

“In My Mind There’s No Sorrow”

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By  
Jeffery Ryan Long

Thesis Committee:

Robbie Shapard, Chairperson  
Rodney Morales  
John Rieder

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## CHAPTER 1

I'm constipated today.

I've called in sick to work. I can't work when I'm constipated.

My work is important—

I'm a 19<sup>th</sup> century poet trapped in nostalgia. I recall a younger time when I was in this state, pondering the same toilet within the same bathroom. Perhaps it's been five years—perhaps ten. I wouldn't speak to anyone for days. I could only sit, as I'm sitting here—in this *same chair*—and contemplate my misery. As I'm doing now.

Inside me it malingered, something ancient and negative comprised of salts and hardened sugars and the grit of low-grade Parmesan cheese and grains of uncooked rice, like a D battery stuck in a garden hose, generating sickness and hate in corrosive waves. I howled. I beat my forehead with my fists. I burned incense and courted dark spirits. *And then*—after complete exhaustion, the shifting of tectonic plates. This monument, this antique, this being of dust and rot crawled out, dragging its foul train behind it. During the experience I nearly wept. I say “wept,” instead of cried, because the feeling was entirely rapturous.

Tiresome! Tiresome! Tiresome!

I can't think. I *can* think—

See what this does to me! Is there nothing on television?

No. Nothing. I'd prefer not to have it on. The colors and sounds irritate me. They make me more nervous. Must stop thinking about it. Have I been drinking too much soda? Not enough fiber—or water—

Oh, what does it do to rationalize it? My digestive system is incorrigible. There is no ritual to placate it—my intestines do as they please. At night they crawl out through my mouth and grip the doorknob like a long, moist tentacle. See how sickeningly febrile! It's perpetuating itself. Constipation has infiltrated my thoughts. Have I been drinking too much soda? What does it matter?

Perhaps if I talked about it, instead of thinking about it, I wouldn't have to think about it anymore. Yes—I'll see Mrs. Altman and tell her all about it. Old people love to talk about that kind of *shit*. That kind of *crap*. Can't get them off the subject, as a matter of fact; it's all Metamucil at breakfast time with a big bowl of bran. And prunes. I could talk to Mrs. Altman about it and then it'll disappear. But not thinking about it doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. Does that even make sense? Doesn't that even not make sense? I'm thinking in too many negatives. No more of that. No more of that.

No more negatives. It's perpetuating itself. It's distorting my thoughts. Altering my perceptions. Destroying my sense of reality and internal propriety. Did Beethoven think about being constipated? What did they think back then? I bet Beethoven *did* think about it. I bet Beethoven was damn well preoccupied by it and spent a good piece of his day meditating on the timely movement of his bowels. That's what "Moonlight Sonata" is about. It's about peace.

Mrs. Altman will be here this afternoon. Good old Mrs. Altman. Her British tea and her "biscuits"—she calls them "biscuits"—sometimes she makes them herself. Oatmeal. She makes a fine oatmeal raisin biscuit. And you know what the secret is? Brown sugar. All right, it's no great secret—but there's not many people who know how much brown sugar you *really* put in an oatmeal raisin cookie. They'd never know.

They'd never know until they had one with just the right amount. And you can't *simply* follow a recipe. It's intuitive. I don't much care for her *chocolate chip* oatmeal cookie, though. She uses milk chocolate chips. If there's one thing I've noticed about British people, they love their milk chocolate. Milk chocolate's fine, but you can't put milk chocolate in a cookie. Any idiot knows that you have to use semi-sweet. It's just common sense. But like I said, British people love their milk chocolate. And when they can't eat it, they'll drink it just the same. Cadbury's made an entire industry out of it.

Good old Mrs. Altman. She's from Scotland, actually, and the thing about Scots is (don't you *dare* call them Scotch—I had to learn that the hard way—well, I actually learned it from a trivia column in the newspaper) they don't like being confused with the English. I always tease her, as though I've forgotten she's told me several times that she's Scottish, and the poor old thing forgets that she's told me that she's not English, and she tells me *again* that she's Scottish. As though I never knew before. Good old Mrs. Altman.

She'll be here this afternoon—with oatmeal raisin cookies. And hot coffee this time (even though she drinks it instant) instead of tea. That is, if she's not dead. Jesus, what a horrible thought. Don't die. Perhaps she'll even bring along those biscuits her sister sends her in the mail, those "digestives."

But she doesn't even know I'm home today. She'll think I'm at work. I was supposed to work today—I better leave the door open so she sees that I'm home. Usually she only comes on Tuesdays and Saturdays for tea. I'll leave the door open and tell her that I forgot I left it open. That is, if she's not dead. She's quite old. Her husband's dead.

Died a long time ago. He was an American. He was probably in the military—how else do people meet and marry other people from overseas? It was most likely

during or after a war of some kind. I wouldn't say as late as the Vietnam War—perhaps the Korean War— could it have even been World War II? The War of 1812? She told me, several times, actually, but I'm not sure if I can't remember very well or if she didn't tell the story well. Like I always say (and, yes, I *do* always say “like I always say” before I say it): having a conversation with an old person is like being on a very long bus ride. The scenery is blurry, indistinct, mostly boring. And believe me, scenery's about the best you're going to get. Soon it becomes physically uncomfortable to keep sitting, but you know you have no other alternative. Bus has left, and you've paid your ticket. And because you've paid your ticket, you begin to resent the ride altogether, to resent past sentimental feelings that inspired you to take the trip in the first place.

But then a daydreaming preservation instinct takes effect—sweet salvation! and what was just a water spot on the window of the bus becomes a penguin you pretend is running through the moving landscape, leaping over electricity poles and trees. It bobs between your eyeballs, in and out of perspective, as meaningless words fall like raindrops unnoticed. The ride ends while you are still roving through some fantasy—an indignant cough, or a falsely embarrassed “oh, you must be so terribly *bored*”—the ride stops so suddenly that you don't realize it right away, not until the silence in the air startles you. And after the faux apologies are bandied about, the genuine feeling of thankfulness at the termination overwhelms the resentment felt earlier, subdues even the strong doubt that the arrival at your destination was worth the trip it took to get there.

If I had met Mrs. Altman when she was younger—well, what? Her lipstick is chalky on her shriveled lips. Her eye shadow is a dull blue paste. And she was no beauty when she was young. But I'm sure she caught many a suitor's eye as she carried her tray

of tea into the drawing room, impressed as they were by her pristine manners—though doubtless these manners have slipped somewhat over the years. Her behavior, her way of carrying herself, is now a sparkling veneer of chrome, when in the past it was perhaps freshly polished silver. Her chromed, dignified carriage calls upon your reflection by her unerring example, you that have eaten at the tables of Americans and have left your shoes on upon entering the house. Often that reflection is so clear that you want to look away. It's in her posture, her selection of words, her amiability, her tact. Often she makes you appear *that* hideous, *that* distorted, like a troll cleaning out his nose with a black fingernail while cupping his genitals. If I had met her when she was younger I would have nurtured the impotent smoldering passion for Mrs. Altman that characters from Victorian novels hold in their heads because their hands are far too small. I'm sure that the drama of a fictionalized romance—amongst candles and dusty curtains and attics full of old trunks and cobwebs—would quickly supersede the passion of my feelings. But on holidays, like Christmas and New Year's, I would become drunk with sentimentality, calling out into the cold winds *Mrs. Altman, Mrs. Altman*, certain that I was capable of an immortal emotion, but knowing I was safe from her ever hearing me, from her ridiculing my fantasy with perverse truth.

Tea time's not for another three hours.

-----

I don't live alone.

Hence:

*Meow*

*Meow*

*Rar*

*Meowr*

The cat.

A kitten actually.

*Meow*

That's a kitten's voice.

If it were only in my head, it wouldn't slightly change every time—

*Meowr*

I'm sure I would hear just a loop of it, a repetition of the same "meow" over and over. A programmed noise. But it's always different. It's somewhere—

*Meow*

I thought I could prove I had a ghost in my apartment. But, as time creaks forward with the apathy of an un-oiled and obsolete robot, I've learned that simpletons can't grasp the conflicting notion that dead things exist in the present. I know, everyone says "I think my house is haunted"—it usually isn't. Don't believe them. In fact do the opposite. Actively, and with great vigor, attempt to discredit them, if not to their faces then to their friends, or simply to the people that know of them. A haunted house is simply too cliché, but I propose it now because I am aware of the cliché and am willing to forego it by telling the truth. I brought a date over to my apartment. I thought I could prove to her, her who seemed so *aware*, her who seemed so *sensitive*, there was a ghost. I brought her inside and we both sat quietly: she across from me on the loveseat I took from my parents home, I on the tattered recliner. I couldn't very well tell her that I wanted her to listen for the kitten.



*Merow*

I wanted her to hear it for herself.

*Meow*

I let the conversation die and watched her silently. I was looking to see if her face changed. She would ask me if I had a pet, and I would smile and sit back and tell her a story how the dead kitten came to reside in my apartment. I looked at her a long time. I heard the kitten quite clearly. She began to try very hard not to look at me. She might have had difficulty in thinking up something to say—she wasn't the most creative person. I didn't have the satisfaction of making up my story. Then there was my sigh and I told her we should end the night.

*Meow*

I wouldn't desire a relationship with someone so lacking in spiritual receptivity.

*Rar*

I'm not sure if I hear it when I'm consciously thinking about it, or subconsciously addressing it, or when I consciously or subconsciously stop unconsciously thinking about it.

