tinge of sweat in her hairline.

Finally, a cab pulled over and some black guy was at the wheel.

“Penn station. The one with the E-line.” Charlotte paused. “Do you know where that is?” She realized she didn’t.

“Of course, main line.” He glanced at her through the rear view mirror as he took off. What he must have thought of this woman with the expensive clothes and shoes...and with melting make-up, frizzy hair, and a desperate, over-zealous gleam in her face.
***

They reached Penn Station and Charlotte threw a fifty at him in her hurry, about thirty-five dollars over the bill. She stumbled out onto the sidewalk and looked around in a panic. Where the hell was the subway? A nagging voice in her head kept reminding her that she had never been to one before. She had grown up in Connecticut and by the time she had moved to Manhattan she couldn’t risk being seen going down to the subway and ruining her chance at joining high society. And then, of course, she had gotten so rich. Charlotte looked at her watch, midnight, and she didn’t have time to waste. She was feeling so displaced and different without her soul…she needed it back, and quickly.

Charlotte’s eyes settled on a sign for the Penn Station A, C, E lines; it was above a descending staircase. She marched over to it, as well as she could in three-inch heels, and walked stiffly down clutching the handrail for support.

She was halfway down when she looked at the handrail and almost fell over in her disgust. It was covered in chipped paint and had random splotches of gum on it.

“Oh, God.” Charlotte cradled that right hand as if it had been crushed and broken. “Oh dear. I’ll take care of you as soon as I can.” She continued walking down, this time without the handrail, and each step was precarious in those wobbly heels.

“Didn’t they invent elevators long before the mass transit system? Where are they!” she screamed in her frustration as she started her second descent. “Or how about escalators? They can’t be that expensive!”

A nearby couple watched this frazzled lady talking to herself. “Do you think she’s homeless?” the man asked his wife.
"I don’t know, that dress looks expensive." The wife squinted as Charlotte passed her at that moment. "But maybe she got it at the Salvation Army or something."

"Jesus!" Charlotte stopped and took off her shoes after she almost slipped on some spilled soda. "Don’t they have maids down here? Someone needs to get fired!"

"Why do you think they always talk to themselves?" the wife asked her husband.

"I don’t know." the husband said, shrugging. "Maybe they just want to feel important."

Charlotte finally reached the third level and she had not seen the Jazz man yet. She was so distraught over being in this dark, humid place. This was no place for her soul to be! He must be an awful man. Charlotte looked at her ruined Manolos, her ruined pedicure, and her ruined right hand, and cried. It was a good thing she didn’t have a mirror or she would have seen the running mascara and cried for days. Evil demon, she thought, thinks he can hide my soul from me. Charlotte’s eyes stabilized from their constant searching and settled on a group of homeless men and women in a corner.

She strutted up to them with as much dignity as she had left and tried her best to look regal and imposing.

"Excuse me," she said to the group. They ignored her and continued to stare into space. After all, in this moment, she looked rather like one of them.

Charlotte reached into her wallet. "Excuse me," she said again while waving several twenties.

The whole group perked up. They didn’t care what she looked like as long as she offered money. One man near the front became their spokesperson. "Yes, ma’am?"
"I am looking for someone. One of your kind. If you can tell me where he is I will give you this money." Charlotte waved the bills around again for good effect. "He is a jazz man who has a lot of soul."

The group looked at one another quickly. They were all thinking the same thing. There were a lot of jazz men. All with a lot of soul. But, there was only one who favored a spot near here.

The spokesman took a step forward. "We know exactly who you mean, ma’am. He’s usually around the corner. He’s probably just taking a nap right now."

Charlotte felt instant relief, but she was puzzled at the same time. Who knew a homeless man could speak so eloquently? Shouldn’t they all sound like immigrants or as if they had Down’s syndrome or something? She felt a sense of discord between her expectations and reality.

"Thank you," Charlotte said and paused. "By the way…why do you speak English so well?"

The homeless man raised his eyes to meet hers and, for a moment, Charlotte imagined that if he were clean and well-groomed, well, he would be very handsome.

"I used to be a stock broker," he said.

An upper-middle class looking woman and her mother walked around the corner. They watched as Charlotte passed out the twenty-dollar bills to the group of homeless people.

"That’s so sweet!" the daughter said. "Maybe she’s a philanthropist."