*Meow*

Perhaps the kitten sneaked into a crawl space in the hallway—big enough only for a kitten—as it hunted a bug. It climbed over a cobwebby pair of shoes and jumped to a board, and then a higher board, and when it saw the bug it had followed it leapt from the higher board, and missed the next step (having not grown into its inherent dexterity) and snapped its neck on the lower board. Son and daughter cried that their kitten had run away and mom, who had no real opinion on the kitten but saw a lesson in the incident,

chided the children for not closing the door after stomping and clomping inside, and for not taking responsibility for their things. All this while the bug perched upon the point of the kitten's now sagging ear, whispering obscenely into that furry, echoing cavern, rubbing its greasy legs together. When dad smelled the rotting kitten in the wall, he believed that the stench came from Bowler's apartment, from his damned cocker spaniel. He took the odor as the last straw; if he didn't leave, he would surely insert the business end of a steak knife into the bellies of his entire family. He moved out. The apartment was too small, his wife too preachy, and he couldn't take his children being so physically close to him. Mom took the kids to her mother's home in Oklahoma, and one of the children was discovered to be a prodigy in music, on some obscure and worthless instrument.

*Meow*

Perhaps it knew its days were numbered, from the time it fed upon its mother's stretched-out cat dugs, on top of a pile of its squirming siblings. Aware of its imminent death, it concerned itself only with the fruition of its visions, with the merging of its feline perceptions to the reality, or the supposed reality, of the external world. It watched light dancing on the white walls for hours—sunbeams refracted from a set of crystal chimes in the window. It sat in front of the door and listened while garbage trucks pulled alongside trash cans and emptied them with a clatter of refuse and metal, and then shuddered down the road noisily. It composed poems and wrote them into the carpet with its claws. Soon it stopped even going to its mother's teat. It languished until the moment of enlightenment; when it died the soul was forced from its body and the ghost fled into the ceiling. Now it sings, in monosyllables, its history of a short and wasted life.

*Meowr*

Perhaps—perhaps it was bald. There were always flies around its head and parasites burrowing into its skin. There was never enough food in the dumpster. It slept under a wet mattress in the condemned building next to this apartment complex. It heard “here kitty, here kitty kitty kitty” as it cowered alone, damp and cold. Its brothers and sisters had followed its mother somewhere, perhaps somewhere drier, less infested with mites and fleas. It peeked its head out from the edge of the drooping mattress when it heard someone addressing it. They threw torn bits of fried chicken under its face. It followed them as it ate the dried-out skin and brown meat passing under the WARNING: DO NOT ENTER sign on the construction fence through a break where the chain was slack on the two entrance doors locked together. It chased two boys into the half-built complex, slipping over steel girders wrapped in plastic and thick orange extension cord. It licked up crumbs of bread and its pupils grew big as they absorbed the dim streetlight from outside.

They were going to torture it. One of them had a knife, and they had picked up a piece of rope somewhere—but the kitten looked so pitiful that they thought they were doing it a favor by putting it out of its misery. They thought they were doing a good thing—all of a sudden they felt what they were doing was right and went about their task with an air of religiosity. One of them picked up a hammer that was hanging from a nail halfway out of the wall and with three blows—

BLAM BLAM BLAM

Blam Blam Blam

Three blows

blam blam blam

-----

knock knock knock

knock knock knock

“Gus, are you in there?”

knock knock knock

“Your door is open—are you in?”

“Yes, yes Mrs. Altman. I’m here. I was just having a nap—”

She’s not wearing any make-up today. A dull blue paste is under her eyes, instead of over them. And she’s wearing the same floral muumuu I saw her wearing when I came in from work yesterday. God, I hope she doesn’t stink.

“Aren’t you working today?”

“I’m feeling a bit ill today, Mrs. Altman.”

She doesn’t stink. The same oily odor of rubbing cream.

“I suppose that makes two of us. I’ve been feeling a little under the weather myself.”

“I’m—well, backed up—”

“Have you tried a laxative, Gus?”

“No, not yet. I was hoping—”

“I’ve got some upstairs. I’ll get you one right away. I always use this brand—I can’t recall the name—but it’s herbal. And it’s effective. Do you think you’d care for a bit of tea as well?”

“Is it that time already? Mrs. Altman, don’t go through the trouble—”

“It’s no trouble at all, Gus. I haven’t been to the market in a while though—I can’t seem to shake this cold—I was just going to make a salmon sandwich on brown bread.”

Brown bread. Wheat bread.

“Would you like a salmon sandwich?”

“I’d love one, Mrs. Altman.”

“It’s what I used to make for my mother. I hope it’s all right.”

“A salmon sandwich sounds wonderful. I’m sure you make the best salmon sandwiches on brown bread anyone’s ever tasted.”

“Oh, poo. If you don’t mind helping me with the tray—”

She doesn’t like to take tea in her apartment. She says she spends too much time in there as it is. I wouldn’t want to take tea in her apartment either—the air clogged with complex combinations of old scents: of out-of-date aerosol deodorizers, pine-smelling cleansers, and acrid analgesics. Lye and embalming fluid and marijuana.

“By the way Gus, why was it that you were sleeping with your door open? Isn’t that a bit risky?”

“I was—painting this morning. I wanted to air the fumes out.”

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“If a restaurant claims that it is open from ten o’clock to two o’clock, and that it reopens at five o’clock, that doesn’t mean that the wait staff or the kitchen begins closing up at half past one, does it? That they begin cleaning? They begin cleaning *after* two, when the restaurant is properly closed. None of this getting-out-early nonsense. If they close at one-thirty, then they should be prepared to reopen at four-thirty. Oh, bother. You must find the ravings of an old woman completely dull.”

“No, Mrs. Altman—it’s fine.”

I’m groggy. I don’t have it in me to make conversation. Please stay longer, Mrs.

Altman. Keep talking.

“You said you were airing out the apartment after—painting?”

“I was just doing some touch-ups on my cupboards.”

“I don’t smell anything now.”

“Well, it was a latex-based paint.”

“I see.”

She’s pulling at the napkin in her hand with her fingers. She does that when she’s bored. When she’s ready to leave.

“You know, Gus, I appreciate you allowing me to sit with you in your apartment. I get so tired of being in my own living room—I’m in there enough as it is.”

I know, Mrs. Altman.

“No trouble at all, Mrs. Altman.”

“No, no, I really do appreciate it. Well, I’ve had a lovely time—quite pleasant, in fact—I better get back upstairs and clean up. I hope you enjoyed the salmon sandwich?”

“It was lovely.”

Not enough mayonnaise. It was canned salmon. If it’s canned salmon you have to treat it like tuna fish and use mayonnaise liberally.

“Here, let me help you with that tray—”

“No, that’s all right. An empty tray is much easier to carry than a full one. I can handle it. Thank you, Gus.”

Nothing for me now. I'll wait until the day is over and tomorrow I'll go back to my job. Perhaps I should try to get some work done—my work is important—

Her teacup. Left her teacup, the one I was drinking from. Poor old absent minded fool. I'm sorry, Mrs. Altman. I'll put it with the other things.

I still have the pictures she took in Italy, the bracelet she was fiddling with one day and left on the arm of the chair (I think she wanted me to notice it—perhaps she'd just bought it), a letter from her sister in the UK, a spoon, and a pen with which she had been writing her grocery list, asking me if I wanted anything from the commissary. Perhaps I'll buy a chest for her things, with plastic red rubies set into the black lid.

Those are only the things I've kept—there were the acrylic fingernails that had come unglued, done pink with tiny flowers painted on the tips—a fake eyelash she had bought at the drugstore and wore one afternoon—the innumerable strands of hair left all about.

And the wig. Not a full wig—a wiglet, the type you see advertised in the classified section of a supermarket tabloid. I used to see renderings of them atop the permed heads of cartoon models in my grandmother's magazines, the only things she had in her house to read besides a wall of *Reader's Digest* condensed books. The subject of the picture was a roughly sketched woman with curled hair formed into the shape of a woolen cap. As the caption read, wiglets are supposed to make your hair appear fuller—but I'm not sure if Mrs. Altman ordered one from a magazine or if she purchased it over the counter at a wig and weave store.

She had just dyed her hair, and I wasn't sure if she had used curlers to add more body. Something was different, but I couldn't tell exactly what. She fell asleep after tea—

she had eaten more cookies than usual—and her mouth hung open, the metal caps in the back showing, her dry old breath moving in and out, not travelling through her nose. Her head was leaning over the top of the back of the chair, and when I walked past her—from above I saw the wiglet, about the size of my palm, dangling from the top of her thinning scalp, clinging to a sparse clump of hairs by a plastic clip. I felt embarrassed. The clip was attached where the roots of her hair were white. It looked as though it were on the verge of falling off. I wondered, what if it did fall off? How humiliated would she feel then? To sit up suddenly, the jerk loosening the flimsy clip from the remnant of her natural hair, the wiglet spilling over the back of her chair—and her getting on her knees to retrieve it while I sipped my tea, pretending to not notice?

But there was something moving in the wiglet. Some tiny white worm, a larva perhaps, twisting in the artificial hair towards the bare patches of scalp, moving head over tail like a Slinky. I tapped her on the shoulder, to see if she would wake up, and when she didn't, I carefully unclasped the wiglet from her head, keeping the worm in my sight. I didn't want it to move into my hands. I took the miniature wig to the sink and washed it with antibacterial dish soap, and then shampoo. It looked like a dead thing above the drain, under the running water, its fullness deflated, gone limp and stringy. When I reentered the room she had woken up. I couldn't very well hand her back the freshly laundered wig, the worm now removed—so I said nothing. I suppose that she forgot that she was wearing it, thinking she might have misplaced it in her apartment somewhere.



## CHAPTER 2

## "Silas MacCormack's Decision Concerning the Purchase of a Wig"

Running a coarse hand through his thinning hair, Silas MacCormack considered the selection of powdered wigs in front of him. When he had addressed the possibility of buying a wig to his wife the previous evening, as they lay in their four-poster bed, she snorted and told him that a wig would only make him look womanish. He stroked his chin and again scratched his head. For Silas MacCormack, the question of whether or not to purchase a powdered wig had evolved from some frivolous matter to a truly monumental dilemma.

There was the problem of increasing variety in the market of wigs. So many specimens to select from; this confused Silas as it annoyed him. If he were to put hard-earned money down, what kind of wig would he buy? Silas could barely grasp the many rows of be-wigged wooden perches, the featureless, oblong head shapes propped atop thick nails. Would he request the brown one with the ponytail so that he could deceive everyone of his advancing years? Or a distinguished white one to accentuate and fill out his disappearing gray hair? And then there were these curious curly headed jobs only worn by officials and such.

Silas' contrasting opinions concerning false hair--however rooted in superficiality his wife may have believed those opinions to be--actually cut a deep rift in his heart. He had never worn a wig, had never even considered wearing one until

only very recently. His father had abhorred the effeminate practice of wearing powdered wigs as he had abhorred all the rich, and what he called their "silks and funcies" (his word for "fancy"). And Silas had thought of himself like his father, a hard working man with no time for such nuisances. There was only soil, sundown, and sleep. But his farm had done well, and the abundance of his sought-after crops had put much coin in the family purse; Silas felt the moments of leisure time expand as his plantation grew. Other plantation owners even tried to convince him to purchase a few slaves, what with his children growing up to manage small plots of their own. Silas didn't care for the idea of slavery--his father had never owned slaves--but with the shortage of workers and his prosperous fields becoming more prosperous, he thought that becoming a slave owner would simply be the next logical step. He couldn't very well operate the farm all by himself, could he? Hired help, he had learned, was quite expensive to maintain.

And as Silas' family fortunes had changed, so had his circle of friends. He found it increasingly difficult to relate to the struggling man of the earth, the fellow farmers who had struck out for the colonies with stars in their eyes, for his own struggling days were far behind him. Now he was amongst other wealthy land owners, every one of them with a powdered wig and a fat purse. Sculpted fingernails. He believed, with no small amount of paranoia, that they took affront from his thinning hair and coarse hands. He was just a bumpkin who had struck it rich.

Before he had realized, Silas' appearance had become a standing point with himself. If he were to be part of this new social stratum, he had better start acting and looking like he belonged there.

His wife had her little coterie of rich wives and widows, always a-gossip about which young bachelor had dentures before his time, or complaining about how true courtship had declined in the colonies. Silas had bought her baubles and trinkets so that she could expose her little vanities to the other snobbish women, many of whom Silas detested and at whom he secretly sneered. He felt better after he sneered at them. All he had really afforded himself so far was a simple silver watch he carried in his pocket on a thin metal chain. Silas felt a surge of power when he would pull out the watch and look at it. He usually did this in town, where there would be others to take note of the glimmering silver mechanism and consider how far he had risen from the bottom, how far he had grown from the soil.

And now it all came down to wigs.

No longer did he have to strain his eyes looking at the position of the sun to tell what time it was. Everyone could guess at his wealth, as they eyed his silver watch with envy, but Silas wanted the satisfaction of them knowing without a doubt. He needed the wig. The wig was proof of his entitled worthiness. He had worked so hard...he had to set himself apart from the men with the dirty fingernails and missing teeth. Yes, he needed the wig.

Silas slowly raised his hand and motioned at the bald, little man behind the counter. He hesitated a moment as the man approached. How would he address the man? Silas had never been in a transaction like this. Was the man a wig distributor, or wigmaster? A wiggler? Silas hoped that the man wouldn't misinterpret him and assume that he meant Whig, a term that had recently gone out of favor with his Federalist friends. After the brief hesitation he reined in his irrationality and obliterated the nagging remnant of resistance with a clearing of his throat.

"Master Wigmaker," Silas inquired, "would you mind helping me find a suitable hairpiece?"

Silas MacCormack tried on many wigs that day, as he sat in a chair in front of a large looking glass. The bald man behind the counter patiently fitted various wiglets, toupees, and other false accoutrements to Silas' rather large head. Finally, the appropriate wig was found, a powdered number that was reminiscent of George Washington in that famous portrait.

Silas felt the wig in its burlap bag as he sat in his moving carriage and watched the wig store grow small through the square window. He didn't want to wear the wig right away; he needed to get home and figure out the entire mindset of a wig wearer. Safely, in front of his own mirror. And he hadn't paid too dearly for the wig--if it didn't work out, he could give it to one of his younger sons to play around with. He let out a long sigh. He prayed that his visit to the slave trader after

breakfast tomorrow would not be so terribly stressful, so self-conscious, so fraught with indecision.

Walking to work. I am walking to work. I am walking to work but the mall has been demolished in the middle of the night by a giant from the Biblical past who discovered a route to the future through a cave into which he had chased a baby dinosaur. He arrived in front of JC Penney. This giant, this pagan savage who believed in earth spirits—dryads and water elves and such—was so enraged by the lack of foliage and the desecration of his natural home that he took it upon himself to brutalize the monster that slept where his beloved tree brothers had stood. It was a great sprawling monster with many glass mouths and teeth made out of mannequins and eyes of blinking arrogant neon. The giant howled as he pummeled the stationary beast with the petrified hip-bone of some extinct, amphibious beast he had pummeled in his own time.

Eventually the giant became tired—it was quite late in his own time—and when the mall monster's head was only a pile of shattered glass and broken concrete and the separated arms and legs of dummies swimming in pools of multi-colored clothing, and all the walls were caved in, the giant left. "That'll teach them," he thought. But he didn't know how difficult it would be to break the wills of the children of the future. Rip down one of our malls and we'll build ten more to replace it, you giant bastard. All of them ten times as large.

Imagine how many modern germs the giant took back to his own time. They'll think the gods are punishing them with plague. They'll be totally obliterated.

I'm walking to work—I'm looking at myself in the mirror. From across the hall I hear Bowler's enormous wake-up sniff. I don't want to walk to work. It isn't the walking, it's the going. I'm not going to work today. Again.

To hell with it!

“Hello, Gus Jones.”

Ezgi’s in the hallway. The smell of her female deodorant and the synthetic carpet material in the hallway, along with the powders they use to clean it. Strange that she’s always in the hall when I’m going to work. As if she knows when I leave. As if she keeps a timetable. As if she’s stalking me. What do you know about me? Of my thoughts? Every day, allowing me to incriminate myself further—

“Good morning, Ezgi.”

Look how she lowers her eyes. So demurely. She would be so attractive, so beautiful—her curled blond hair, her dark skin—she would be so attractive—any man would construct a kingdom from his own bones for her. Of course, said kingdom would have to be made to scale; and any man would enslave a race of miniature beings to inhabit that kingdom, to entertain only her. Any man would draw out his heart with a series of short, sharp tugs—

But for her mouth. It’s a wonderful mouth to look at. But she doesn’t speak properly.

“Are you going to work?”

When I first saw her, my breath was stolen from my chest by a hand from the grave. The hand returned, having buried my air in the dungeon of a ruined castle, and proceeded to slap me in the face with a steaming wet rag. Even after I walked away I could feel the burn on my cheek, the hot wetness dripping off my ear. And the next day, she spoke.

“Unfortunately.”

“You do not like work?”

She only said a few words—perhaps it was only a “hello, how are you.” So significant, those words. So damning. Those words dragged themselves by their elbows from her mouth, so wonderful to look at, as if they had been beaten nearly to death. The sounds were bloody, broken things, the kind of catastrophes that trigger disgust before soliciting the reluctant but more conscionable sentiment of pity.

“I despise work, Ezgi.”

“That’s—too bad. I am just beginning to like my job.”

It was Bowler that told me.

*“What—the new girl? Ezgi?”*

*“Ezgi’s her name?”*

*“Yes, you dummy. She’s from Turkey.”*

*“So?”*

*“She has an accent. She’s Turkish and she has an accent.”*

*“You mean—she doesn’t actually have—a speech impediment?”*

*“Jesus. You’re a piece of work, Gus.”*

“I’m glad for you.”

All the time I had believed she was mush-mouthed.

“Well, okay then. Goodbye, Gus.”

I wonder how she became so stylish. Are they that stylish in Turkey? Most likely it’s because she works in a clothing consignment store and the other girls tell her what to wear. I’ve seen those girls, they are beyond hip. They are beyond beyond hip. They’re walking clothes hangars, with breasts, from the closet of a New York fashion maven, the

type of fashion maven that must have a minimum cacao content of eighty-five per cent in her dark chocolate to go with her tumbler of cognac. And like clothes hangars those girls don't have any feelings. They act as if they're performing charity if they decide to sell your clothes. I would have gotten at least twenty dollars for that shirt. Ezgi would have let me sell it there.

She's probably a Sikh or part of some other bizarre Persian religion.