"But she’s so dirty and messy," her mother commented. "However, those are big bills and her bag is a Louis Vuitton."
“Well,” the daughter mused. “If it’s not her money, maybe she’s like Robin Hood. Either way, she must have a generous, good soul.”

Charlotte said goodbye to the homeless group and rounded the corner. There, just as they said, was a black jazz man snoozing next to his saxophone case. Charlotte didn’t know what to do; she felt a bit intimidated, but couldn’t recognize the feeling and so she registered it as being confused. Charlotte watched as the jazz man awoke, as if he could feel her watching him, and, as if to verify that, he tipped his torn, felt hat in her direction. He wore many (fake) gold necklaces and was layered in coats though the subway station was warm. His saxophone looked old, but polished well and obviously loved. He hooked it onto his neck strap and then his fingers fell immediately into place on the keys—like they were home. The jazz man began to play... sending one note soaring after the next, colliding them into mixed melodies, combusting them into bursts of power that filled Charlotte’s ears. She was surprised to realize that she kind of liked the music. Maybe he had once been part of the New York Symphony. Or the Boston Pops.

The mellifluous sounds washed over her and her ears began to twitch. She watched as his fingers flew up and down the instrument—and how every now and then one of them would tremble up and down on the key to get a warbling effect. His mouth was pursed so tightly on the mouthpiece and it seemed as if he didn’t need to breath. The music flowed on—smooth and continuous—echoing throughout the underground hallways.

Charlotte took a deep breath and sat down on her purse. She felt as if she could swim in his sea of notes and with that relaxing thought she closed her eyes and fixed her
ears on the music. She began to feel that she now truly knew the feeling of “zen.” Her yoga instructor had always told her she was in a zen-like state...but she had never felt it. Now this—this was what Charlotte imagined it to be. Charlotte thought, he doesn’t seem that bad. Maybe he was just taking care of my soul. Holding it for awhile.

The jazz man was winding down and Charlotte stood up and walked over. He was nodding his head up and down as if the music was still resonating in his mind.

“Excuse me, sir?” Charlotte felt that she had better be nice in order to get her soul back.

“Yes, ma’am?” The jazz man’s voice was deep and it rumbled out like one of his notes.

“Sir, I’ve been told that you have a lot of soul. I was wondering if you might have my soul too?” Charlotte’s voice sounded so earnest and she almost didn’t recognize herself.

“If I might have your soul?” he echoed back to her.

“Yes.” Charlotte hesitated; maybe he wanted to play hardball. “I’m sure you didn’t mean to take it. Perhaps I dropped it, and I can see how one would pick up something that valuable if one crossed its path. I don’t blame you at all.”

The jazz man said nothing, but his eyes looked as though he was working something out behind them.

“I could give you a finder’s fee!” Charlotte nodded eagerly at those words. “For looking after it this whole time.”

“Finder’s fee, huh?” The jazz man smiled and revealed several gold-capped teeth.
“Yes, I’ve been spending quite a bit, but...” Charlotte dug through her wallet, “I still have fifty left. How’s fifty dollars?”

The jazz man took the money from her outstretched hand and transferred it to his own pocket. Then he reached into his saxophone case and grabbed one of the quarters in there. A particularly dull one, with absolutely no sheen, that was turning brown at the edges.

“Here, you go ma’am.”

Charlotte looked at the dirty quarter in her hand. “Are you sure, sir?”

“Yes, ma’am. Each one of them quarters in there is a soul.”

“Oh.” Charlotte looked. There were a bunch of quarters—around twenty. But there were also dimes, nickels, and pennies.

She closed her hand over the quarter. “But what are all the rest of the coins then?”

The jazz man lowered his smoky eyes as if in prayer. “Those are the half-souls. The not-so-good ones. Feel lucky ’cause yours is a full soul.”

Charlotte suddenly felt that she had better get out of there soon, before the jazz man changed his mind and gave her a half-soul. She clutched tightly at the quarter and began backing away.

“Thank you, sir!” she said as she turned to go.

The jazz man watched her walk up the stairs and smiled to himself. “Silly, rich women,” he mumbled. “Think they can buy anything. Even a soul. Guess they must be the devil ’cause only he can do that.”
Charlotte, shoes back on, stumbled out of the dank subway station and back onto the streets of Manhattan. She gripped the quarter tightly and, since she had no more money on her, began to walk the thirty blocks home. Due to her earlier excitement when she thought she would find her soul at the club, Charlotte had forgotten to grab the wallet that held all her credit cards. She had only grabbed cash. She had also forgotten her cell phone. She shivered in the cold breeze and goose bumps scattered over her skin. She stopped walking and looked at the quarter in her hand. It was so ugly! So dirty and common! How could this be her soul?