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I'm at work, and the aging round men and women exercise by speed-walking through the mall in their white-white tennis shoes, fanny packs bouncing on a hip that is no longer distinct from the flesh that has accumulated, over the years, on their sides. American flag caps and shirts with teddy-bear prints. Dark veins show through their swollen, hairless calves. Soles squeak in quick succession against the night-time wax-job. I try my key in the door but it's already opened—Jackie's inside, beavering about again, compulsively. The air is sticky and chill, smelling of chocolate and mint, and under that, coconut.

"We need a tub of bubblegum from the freezer. Your key."

Jackie's turning-key hand motion is redundant.

I bring out the tub of ice cream and watch as she scoops out the remaining bit of bubblegum and press it into the new tub. She fits the new tub into the recess under the display case while I count the drawer, starting with the pennies. Perhaps I should start with the dollars today. Oh, hell.

Tiresome. Tiresome. Tiresome.

"Was it busy yesterday?"



“Where the hell were you?”

“I was sick. And you can’t answer a question with another question.”

“Whatever.”

I check the totals. *That’s* why she seems so angry. Pretty busy, and her by herself the whole day.

“Well, this drawer looks good. I guess we better open up.”

She sighs. She always sighs. She once told me that she hated the laughter of children.

*And when the lights come on it’s a completely different place!* It’s more horrid, more wretched, more grotesque. The modern ice cream parlor is what an opium den for strung-out clowns and puppets on the nod would look like: it is festooned, not decorated, with the pastel colors of hate on all four walls, even the ceiling. It is the giggle of madness before the ultimate bullet to the brain. Bright pinks and blues cover banners and signs and pasteboards that assault the awareness like the cacophonous shrieking of Ringwraiths on horseback. And there is the stickiness—everything sticky, milky sugar adhesive over the counters, the tabletops, in the spaces between your fingers, on your elbows.

*And yet*—the customers. The open palms of children pounding on the display glass senselessly. They see only the colors of the ice cream flavors, ignorant as they are to the faded and constricting rainbows all around them, and they are compelled to hit the glass. Blam Blam Blam. Perhaps they are hypnotized. Perhaps, from the other side of the display glass, the open mouth of the ice cream tub whispers to them in the fantasy language children create in order to disassociate themselves from responsibility—perhaps

the ice cream suggests something evil and thoughtless, something that requires only the brute strength of their thin arms. Blam Blam Blam. Sometimes they have to stretch to hit the glass—the dumb, transparent border between them and inherent gluttony—other times they are lifted by their enabling parents. “Here honey, what kind do you want? Pick one out.” Arms outstretched, palms up. Blam Blam Blam. “No, no honey, just pick out a flavor. One flavor.”

“How can you work here and not weigh a thousand pounds?”

“How can you stand behind that counter and not just want to—to just eat it all?”

“If I worked here, I’d be eating all day. It’d be dangerous.”

“Fatal.”

Sometimes it breaks your heart. An obese teenager with pimples walks in and orders a double banana split as if he’s confessing his first masturbation to his priest. Or some woman, her thinning hair parted to the side, her nails just done, gold bracelets around her wrists, no wedding ring on her finger, orders an ice cream cone, and then, on a whim, purchases a pencil with a fuzzy eraser head. She’ll pull it out of the bag when she’s alone, holding the pencil in her big bear hand with the pretty nail job and spin it around, as she wishes on it. And there’s no one she can tell.

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“It’s not too busy, is it?”

“Why?”

“I’ve got some paperwork to do. I’ve got to add up the timesheets and then make the schedule. Will you have the same hours next month?”

“I don’t want to work with Mark or Jolene. Have them work nights. Put me on daytime. I can handle it myself, if you would just help me out once in a while.”

“Are you mad that I was sick? Look, do you think I’d be mad if you were sick? I’d feel sorry if you were sick, Jackie.”

“Blah, blah, blah. You just don’t—”

“Don’t what?”

“Never mind.”

“All right. I’m going to take this paperwork over to the food court. Seems I’ve got some catching up to do. You want anything?”

“No.” She gives me a side look from her naked eye, from the area her eyeglass lenses don’t cover.

“If you need me, just beep me.”

She’s been angry with me for years. Three years out of the seven we’ve both been at Stubby’s. She’s angry because she knows she could do a better job as manager than me. She could. She was working here four months before I came. But I’m not as apt to speak my mind to anyone, especially not to the owner. Better management material. In fact, my intellect is completely independent of my job. *Of course* she could do a better job than me if I hadn’t gotten promoted and she had. An ape could do this job. Perhaps not better than me—but I’m sure an ape could do the job just as well, as long as you gave it a calculator and a good pen. And it would need at least a high school diploma.

But Jackie’s making just as much money as I am. It’s the only thing that keeps her from figuring out a way to get me fired.

Oh, she wouldn't have me fired. She was in love with me, but now she just wants to act like we're an old married couple. And I suppose that's how it is. I just wish that she hadn't begun to resent me after she realized I was never going to be her lover.

Hear the hiss of a hundred deep fat fryers simultaneously implemented. Smell the crisping breading of a hundred different types of fried food from a hundred different back-kitchens. I walk into the odor cloud of the food court and it is flavorful, of grease and salt and garlic salt. The people at the tables chew their food meditatively, alone, either guilt-ridden or possessed with lust.

*Don't look into the eyes of the people that work at the Taco Shop.* They're some strange clan of dope users, sharing needles with one another, shooting the same cheap chemicals into one another's dirty veins. Their eyes are orange and glow with the dull shine of tarnished pennies.

*Across:* inside the salon there is so much activity—and there is a grossness beating out of it, heaving forth like dry coughs while vomiting. The hairdressers flick their combs and hair oil splashes from saturated hair to the mirror. Seats twirl, and the hairdressers twirl, and women in too-tight clothing wait in the moving line pushing their out-of-date hair out of their eyes. Their hairstyles, once so chic, have become ridiculous. Their too-tan skin is spilling out from under their too-tight clothes. Their waxing jobs have become itchy and uncomfortable. The feigned laughter, the hugs, the innuendos, the dry imaginary greeting kisses inches away from the cheek—everything is *too much*, the behavior, the scent of the chemicals, the hair growing between thighs, the money, the cost, and all of it begins to spill and splash and tumble in waves of sculpting oil and styling gel while the seats spin and the hairdressers twirl in front of the mirrors, dancing

hyperbolically to the contemporary music station over the sound system, flicking their scissors, drinking down the long jars of barbicide, their lips tattoo blue.

The entire mall has the stench of fecundity to it.

Tiresome.

But in the Hall of FRAME—powdered by soft light from lamps, not the smothering dead fish gleam of florescent lighting—is Fiona. Fiona, Fiona, wondrous aberration, like a golden egg laid by a lizard, Fiona through the window, Fiona in repose, the lips parted, the freckles blooming and beaming in the soft light, her eyelids lowered as a she reads noncommittally from a novel—or is it a book of poems? Fiona as she reads, leaning upon the cash register countertop, Fiona in constant state of repose, oblivious, surrounded by the sterile watercolors of hobbyists set in rich wooden frames. Fiona—*yes*, I see you in my burning dream, my body aflame, and I see you forever in cool repose, oblivious! I must—

Why does everything appear as tired recitation in my mind? Tiresome! Tiresome! Tiresome! I must keep watching you, that is all, Fiona, who lives without breathing, who appears without moving, who speaks with no vibration from her mouth! I must watch you and document the base yearning you instill in me with only the primitive vocabulary—*of my heart!*

Tiresome.

The subterraneans watch me from the Taco Shop. What do you know of me? Of my thoughts?

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“How’d we do today?”

“You were here. You know how we did.”

“I guess I wasn’t paying attention.”

“People are stupid.”

And sometimes, she’s so much like me. We *are* an old married couple, giving generously our mutual bitterness to the rest of the world. I should ask her to a movie one day—but she’d get the wrong idea, imagine that I’m finally coming around—or have grown desperate—and she’d never respect me for showing interest in her. Strange how our relationship turned out. Doomed, although not in the Romeo and Juliet sense of doomed. Doomed in the same way that two counterfeiters might share their sentence in Hell. I love her—her thick glasses, her smirk, her illogical compulsion to work at everything, to *do a good job*—at least enough to keep inspiring her pretend animosity. Never, never shall we explore our feelings for each other. The tension between us has been extended for too long, and is now like old, comfortable, over-large underwear.

I wonder about her. She works so hard while I avoid—all of it. But at least I’m deferential to her. She won’t be working with Mark or Jolene. It’ll be just the one of us, since I’m not here.

I wonder if she’s bottling it all in, waiting until that metaphysical jug is completely filled with every justified grudge before she raises it and slams it upon my head. I imagine that she’s getting closer to the edge everyday. Letting the rage develop, ripen, until it poisons itself and becomes complete madness. And then she’ll lose herself, possessed, having crossed over the threshold of her mental capabilities to the point when she can no longer differentiate between the living and the dead.

Perhaps I’m romanticizing her too greatly.

“Ana at the Circus”

Voices: yelling, laughing voices are all the bear hears, feels. The thick volume of blended voices from the audience reverberates off the concave roof of the auditorium and lands squarely on her shoulders, pounding. All of her bones tremble-- her jaw bone, her teeth, her skull, her ribcage--her whole body vibrates outward from its core of trembling old bones. She is tired and weak. Her weak eyes see the loud audience as a gray mass off in the distance. Everything is sound, accented by the cloying odor of animal dung. She can't hear herself breathe, she doesn't believe she is breathing. She closes her eyes and her great body teeters on its hind legs.

Suddenly, one high voice above the others, one shrill voice, cutting through the all-encompassing drone: *Ana, Ana*--the only word she knows--*Ana, Ana*. It means nothing to her. Her eyes open, and she remembers that she is on a circular platform, the second platform, and must go through the last ring to get to the third and last platform. The painful realization that the third and last platform is higher than the second platform causes her shoulders to droop further. All she sees are dull, geometric shapes, shadows without color; the man yelling her name is a dark shape emitting heat and a sharp human scent. The last platform seems so far away. *Ana, Ana* he cries, and she wants to make the man happy, to please him, but it is now beyond her abilities. She falls on to her four legs. When he starts screaming at her, in her face, something in her mind explodes, erupts, and the

overwhelming voices still roaring are drowned out by the driving rhythm of rushing blood. She feels as if her backbone has been shocked. Her fatigue evaporates. The man is now flat on the ground, under her massive paws, her weight, and he is silent. She turns to the audience.

She feels as if she is swimming--she swam once--her dense old bones and her heavy flesh are now weightless. Mass is converted to momentum as she races toward the audience; the clowns, devoid of their bright colors, scatter before her. She leaps while running and almost reaches the stands--she struggles to pull herself over the partition with her forepaws and one corner of the stands collapses as the screaming audience attempts to flee. Bodies roll towards her, fall in front of her. There are warm bodies everywhere. She can hear them, feel them, even though she can't see them clearly. The lighting is dim in the seats. She trips over a large body and clamps down on its neck with her jaws until it is motionless. Screams from the higher stands, and she climbs further up the tilted architecture of the audience seating, trampling small bodies and swiping at everything that moves with her front paws. When all have fallen or fled, she rears up to her full nine feet and roars--a shattered voice accompanied by broken teeth worn with age. She remembers a door, being led through a hallway and a door, and she climbs down the stands to the ground, searching for the door with her nose. The exit is to the right of the stands. She enters the corridor in a run.



Her strength is fading. She realizes this as her heavy paws crash on the slick concrete floor of the corridor--her monumental inertia is being rapidly swallowed by gravity. She runs through the hallway as bodies hug themselves to the wall. The slower ones are caught under her feet and she leaves them on the ground. She sees the wall only when it is right in front of her and stumbles while turning her massive frame on the slippery concrete. She hears the explosion before she feels the bullet in her right backside, a crack that penetrates her sensitive eardrums--the unrelenting hiss of echo drills through her brain. She is dragging her right rear leg now, leaving a trail of blood behind her.

There is a door. She charges into the door with her remaining strength, handicapped by the injured leg. The door doesn't open. She rams it again, with her head. The door doesn't open. She stands up, her throbbing leg in agony with the effort, and batters at the door with her forepaws--it doesn't open. She hears the sirens outside, and more voices. Her body folds into itself, her right rear leg giving way first. A viscous fluid is dripping from her snout. Saliva falls into her fur in a constant stream from her panting mouth. The rear part of her body is covered in blood. She leans into the door, onto the parallel bar door release. The door opens, and she falls through onto the curb of the parking lot outside. She lifts her black nose from the gritty, abrasive surface of the pavement. Voices, loud yelling voices, yelling at her, she knows--but she sees above the

flashing lights, above the cars and the shouting people, to the colorless city skyline bathed in late afternoon light. To her failing eyes, the skyline looks like mountains against the setting sun.

## CHAPTER 3

Inside of Bowler's apartment. A light blanket of golden dog fur lays over the ground and the single piece of furniture. I build little piles of it under my feet as I rub my bare toes into the carpet. I'm sitting against one wall while Bowler sits against another, perpendicular to me, his cocker spaniel Honeycut at attention on her forepaws while he rubs his hand down her slanted back. Dust and dog skin and floating hairs catch the light of a single lamp set upon the pressed wood entertainment system stand as they fall into the carpet. Two video game controllers snake out from the system—the big screen television centers itself in the room like a black, distorted mirror.

“There's no room for people like us in this world, Gus. People look at us and think they see depths behind our eyes—but the surface of our eyes is about as far as it goes. The eyeball, and then the retina, and then maybe the socket. But that's it. No depths.”

“Who needs depth? If you have too much depth, then you don't know how to see a thing for what it is. You scare easily, and you interpret everything as monumental. Depth is death.”

“I don't mean that it's a conscious decision not to be deep—well, maybe for you it is—but it's like we burned everything up in the womb, all that ambition, all that passion. And when we came out we were—bored. And because we were bored, we became jaded. And because we hate the idea of being jaded, we decided that there wasn't much point to feel any way about any thing. Unless you were to feel every way about everything. And that's a sure-fire way to piss off your dad.”

“No principles. No morals, no ethics. Nothing to believe in except everything, which in itself adds up to an infinity of cancellations.”

“So we just jack off and rot. It all comes down to the show of it, right? Gus? And we play it like actors. He was right, god damn it, all the world is a stage. But if it’s a show, let’s just be honest about it for god’s sake. Let’s at least try to be entertaining. I hate it when people hide behind their bullshit rhetoric.”

If Bowler were present at the construction of the Egyptian pyramids he would have been the desert air caught inside the tomb before it was shut up and sealed.

“Gus, tell me this. Is not everything just a big jack off? You comb your hair, you’re jacking off. Go to work, get paid—jack off. Write a love letter, write a poem—”

“Why is writing a poem comparable to jacking off? Is there something that exists that’s bigger or better—whatever those words mean—than just the selfish, dirty act of jacking off?”

“Do you think there’s a God that exists?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then it’s all in your head, Gus. All of it. The daydreams, the schoolyard crushes, the situational philosophies—one jack off. You’re not sharing it with anybody, you don’t even *believe* that you’re sharing it with anybody. You like it for yourself. Jack off.”

“But poetry is communication with an art form, with all the poets who have preceded you—”

“You—you can’t be serious, can you? Gus? Come on, don’t you see it? But poetry is even worse than jacking off—it’s hypocritical. It’s supposedly this vessel of

honesty but it's really like jacking off behind a thin curtain while someone within the same room watches you."

"What in god's name are you talking about, Bowler?"

"Poetry, Gus. I know you've been—well, you're a college man, so I'm sure you were influenced to view poetry a certain way. Because it's really a jack off process. Look at it this way: when you jack off, you have only yourself to please, your naked, repulsive, worthless self and all the dirty fantasies about the milkmaid or the delivery boy or whatever you happened to see that day. Things you wouldn't ever tell anyone about for shame you pursue with the sloppy glee of a hog. And when it's over all those sensuous visuals contract and shrink into that secret part of your mind that you try not to think about the rest of the day."

Bowler enjoys using the inclusive "we" and "you" while he's speaking. It makes the conversation seem like a consensus even though only one of us is talking.

"But poetry, Gus—or even all art, if you want to take it that far—like I said, it's just jacking off behind a curtain while someone watches. Not only do you exploit those dark dirty fantasies, but you think you can mask them, dress them up, put wigs or makeup on them so that other people will enjoy them too. You are conscious that someone is watching you from the other side of that curtain, and there's something—I don't know— weird about that. But it's fine—here we are now, entertain us, for god's sake. But it's just a show. Don't make it too complicated, just give us the sex and the blood and be done. Be honest about it. It's nothing deeper than that. Don't think that it goes beyond being a show."

“So, if we operate by that theory, Bowler—a very well argued theory, might I add—then people who read poetry, look at art, listen to music, all they’re doing is licking up greasy drippings cast off from the human psyche.”

“Ah, it’s just a theory. But what does it matter to *me*? It doesn’t mean anything. I might as well say *something*.”

“Another jack off.”

“What are my motivations in saying anything? I don’t have any vested interest in what I say. Do I even have motivations? It doesn’t matter.”

A thin mist of vacancy, along with undulating dog fur in the lamp light, surrounds him. But it’s not as though he doesn’t think anything; he thinks everything, he just doesn’t think anything about it. He’s been dead a long time, you can tell.

“Honeycut. Hey, Honeycut. You sleeping? Come here, girl.”

I suppose his dog does most of his living for him. Keeps his life-force in her chest, makes him eat his breakfast and walk outside. If she had died—

“Bowler, what do you think about love—I mean—well, to hell with it. Never mind.”

“What about love?”

I didn’t want the conversation to go that way.

“I was just being stupid. Like if I were to ask you about angels or griffins.”

“Gus, love’s the only reason. Because it doesn’t make sense—you can rationalize every little thing in your life and check it off a grocery list and then love comes along and even the grocery list doesn’t matter any more. I’m talking about love between two people here, not love between a man and his gun or his god or his guitar. Not about some

nebulous collective love either; the selfish, wallowing love between two people. Makes the world stop being present.”

I didn't want to talk about this. “It's not just another jack-off, then?”

“You get to jack someone else off, and if you can put your mind in a place where you honestly enjoy *that*, then it's like another level of being. It doesn't make sense. But when that feeling is gone—well, what is there?”

I didn't want to get into this conversation. I didn't want to talk about his lover and the car crash and Honeycut having two broken legs and losing one of her eyes, his lover dying in the hospital that night—*Lucky thing Honeycut was in the back seat—oh hell, what does lucky even mean? Does it mean anything?* Bowler probably had hobbies before, interests even; perhaps he enjoyed writing a little bit of verse himself, or keeping up with sports. Now his apartment is simply bare walls and a pad for sleeping on the ground, twin dog dishes on the kitchen floor, and a massive and modern entertainment system at the far end of the living room. *The strange thing is, she wasn't even my dog. She was Jean's. But now I love her, I really do love her—*

“Forget it, Bowler. I was just being stupid.”