The more Charlotte thought about it, the angrier she got. She had “worked” so hard in life to get everything a girl could want and her soul looked like something out of her past. A nasty reminder of what she had started from. Complete commonness. Why would she want to hold onto a thing like that? She was better off without it! It certainly wasn’t worth a thirty-block walk home in the dark.

Charlotte walked up to the payphone on the corner. She knew of at least five guys who would be happy to rescue her, but only one was someone whom she would never consider dating. He only made a hundred grand a year...how was a girl supposed to live on that? Therefore, he was the only choice to call because no one she considered serious could ever see her like this. Charlotte was fully confident that he would jump at the chance to come rescue her. Then she would flirt with him on the ride home, make up some excuse of a mugging for her unsightly appearance and lack of cash, and, when he walked her to her front door, she would promptly slam it in his face. Charlotte smiled at the thought. It would be so good to feel like her regular self again.

Charlotte picked up the phone and paid with her soul.
Life in an Aquarium

I remember sitting in Jill’s room at the beginning of my senior year and wondering about his spaced-out look. He normally had that look from his regular lack of thought, but this time there seemed to be something forming in that head of his, behind the blankness. There had been this silent twinkle in his eye that would pop up from time to time and it was there again. Jill was a good friend of mine and he lived a couple of floors down from me in our dorm apartment building. Jill’s real name was Gil, but his roommates were named Jack and Jaron. Back when they had first moved in together, Jack had decided that Gil would thereon be called ‘Jill’ for the sake of alliteration. Jack thought it sounded more hip to have three ‘J’s’ all together. But I digress. We all knew Jill wanted something, but I, and our tight group of friends, couldn’t figure out what until one day he simply came out and said it.

“Fish.”

“Fish?” I queried.

“Fish.”

“Hmmm.” I considered this proposition. “Sounds cool.”

Jack was thrilled by the idea.

“Cool dude, they’ll be all swimming around and buggy eyed. It’ll look great in the room. We gotta get some really cool fish though. We need a chill room. The fish have to chill.”

The idea of seeing a fish chill was intriguing and I wanted to see how this developed. A week went by and then, one day, there it was. A glass aquarium sat on top
Jill’s nightstand and inside swam three chill fish. One was a shark fish; he was long, lean, and gray in color. Jack informed me that this was Scrotum. The other fish was rounder and striped. I peered at him as he swam in erratic circles.

“What’s this guy’s name?” I tapped a finger on the glass by him.

Jill popped in the room from the kitchen. “Ivana Humpalot.”

“That’s what Jack tells me, but what’s the fish’s name?”

“Ivana Humpalot!”

I shook my head. “Good Lord…these poor fish.”

The last fish was smaller, oval-shaped, and all blue. He remained nameless for several days until their third roommate, Jaron, declared that the last fish would be Pootie Tang. And so he was.

Our group of friends consisted of about eleven people, who at any given time knew exactly what all eleven were doing. And at least five, at any given time, could usually be found in Jack and Jill’s apartment. It had become our official hangout spot and not a day went by without PlayStation 2 blasting or the movie “The Matrix” being played for the infinite time. It got so bad that everyone spoke to each other by using quips from the dialogue of “The Matrix” or “Austin Powers.” Every weekend our group would conglomerate there and alternate between drinking games, dancing to loud music, friendly arguing, or, most likely, all three. Our social group became our world—basically no one in it hung out with anyone else. Sure, every now and then one of us would meet a parent for dinner if it was a family birthday, or call up an old friend from high school, but otherwise our group was impenetrable.
At the first party to feature the fish as VIP guests there was a noticeable lack of background noise. The TV was actually off and the stereo system was only at half blast. This was because Jill said that the fish didn’t like loud noises or vibrations. Thus, everyone had to follow his noise-limit rule or be kicked to the curb—well, elevator really since we were on the eighth floor. Everyone treated the fish like celebrities; it was like no one had seen a fish before. Or maybe it was just the idea that one of us had the audacity to care for a living thing. No one in our group had even owned a plant before.

Randy came storming in through the apartment door, obviously stoned out of his mind, and yelled, “Whoa dude! Whoaaaa! Those fish are psychedelic man!”