Honeycut is nosing into my hand, so I reach and place her on my lap. Her paws dig into my thighs as she sniffs my aura; it's probably some sickly purple thing in her dog mind that reminds her of dried blood. But it must be something that she likes because she sits down, those leather folds on the sides of her black nose still pumping. I yawn, and then she yawns. Looking me in the face, she seems to be a matron from some war torn, Eastern European country who has now preened herself for a state awards ceremony in which she will be honored. Her two long ears fall around her head like human hair, dyed

golden brown and curled, perhaps permed. And her one sad eye. It becomes joyful, with a reflex, a tightening of the skin and muscles around it—her one sad eye, along with her un-open mouth, a mouth that rarely pants idiotically as most dogs pant—her single eye and her closed mouth give Honeycut the look of a resilient being that has maintained a deep sense of nobility through the most trying of adversity.

“What are you thinking about, Honeycut? Huh? Huh, girl?”

“Me, me, me. Oh, don’t give me that look. So Gus—what makes you bring love up? Some woman caught your fancy?”

“I wasn’t really thinking anything about it, Bowler—”

“Oh, come on, Gus. Let’s dish it up. I’m tired of talking philosophy.”

“You were talking philosophy earlier? What school of philosophy was that, exactly?”

“Don’t chew on that, Honeycut. It’s Ezgi, isn’t it, Gus? You like her. She’s quite the looker. Like a Turkish Greta Garbo.”

“Ezgi is beautiful. But the way she talks—”

“There’s no particular way that she talks, other than that she has an accent. Is it so atrocious to you? Are you a skinhead, secretly?”

“No, Bowler, no. There’s this woman that works at the mall—her name is Fiona—”

“You’ve met her?”

“No.”

“How do you know her name?”

“She bought an ice bar once. Fruit flavor. She used her credit card.”



“What does she look like?”

“She’s a hallucination. She doesn’t belong. I’ve seen thousands of people go in and out of that mall and it’s as if they were all two-dimensional. One long scroll of two-dimensional people saying the same things over and over, wearing the same things, acting in variations of the same way—one drab, endless painting unrolling itself, and suddenly, Fiona, in relief, in super-relief, suddenly three-dimensional—but distant. So distant. She’s the culmination of the effects of an initial drug experience, she’s the embodiment of that unreality.”

“And you’ve considered asking her out?”

“Are you mad? She’s distant. Do you know what I mean? I couldn’t very well transpose her into another place in my life. She’d break everything up if she were any closer. She’d destroy my already fragile sensibilities.”

“The unobtainable beauty. And we know how this shall end, as it always does. Honeycut, get down from there! No! The cycles keep spinning—and if we can see them, why do we choose to play the part? What do we have to learn? The role is always the same.”

“I just think that she’s beautiful, Bowler.”

“Enjoy the feeling, Gus—or don’t. When it goes away it won’t matter if you did or didn’t in the first place. And everything in turn will become more worthless.”

The deadness again. He’ll feed on any topic and when it is dry, expose it for the shell of meaninglessness it is. I could be learning German in the time I spend talking with him about the lack of meaning in anything. But what would that matter? Ah, Fiona. I

enjoy the feeling as much as I am at work and then the feeling goes away. But it can come back.

“There’s no place for us, Gus. We don’t believe in anything, do we? I mean, aside from base instincts like hunger, attraction, and pain?”

“Would you say that we’re—Jesus—you’re—a nihilist?”

“I would say that I was a nihilist if I didn’t have to know what it meant. But there’s this oppressive philosophy behind it. What do you call the people that aren’t interested enough to research their own philosophical leanings? Is there a place where people don’t have to call themselves anything, don’t have to call anything else anything, where they can say whatever they please without having to support it, or feel a certain way about it, where they can enjoy being hypocritical, but being honest about being hypocritical because there’s no real investment on either side, where they can sit and spout for only sake of exercising their vocal cords and wasting their time? Is there a place for people that are so disinterested—in television, current events, art, people—in everything but their own and other people’s sex lives, that they don’t want to do or say anything that might be interpreted as instruction, or an example, or a philosophy? Honeycut, don’t chew on those wires.”

“Bowler, you’re living in a world without meaning. Or else all things mean the same thing, so that there’s no hierarchy or distinction. But what’s worthwhile to you? Have you attempted to find something that affects you, makes you feel something?”

“Gus, have you seen the way people live their lives? I don’t want to do that, if just for the sake of not being like them. It’s bullshit rhetoric. Artificial defenses counted as reasons, logical rationalizations translated as beliefs. The average person thinks to

himself: ‘Hm, why do I like this? Why do I believe in this?’ And he comes up with a list of reasons for even believing in it, and when the good reasons beat the bad reasons he can feel good about it. He can feel like he’s right. It’s all rhetorical.”

“So it’s all—that’s your cue, Bowler.”

“A big jack off. But it works for what it is. Me, I like video games. Nothing more complicated than that.”

“Let’s make a pact, Bowler. Let’s say that from here on out we will only act from our most basic of instincts. Like you said, there’s an inherent dishonesty in the human thought process—it’s like applying math to a waterfall, or engineering to the roots of trees.”

“Oh, come on, Gus, nothing has been said that’s of any worth—we’re not going to change. The cycles keep spinning, and we recognize them, but we have to play the part. That’s the futility of it. Best just to watch yourself fall into every hole you see, and then laugh about it. Nothing’s going to make those holes disappear, or give you the capability not to fall in them.”

“Unless you don’t even acknowledge them, Bowler! You could be like Honeycut, and piss in the grass, and chew on furniture and just sniff things. All that hole stuff, and that stuff about cycles, that’s just an intellectual representation of how *you* think the world is.”

“You know, sometimes I resent the fact I never finished college. Didn’t have the money for it. Maybe I would have found something better in this shitty world other than pornography or video games?”

“Doesn’t that refute most or everything you just said, Bowler? What about us? What about me and you and giving the world the bird and living like animals?”

“You don’t get it, do you Gus? Everything is a lie. Unless truth is based on some ideal vocal delivery, you can’t speak the truth. And if you can’t articulate truth, then everything is an approximation, a half-truth.”

“Basically, a lie. This is getting tiresome, Bowler.”

“But we could go on for hours, couldn’t we? Up until bed time, and then wake up and do it all over again. And for what?”

“A jack off.”

“Well—yes. Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Do you believe in love, Bowler?”

“I believe that hate is equal to love, and that the two exist concurrently, along with everything else, and that there’s no difference between what’s beautiful and what’s utterly grotesque.”

“Grand, grand. Just grand.”

Honeycut is lying sideways on the ground, her small chest moving up and down. She rubs a paw against her snout.

“Gus?”

“What?”

“What *did* you get out of college?”

“I certainly didn’t get a job out of it.”

“But do you think there was something more? Some exciting secret that possessed you, that opened your mind? Something that was worth something?”

## CHAPTER 4

## "The Strange Affliction of Warren Dunne"

Warren Dunne leaned back into the wooden theater seat in the lecture auditorium and made no effort to conceal his smirk after a fit of sarcastic laughter, which came out as small coughs, had doubled him over. He took a deep breath through his nose, humming, and shot a haughty look at the back and shoulders of the large student in front of him. Everything about the student that Warren so disliked was big (except for the student's ideas, as Warren cleverly remarked to himself): a thick arm had raised a large hand and a big voice had posed a monumentally ignorant question about the atomic makeup of stars. Warren had never learned the student's name. In his mind he referred to him as Leviathan.

Leviathan's giant shoulders, seen always from behind by Warren, were frequently framed by the cloth curves of a tank top. Even the red bulging pimples on his tanned back dwarfed Warren's own facial blemishes. Warren, who was studious and stick-like except for a potbelly that strained against his shirt when he sat down, looked, he had once sadly realized while examining himself in full length mirror in his underwear, like a spider with only half its legs. He had felt an appropriate amount of envy towards the big student when he had first seen the hulk; later, when Leviathan opened his large mouth, Warren felt the appropriate amount of contempt. His admiration for his professor only grew

when the professor blatantly ignored the superlative student's stupid question and went on with his lecturing.

The professor, a stocky man with wide shoulders and short legs ill-fitted into tight jeans, pushed his drooping spectacles further up on his nose. He spoke through a gray, bushy moustache as he wrapped up the day's lesson, shuffling through some papers on a podium in front of an unlit white screen.

"As you all know," he said, "for our next few sessions together we'll be having presentations from students, starting with," he traced his index finger down a piece of paper, "ah, yes--Warren Dunne." He barely looked up from the podium to glance in Warren's direction. "I hope Warren has taken the necessary preparatory steps to best share his topic with the rest of us--um, what was your topic, Warren?"

"Time travel," came Warren's reply, slightly and theatrically disembodied from the echo in the auditorium.

"Time travel, that's right," the professor replied, stacking and straightening his papers against the podium. "Time travel. That should be fun. A creative project in the midst of all this meaningless 'science' stuff. Very creative of you, Warren. I'm sure Warren has many interesting and creative theories regarding time travel. You know, I travel through time whenever I go home to visit my older brother. His taste of clothes is stuck in the seventies..." The professor's voice trailed off as he glanced towards the class, searching for a response. "Ahem. Remember everyone, these presentations are not an excuse

for anybody to miss class. I will be taking attendance. And bring some questions for Warren, please."

A girl who had loudly zipped up her book-bag while the professor was speaking was already heading towards the exit.