The fish remained their rather plain, solid colors and stared at us all.

“Look at them!” Randy was screaming and Jill was frowning. “It’s like God painted them, yo! All the colors, so swirl-ly, so sublime. They’re like lollipops! Yeah, baby!”

Sara and I exchanged glances. I was a “tom boy” and usually hung out more with the guys in the group, but Sara and I were pretty close. We both had noticed that Randy had been coming to these things like this more and more often. I thought about giving him a dictionary and telling him to look up moderation, but right now, in this state, he’d probably try to eat the pages.

Steve took Randy into Jack’s bedroom so that they could go smoke some more pot together and Jill put his hands over the top of the aquarium as if that would block out their loud laughter.
Linda was totally drunk and was sitting and staring at the fish with a glazed expression on her face. She was pretty quiet that night, but kept yelling out, every now and then, “I can’t believe you got fish!”

Shelly and Jim, our group’s only couple for the moment, were looking at the fish as if they wanted some “babies” of their own. And then, when they thought no one was looking, but everyone was, they gave each other a look that said, “we just want to practice.”

Jack stood up at about midnight and said, “It’s time to go, everyone. Go and visit your own homes for awhile. Remember those places?”

We all groaned; it was still so early! Normally we hung out till three, or sometimes till the sun came up. But Jack stood firm.

“Scram,” he said. “The fish need sleep. And it wouldn’t hurt any of us to finally get some of that too.”

That party showed the first signs of Jack and Jill’s obsession with the fish. It would only get worse from there. Jack and Jill were enamored with the fish and would spend absurd amounts of time watching them. Every day they would tell whoever was in their room a new story on what the fish had done. In fact, the observation, or I like to call it stalking, of the fish became the new favorite over video games and pre-viewed movies. I couldn’t walk in anymore without immediately being blasted with news on the fish. One day it would be...

“Ho, Mary—today Scrotum just chased Ivana all over the fish tank. I think he’s in heat.” Jack put his face by the tank and smiled at Scrotum.

And the next it was...
“Damn, Mary! You just missed it! Pootie wagged his tail really hard and hit Scrotum in the face!”

Jack and Jill studied those fish so hard that if that same dedication had been applied to academics, they would have graduated in three years. Instead they were fifth-year college students and graduation was still not in sight. Jack and Jill became experts on their fishes’ personalities and observed and predicted their every move. At the same time, our usual group gossip went on as every member in our cluster happily rattled and tattled on other members. I learned that Steve and Linda were probably going to ‘hook up’ soon because we had all seen how they had flirted at the last party. They had dared each other to do shots until they had to hold each other up to walk home. It came by the rumor-mill that Todd was mad at Randy for borrowing his CD player without permission and then accidentally scuffing the side when he dropped it off his bike. And Sara told me in careful detail how she had observed Shelly and Jim at the last party and that, in her opinion, they were headed for a break-up. Jim had ignored Shelly twice when she tapped him on the shoulder to talk and Shelly had purposely danced with Roger all night. Yes, news on everyone’s business never seemed to get old.

We had a potluck one night for dinner. I brought rice and shumai, Jack made spaghetti, and Jill cooked country-style pork. This was a small affair because it was a school night, so it was the three of us and two others—Shelly and Jim, who had subsequently, not broken up. Jack, Jill, and I lived the closest of anyone in our group and we became a clique within our clique. Thus we often had these small dinners, usually on weekdays. Shelly and Jim had been invited on a whim this time. We would talk about what was going on with everyone in the group or about the latest celebrity or
movie gossip. Sometimes we had the dinner in my apartment and would watch “Late Night with Conan O’Brien” or some other show that wouldn’t test our brains. I lived upstairs from Jack and Jill and had several TVs in my apartment because all of my roommates own one. The guys, however, had none. But on this particular pot-luck, instead of going to my room, or having a conversation, we all sat in front of the aquarium and watched the fish. I must admit—those fish were starting to grow on me. They would swim in circles, or randomly chase one another. Often they would just float perfectly still and they looked very cute then with their big, bulgy eyes. I was a little worried that the fish would get bored though, because the tank was bare. It was completely void of any objects; there was nothing tangible within their environment. Jill said he was going to buy lights for the aquarium, seaweed to put inside, maybe a little scuba-diver figure, and a rock with a hole in it—all this as soon as he had money. (Translation—the fish would live in emptiness forever.)