As the rest of the class was leaving the auditorium--the large student taking his large, Leviathan-esque steps--Warren's nervous excitement began to rise. He couldn't wait to get home to his outlines and graphs and all the other materials he had gathered. He almost asked the professor a superficial question in order to pique his instructor's interest about his report but reconsidered. It would work much better as a surprise. As Warren walked past the utilitarian, prison-like school buildings, past the other students rushing to get home, his mind ran through a list of sources. He arranged and rearranged the continuity of his presentation in his imagination until he got home.

When Warren entered his dorm room--a modest sized dwelling with two wide single beds that faced one another--he immediately set his backpack down and lay on top his bed, putting his hands behind his head. Various annotations were still taking shape in his dancing brain.

The room was decorated with a few beer posters featuring bikini-clad women, which had been put up by Warren's roommate, a senior named Dexter who was biding his time during his 'final' semester with minimal studying and much wanton celebration. He rarely saw his roommate, except for occasionally in the morning when Dexter was snoring in the bed opposite his own, often with a

girl. On these occasions Warren would quietly gather his toiletries and pad down the hall to the communal bathroom, shared by other males in the dorm. He was happy with this arrangement, with the frequent absences of his roommate. When Dexter was awake and present, he was a jovial, obnoxious frat-boy type with a goatee, and he often pressured Warren to drink liquor or smoke marijuana. Warren always declined, disregarding one instance: he had his older roommate buy him a bottle of strawberry wine and got drunk very quickly, by himself, which motivated him to call his parents two states away, making them aware of his resentment of their high expectations. The next day, after being informed by a laughing, mocking Dexter of his inebriated shenanigans, he immediately called his parents back and apologized while nursing a large headache. They didn't take either call badly; in fact, they were pleasantly surprised that their tightly wound son had finally "let go" and "loosened up". Warren continued to look upon the incident with a large amount of regret, and he was razzed quite often by his perpetually happy roommate, too often happy. This sort of ribbing he pretended to ignore, and it made Dexter appear all the more loathsome and inconsequential in Warren's eyes.

Warren sat up from his bed, contemplating and unraveling his thoughts as a brainstorm incorporating a science fiction television series called "Star Trek" pointed towards and elaborated on several correspondences between theory and fantasy at which in a previous gestation of his report he had only



hinted. He was certain that if he included this information a level of entertainment he had just now considered might be reached. Warren mentally filed the revelatory burst under a general "projective reasoning (fun)" section in his brain, along with the H. G. Wells novel *The Time Machine*. Automatically he began figuring where these fictional, hypothesized accounts of time travel might be placed in between all of the more reality based, scientifically and philosophically oriented research pieces. The Wells novel, which was the early inspiration for Warren's report, was now nothing more than an anecdote to mention underneath the graphs and equations he had prepared. He had discarded the sci-fi aspect of adventure in time travel and replaced it with various theories of socio-political structure upheaval in the wake of hypothetical human evo/devo-lution if time travel were attainable and accessible.

Still sorting out this large puzzle while mumbling imaginary vocables under his breath, Warren got up from his bed and moved to the long wooden desk under the window. A stack of papers, a pile of various books, and Xerox copies of reference materials made a great mess upon the desk, next to a computer. Right away he began to straighten the items, flipping through all of the papers and arranging a stack with the most important on top and the least important on the bottom. The books he ordered according to size, with the biggest on the bottom and the smallest on the top. He thought for a moment, looked out of the window above the large desk without seeing anything, then pulled

out his notebook and wrote down the plot of the exact episode of "Star Trek" in which he remembered time travel being addressed.

The rest of the evening was spent reading, typing, and cross-referencing ideas under the influence of a two-liter bottle of soda he purchased from a small campus store a block from the dormitories. Warren fell asleep early in the morning as he was drawing some graphs with a metal protractor.

He woke up before the alarm made a sound. He had been pushed out of his sleep by a wired, ever-working consciousness that didn't allow for even a short dream. Warren turned off his clock radio alarm as he sat up from his desk, looking at the darkness outside of his window, considering. Dexter was not in the dorm room, as usual, and Warren supposed that he had made his way with some girl and gone to her place. Seeing an opportunity, Warren thought he might play hooky from his other classes that day and further work on his project. In his roommate's convenient absence he could refine it down to the minutest detail, shape it to transcendent perfection. The decision was easy. Warren chose not to go to class, and spent the early part of his isolate morning scraping new information from his collection of books, indexing insights that he might work into his report.

Towards noon Warren gathered up the materials he needed for the visual side of his presentation, printed out new pages for his handouts and transparencies, revised everything. He had been a little unhappy with his original set of class handouts and completely reshaped them, using a humorous narrative character

called "Nifty" to guide the students through his dense reasoning. Warren gathered his pages and strolled out his door in the direction of the pink copy store in the middle of campus.

The proprietor was a short round man with an unknown condition that made his nose interminably peel. A purple scab grew around edges of dry skin, exposing bits of pink flesh underneath. In the several times that Warren had come to the copy store, he'd tried his best not to look at the nose. For the most part, his practiced aversion had worked.

The man stood behind a counter that was broad and long, with colored paper samples and displays of paper sizes. Behind him were various tank-like copy machines, humming with electricity. He looked through reading glasses perched upon his sickening nose at a newspaper; for some reason Warren could feel the man looking at him. Almost as if the man were seeing through the newspaper to look at him. He felt uneasy as he unzipped his backpack and pulled out a large stack of stapled handouts he had prepared for class. He began to unstaple each handout with a tool on the counter that looked like metal snake jaws. The man behind the counter slowly turned one of the pages of the newspaper, and the deliberate action made Warren hurry. Yes, the man at the counter was definitely observing him.

After all the staples had been removed, Warren dumped the entire stack of papers into a recycling bin to the left of the counter. He then removed a blue folder from his backpack, and placed two piles next to each other, one bigger and one smaller.

The man at the counter sniffed through his damaged nose and folded the newspaper slowly.

"So you're back again," he said. "This is the third time you've been here this week. How many reports do you have to do to get through college these days, anyway?" He grabbed the thicker stack of paper and started to thumb through it.

"These are revisions--I changed a lot from my original report," Warren said matter-of-factly, as he pushed the smaller stack of papers across the counter. "Those you have in your hands will be handouts for the class, so I will need about twenty-four--well, make it twenty-six--copies. Just in case. These right here," he put his index finger on the smaller stack, "will be used as transparencies, so I want two copies of each page."

"Two copies?" the man asked.

"Yes, two copies," Warren replied. He had thought about keeping an unused set for his files.

The man let out a long, slow whistle. "Expensive job," he said, as he placed the two stacks of papers on a copy machine behind him. "This must be some report that you're working on. And you," he said as he looked down his nose at Warren, who quickly looked somewhere else, "must be quite the perfectionist. Yes, quite the perfectionist."

Warren didn't understand why the copy machine man was being so talkative. His skin began to involuntarily constrict around his bones. He continued looking at some paper clips in a plastic

container, waiting for the attendant to tell him the approximate time of completion.

"Come back in two hours," the man said. "Jobs like these take time."

In a tense moment of disbelief, Warren's eyes shot to the man's own.

"Two hours?" He wanted them now, instantly.

"Two hours," the attendant replied, grinning. "You want quality work, don't you?"

Warren shuddered and removed his gaze. In the same motion he turned his head around and headed for the exit, swallowing a sharp reply. He turned back for a moment and saw the copy machine worker still grinning, his arms crossed, his red eyes digging into him. Warren hastened out the door. Two hours and he would be liberated.

The process had begun. Two hours, yes--but Warren could wait. Sitting on a wooden bench outside of the copy building, he nearly cried out. He felt that if he had been a smoker he would have had a cigarette, 5 cigarettes, to release the ecstatic pressure inside of him. He had always been a diligent student, precise and industrious, but never before had he attacked any project with such fervor, with such unrelenting passion as he had thrown into his presentation on time travel. He could barely contain himself. The entirety of his young soul was in the hands of the copy machine attendant; Warren would savor so fully the moment when it was neatly collated and stapled and ready to be

distributed to the class. They would know him then: the quiet, aloof boy would awaken his fellow classmates and shatter them with devastating glimpses of information and theory. A feeling arose in him that he had never, in all of his life, known before—triumph. Quickly standing up from the bench, waves of glory issuing forth from his insides, Warren looked around desperately, searching through the campus for something to occupy his mind until the prized copies were made.

He found himself in the campus bookstore. It seemed to Warren, now coming down a little from his earlier, power-fueled high, that the light from the overhead fluorescent lamps cast eerie, bruised shadows under everyone's eyes, making them appear undead, vampiric. He patted down the raised hairs on his neck and deliberately avoided eye contact with the other customers as he browsed, distracted, through shelves of school supplies, manila folders, envelopes, and typing paper.