I once came in to watch TV with Jaron and said “hi” to Jill, who was pretending to do homework in his bedroom, but he was really admiring his fish. An hour later I left and said “bye” to Jill. He still had his eyes on the fish, and not on his books. It was as if those fish held the answer to life. As if their movements, if interpreted right, could tell us all what our movements should be. They were like scaly, gilled gurus to Jill.

Our group had a problem, in addition to gossip, with decisions. No one could ever make one. In fact, Jill deciding to get fish was the most important decision anyone had made since we decided to go to college. Everything was a battle about getting someone else to make the decision. Sometimes it was a fight over dinner.
“Where do you want to go?” I asked Jack on a Thursday, which was our day to eat dinner together.

“I don’t know. Wherever you want.”

“Nah, you pick. I picked last time.”

Jack shook his head. “No way. I picked last time. We went to Subway.”

“Ha!” The sneak; I couldn’t believe him. “I picked Subway. Who are you kidding?”

“Hurry up,” Jack whined. “I’m hungry.”

This would go on forever until we either just ate in or went to one of our four fallback places: Subway, McDonalds, Jack in the Box, or Panda Express.

Sometimes it was a fight over what to do on the weekends.

One Friday night, per usual, Jack, Jill, Jaron and I were sitting around in their apartment trying to figure out what to do so that we could call everyone else and tell them the plan. Our usual Friday night started with us meeting at seven and finally leaving to do something at eleven. It generally took four hours for us to decide what to do. We wasted the time in between throwing barbs at one another and by being distracted by the TV, the blasting music, and now, by the fish.

“We could go see a movie,” I suggested to the guys.

Jack ignored me and put some food into the fish tank.

“You know Jack hates the movies,” Jill said from the kitchen where he was opening some beers. “He only watches, like, one a year.”
I knew that already. Jack pretended to hate the movies, but I suspected he was just a cheap bastard who couldn’t deal with paying eight bucks to see a flick. After all, whenever someone else rented one he would watch it.

“Well, we could go bowling,” I said apathetically. Someone had to throw out choices to be rejected and the duty always seemed to fall on me.

Jaron shook his head. “Nah, the only good bowling alley is super far and always so crowded. We’d just spend all our time drinking while waiting for a lane. Might as well drink at home then—cheaper.”

Jill came in from the kitchen, handed everyone their beers, and then poured a drop or two into the fish tank.

“What’re you doing?” I asked. “You’re going to kill them.”

“No way.” Jill sounded defensive at the suggestion that he might hurt the fish. “You can’t expect me to deny them a good time too.”

“Whatever.” I rolled my eyes. “How about we go to some bar?”

“Cheaper at home!” all three guys said together in unison.

“Man, I give up!” I downed some beer to ease my frustration. “No one ever listens to me. We might as well ask the fish; we’d get just as much progress done.”

To my dismay Jack thought that was a wonderful idea.

“Yeah, we should ask the fish!” His whole face lit up and he looked like a little kid who had thrown a water balloon at someone. “I know!” Jack reached in the tank and scooped up all the fish food he had just put in. “What we’ll do is make each fish represent a choice. Pootie will be movies, Scrotum will be bowling, and Ivana will be a bar. Now, I’ll dump in the fish food and the first one to eat is the one we’ll do.”
I looked at Jill and Jaron and shrugged my shoulders. At least it was a way for a
decision to get made. “Go ahead,” I told Jack.

Jack dumped the fish food in and we all leaned forward to see who would “win.”
None of the fish went for the food at first because they had just been eating from the first
time that the food had been in the tank. Then Pootie started to move.

“Ha, Pootie is going to get it!” Jaron was excited; he loved movies. “Sucks for
you, Jack!”

But Pootie was just toying with us and swam around without eating anything.

We watched intently thinking that Ivana might go for it because there was a piece
floating down right in front of her, but in the end Scrotum ate first.

“Looks like were going bowling,” I said.

“Yeah, but where should we go to bowl?” Jill asked.

I sighed and leaned back in my chair. Unless we played the fish-pick-for-us game
again it was going to take awhile and I might as well be comfortable.

It was pretty sad, but we ended up using the fish to make a lot of our decisions
from then on. Every time we got fed up trying to make a choice on our own, Jack or Jill
would make up some game that let the fish pick.

One day Jill thought the fish should see something of the world and so he put
them in a big stew pot and carried them up to my room.

“See guys, don’t be scared,” he said soothingly to them. “This is Mary’s room.
You know Mary. The one that doesn’t try very hard to talk to you guys.”

Jill was splashing some water out of the pot so I told him to grab one of the
newspapers from my recycling pile and put it on the newspaper on the table.
“Damn, Mary. I never noticed how many newspapers you had in this corner. I thought you didn’t read the paper.”

I shrugged. “I don’t. My mom got me the subscription. So, every day I get the paper from my mailbox, take off the rubber band, and throw it in the recycling bin.”

Jill made a funny face at me. “You just throw them straight in there?”

“Well,” I said, trying to sound defensive, but didn’t really care. It wasn’t like he read anything except sports magazines and Playboy—for the articles, of course.

“Sometimes I read the ads. And sometimes I use it to get the movie times.”

“Pathetic, isn’t she?” Jill cooed to his fish.

“Whatever, like you would read the paper if you got it.”

“Sure I would.” Jill said, putting his finger in the stew pot and twirling the water around. “Too bad I don’t get it.”

“Yeah...what a coincidence!” I laughed and went to turn on some cartoons—or maybe Comedy Central.

“You believe me, don’t you Ivana?” Jill said, now trying to tickle Ivana. “I better take them home—they looked scared. I shouldn’t have taken them to such a totally new environment so quickly. Look at them! They have no idea where they are and it’s freaking them out.”

I looked and the usually placid fish did seem to be swimming rather erratically.

“Bye Mary.” Jill was already halfway out the door with his “babies.” “Don’t worry guys...Daddy’s taking you home.”

Jill had made me feel guilty about my newspaper pile and I almost thought about reading one. But I couldn’t do it. Reading or hearing the news made me feel so
depressed—it was always about ghastly and terrible stuff. It didn’t concern me anyway...the news and the world always went on and never seemed to affect my life.

Three weeks later I was sitting in class and the teacher was talking about ethics in business. She was using something called “Enron” as the example. Maybe she noticed the blank looks on most of our faces because she eventually stopped and said, “Class, you do know about the recent Enron scandal, yes?”

I looked hard at my notebook and pretended to jot some notes down.

Most of the students in this class lived in the dorms—I either knew them or recognized them from just seeing them around. But one girl, who I happened to know lived at home with her parents, cautiously raised her hand.

“Didn’t they have a big scandal on insider trading?” she squeaked out.

“Yes, very good.” The teacher appraised the “we-have-no-clue” expressions on the rest of our faces. “I can’t believe the rest of you haven’t heard about this. How did you hear about it?” she asked the quiet girl who had answered.

“Well,” the quiet girl said, turning a bit pink. “I saw it on the news while eating dinner with my parents.”

The teacher nodded and went on lecturing about this Enron investigation and my mind started to faze again. I just needed this class to fulfill some bullshit college requirement. It wasn’t in my major. Everything I needed to study seemed to deal with authors who had been dead for two hundred years, not present day business scandals.

I used to see the fish, and my friends, on a regular basis, but school eventually got the better of me. I was unable to visit Jack and Jill for awhile because I was consumed with homework. The realization that it was pump-the-homework-out or flunk-out had
finally hit home. One fateful day Jaron came up to my room so that we could go to the gym together. He broke the shocking news to me gently.

"Holy crap Mary, did you hear about Pootie Tang?"

"What?" I grabbed my gym towel.

"He died. Jill didn’t know what to do with him, but Jack decided that it was Pootie’s last wish to fly.”

I was suspicious. “What do you mean?”

“I mean they flew his dead body out of the window.”

“They live on the eighth floor!”

“Yeah, you shoulda seen it, he just flew...and plop.”

Oh the humanity.

On the way back from the gym, what did I spot lying in a shallow puddle of mud and covered, half-eaten, by ants? Poor, dead, rotting, Pootie Tang. It was a poignant sight to see.

How easily things are thrown away, I thought. How soon the time comes to fly.

I was still too busy to pay my respects to the remaining fish, but I called Jack to tell him I couldn’t believe they threw Pootie out like that.

Jack was solemn. “His time had come. He wanted to fly.”

“Still,” I said, feeling that Pootie deserved someone on his side, “seems a little cruel. I almost stepped on him coming home from the gym.”

“It’s like Steve dropping out of college—some things are inevitable. He was also too much of a free spirit.”
"Wait a sec," I said and creased my forehead. "What do you mean Steve dropped out of college?"

"Didn't Jill tell you? He must have been too broken up about Pootie Tang." Jack paused as if to give Pootie a moment of silence. "Steve dropped out. Come on...we all knew it was going to be soon. He was drinking way too much and once he started to get into the pot it was over. I don't think he went to a single class this whole semester."

I went to grab a beer and then thought better of it. "I can't believe this. Especially because Randy dropped out a month ago."

"Yeah, well." I could picture Jack shrugging. "He was hard-core into the drugs too. That guy started doing all that 'e' and shrooms."

"You know," I said, and poured some juice. "I knew Randy in high school and he was a total nerd. Straight-A student. I never would have guessed that he would've ended up such a druggie."

Jack shuffled around and there was some static on the phone. He was probably moving to a new angle at which to gaze at his remaining fish. "Well, Steve was valedictorian of his high school. Also a supreme nerd. But, you know, living here in the dorms does something to people. And if you're not strong enough, then you cave."

I wondered what my limit was for caving. Was I hinging on a red-alert? It was hard living in the dorms—you were in this static, cramped environment where people constantly watched your every move and were more than happy to offer you drugs. I can't even count how many times I've turned down a joint or a hit off the bong. Someone's always waiting to 'feed' it to you.
Two days later I made it down to the guys’ room and as I peered in the aquarium I noticed that Ivana Humpalot was all alone, chilling in a corner. It turns out Scrotum had turned suicidal soon after Pootie’s demise and would just swim up and down as if contemplating jumping out. Or he would mope depressively near the bottom and just kind of float instead of swim. He had expired earlier that day by jumping out of the aquarium. Jaron had almost stepped on Scrotum because the fish had landed in Jaron’s bedroom slippers.

I looked at Jack. “I can’t believe you killed another fish!”

“No way Dude—that fish wanted to die. I should have killed him earlier; he was acting all stupid just moping around. No sense having a stupid fish. He wasn’t cool—it was time for him to go.”

Heartless.

“I shouldn’t have tried to culture him. Poor little guy. I took him out to the living room yesterday and we watched the news together. I just wanted to show him more of the world…let him learn or something.”

I stared, straight-faced, at Jack. “You and the fish watched the news together?”

“Yeah, I think it was too much for him considering how depressed he was about Pootie. I mean they had some thing about this guy who beat his girlfriend into critical condition, and this one about the police having to do a car chase…oh, and they caught this super, big marlin and it won some kind of ribbon.”

Jack looked rather remorseful and I almost felt bad for him, but instead I just reiterated. “You and the fish watched the news together?”
"I just wanted him to know that shit happens, you know, to help him get over Pootie."

I paused, how to put this delicately... "You do realize that you own fish, right?"

Jack didn’t even hear me. He was too busy muttering about how it was only right. That it was Scrotum’s time to go

"Did you fly him too?"

Jack shook his head. "We flushed him."

And like that one can simply be flushed away.

I visit more often now and Ivana Humpalot is still there every time, but I have yet to see her move. She is always floating perfectly still in the middle of the tank every time I look. It’s as if her will has also expired and she is just biding her time to go. I told Jill that I think she’s depressed.

"Nah."

"She’s tough. It’s survival of the fittest. She’s Queen of the kingdom now."

Queen of an empty kingdom.

"Yeah Dude," Jack joined in. "She’s all happy ’cause she’s got the whole place to herself. She’s always swimming around—you’re just not here at the right time."

"Whatever you guys." They had all these papers and books out on the desk, but hadn’t even looked at them. "So, how’s the studying going for that FSHN class?"

"Ah man," Jack said, quickly glancing at the pile and then looking away. "I totally bombed my last test. Sixty-four percent—sucks dude! So, I’ve totally got to pass this one...and with, like, a high B at least."

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“Yeah,” Jill piped in. “My teacher totally screwed my last midterms too. I’m sunk in the hole. And now finals are next week! Totally screwed.”

“Screwed,” echoed Jack.

“Tried studying, guys?” I asked.

Jack and Jill looked at each other. “Screwed,” they said in unison.

They went back to looking at their fish. “Ivana’s totally mellow,” Jack said.

“She’s just chilling now. She’s strong.”

I guess Ivana is just chilling. But sometimes I’m not so sure. Who knows how much more time Ivana has? Maybe tomorrow I’ll find her rolled up with some rice in nori—I wouldn’t put anything past these guys.

And then the aquarium would be empty.