Without anything to consciously focus on, the gears in Warren's mind began to turn of their own volition. As he slowly walked down the aisles the long mantra of his oral presentation kept rolling through his head unbidden. *The entrepreneurial model of a time machine industry would most likely mirror that of the automotive industry.* He had organized the oral portion of his report the previous night; the new information he had absorbed was searching for context. *One has a tendency to believe that the set dimensions of time would not accommodate time travel; however, I believe that time is a bladder of eternal elasticity,*

*that can be stretched to contain everything, that will certainly not burst. He half-listened to this cavernous inner voice, waiting for a break in rhythm. If it stumbled or locked, he knew that he would then have to mentally correct something. Families could travel through time on vacation without fear of some primitive race of savages killing them for sport or sacrifice. As trips became more frequent, time would eventually converge into one constantly changing moment--past, present and future would have no meaning, all would be subordinate to the constantly changing NOW. He knew what he was to say without error; he knew his work, how to explain his work, as if it were his native language. But the train of words and ideas kept moving through his consciousness as if it were an obsession. Imagine a map that went beyond simple geography, a five dimensional map of time that revealed the layers and waves of human movement constantly crashing upon the shore and constantly changing the surface. Time is that shore, and time travel is the unifying ocean. History and what is to be could be ever accessible. Warren stopped by the index cards for a moment, but moved on when he realized that they would be unnecessary.*

As he stood next to an aisle of books under the heading "Psychology," Warren attempted to shut the echoing voice out of his head, confident that he would not miss anything. *Hierarchical conditions would cease to exist. Napoleon would be no greater than the person sitting next to you--although he'd still be an interesting person to meet (make time for laughs).* But the voice

did not stop; the language of his own mind became an overwhelming abstract mumble. *We would have to think about a new form of government, of course. There could be no one power to control this changing landscape, no single authority to monitor the potential anarchy of the time travel principle.* He tried to think about something else--he looked at a row of magazines, working up a desire to leaf through one of them. The voice did not stop. *Neanderthal learns etiquette and tennis from the modern man.* He picked up a book that was at hand and flipped through it to divert his attention, but still the compulsive voice reverberated, calling him away from his surroundings. *A new consciousness, a consciousness ready to seize the multiple opportunities time has to offer.* Warren could not stop the voice. He began to panic, breathing shallowly and quickly, looking for the exit beyond the rows of slouching zombies. A lightheaded feeling made him partially swoon and Warren suddenly remembered that he had not eaten the whole day, and most of the previous day. This revelation dampened the drum of words in his brain and Warren made his way out of the bookstore, careful to keep an arm's length from anyone that might touch him.

He finished a sandwich he purchased at the convenience store and found himself again on the wooden bench outside of the copy building. He thought that the pink paint had gotten brighter over the course of the day; it almost hurt his eyes to look at the building. He impatiently glanced at his watch. Only a half hour had passed. Turning from his seat to the copy building



blazing in the sun, Warren attempted to look through its glass door but only caught the glare of reflected sunlight. The feeling of triumph still resonated in him softly, but most of his nervous energy was digested along with his sandwich. Warren could feel it break down in his stomach. He stretched his legs out in front of his body and reclined as much as he could on the hard wooden slats of the bench. Again, semi-consciously, he started to think about time travel. The term popped into his inner vision for only a second and the next second he was asleep.

When Warren awoke he found himself curled lengthwise on the bench. His mouth was dry; he felt as if he had sucked on dirty pennies. He started to recall a dream, a fantastic dream that had occurred during his nap, but it was smothered by the revelation of the moment. He sat up and immediately looked at his watch. Two hours had passed, overcome by two more, and the copy building had closed a half hour ago. Disregarding his cramped muscles, Warren rushed to the glass door and, to his surprise and relief, found it open. He hesitated at the entrance.

The house lights were off, and only a soft white glow illuminated the register on the counter. Through the glass door, Warren saw a brown paper bag on the counter, next to the register. The attendant, in darkness, stood over a copy machine, facing the opposite way. Warren entered the building and the man did not turn around. A vague, senseless fear clawed at Warren's shoulder blades. The store was frightening in its darkness. He looked back towards the entrance, the exit. All of the machines

had been turned off, and the comforting hum of electricity was replaced with the inert weight of silence. Hearing only his own breathing, Warren made his way to the counter.

"I was waiting for you," the man said quietly, his back still to Warren. The man's soft words exploded in Warren's ears, and he heard his own breathing become louder.

*This is absurd, Warren thought. I just wanted the copies.*

"I read your report, you know," the man said, again very softly, as he turned around. "It blew my mind. You are a very intelligent, a very bright, young man."

The man's face came into the soft light above the counter-- Warren half-gasped and caught himself. The attendant's nose, which Warren had earlier avoided because of its perpetual peeling, seemed now in the process of being totally ravaged by a horrible, degenerative ailment. For a split second, in the soft white light, the nose looked as though it was actively rotting on the man's shadowed face; all Warren could focus on, with his eyes and his mind, was the nose. A brief odor came to him, and he immediately felt like vomiting. The man punched up some numbers on the register.

"59-76," the man quoted as he looked at Warren.

Rapidly counting his money in his hands and setting it on the counter, Warren temporarily forgot his irrational fear. He grabbed the brown paper bag with his handouts and nearly ran to the door.

"Good luck," the man called after him.

Warren paused for a small moment at the glass door and almost turned his head around to confirm what he had just seen. His neck began to swivel as if were separate from his body, as if it was controlled by some other force. With a great effort of will Warren forced his head forward and slipped out the door, the thick and heavy paper bag clutched tightly to his chest.

He didn't stop running until he returned to his dormitory room. Fumbling for his key among the several coins in his pocket, Warren pulled out the contents of his entire pocket and shuffled them in his palm with his thumb, his right arm cradling the package with all of its strength. He spotted the key and carefully placed it in the door lock while holding on to his change with the rest of his fingers. A penny dropped from his sweaty grasp and fell on the ground with a twirl before landing heads up. It seemed like an omen--good or bad? Warren, who had the apparition of the man with the decaying nose behind him, left the penny where it was. He was being foolish. He twisted the key, threw the door open turned on the overhead light and fell on his bed butt first, dropping the package of copies beside him.

Rubbing his temples with the claw of his hand, Warren noticed that his roommate still had not returned. This fact comforted Warren; he didn't feel like dealing with Dexter in this tense state. It had been such an odd and stressful day, with the world reeling around him like an uncontrollable dream. It seemed to Warren that he had been only the helpless dreamer. That he had been heavy-limbed, sluggish, unable to react except with terror.

The only real moment, Warren thought, had come when he was asleep on the bench outside of the copy store; he thought that if he could remember what he had dreamt, something would make sense. Warren attempted to reconjure the dream, but nothing came to him. Closing his eyes, he began to relive the sensations and thoughts that played upon him the whole day, and these images quickly melted into a breathing, glowing blob behind his eyelids--the light against his closed eyes. His imagination still running, he transformed the blob into a fleshy nose with maggots rutting in every stretched pore. If he could only stop thinking! The blob disappeared as the slithering memory of his presentation on time travel wrapped itself around his brain.

Warren opened his eyes, and a rush of blood and air filled the entire recess of his head. He closed his eyes once more and breathed deeply until the dizzy feeling escaped through his nostrils. He opened his eyes again, slowly this time, and turned to see the brown paper packet beside him, pressed into the springs of his bed with weight and authority. He relished every languid moment as he tore the brown paper around his handouts; it was as if he were unpeeling a sensuous fruit. He wadded up the torn bag and threw it near a wastebasket under the desk. Warren saw before him an unflawed, uncreased, perfectly stapled stack of handouts with a brief table of contents on the cover page of every one.

Warren snatched up the first copy right away and did a rapid once-over of the handout, flipping through each page and

trying in vain to approach the booklet from the perspective of an indifferent student. The work was too close to him, as a child would be; he thought it was beautiful. The transparencies, which were underneath the handouts in a smaller wax bag, were held in the light by his careful fingers and discerning eyes. No smears, no bleeding--everything was perfect.

The presentation would be more sermon, more fireworks display, more stage show than an actual lecture. He placed the transparencies on the bed as he stared at the fluorescent light overhead, envisioning himself at the podium in a suit pounding on its surface, with animated numbers moving behind him, himself lit like a cinema star. Warren's day would come tomorrow, and if this moment was a preamble to his presentation, glory and triumph would truly be his.

He moved his strained eyes away from the light and slowly gathered his handouts and transparencies, placing them in a flexible paper folder he retrieved from his desk. He opened his backpack and placed the collection closest to where his back would be, closest to his body. After he neatly zippered his backpack and set it next to his bed, Warren felt confusion melting into his body. Again he felt as if he did not know what to do with himself. He thought about nervously bouncing his knee up and down, but his body did not respond. Even his thoughts escaped him, and for a moment he felt as if he were nothing, as if he were of no substance. There was, for a moment, the acute sensation of disappearing--

His conclusion, upon waking, was that he had slept without dreaming. He had not even the comforting feeling of dreaming and then forgetting the dream. Warren felt as if he had simply watched himself sleep for hours, his eyes closed and his surroundings masked by blinding fluorescent light. When the notion that he had not set an alarm struck him, Warren sat up and found himself fully clothed, his legs over the side of the bed. Even his shoes were on. Before noticing anything around him, he quickly opened his backpack next to his bed and his checked on his copies, which were safely inside. Warren was brought to full wakefulness by a sharp snore from the bed across his own. Dexter was asleep in his own bed, the covers pulled all the way up to his chin. Warren noticed that he had shaved off his goatee, only because his roommate's mouth was gaping. Taking a fast look at the digital clock, Warren realized with relief that he had only slept in 15 minutes later than he should have. He still had time to shower and prepare himself for the presentation that day.

He unclothed and wrapped himself in a towel, keeping one eye on his sleeping roommate for the sake of his own modesty. After Warren gathered up some clothes and his toiletries, he left the dorm room and headed to the bathroom. The halls were empty, just as the communal men's bathroom was. Small white tiles glowed as Warren flicked on the light. He placed his clothes on a metal shelf under a row of mirrors and above a row of porcelain sinks, and then separated a bar of soap and bottle of shampoo from his bundle of things. He turned the water in the shower on, tested it

with his foot, and when it was deemed sufficiently warm he entered underneath the running stream.

The shower rejuvenated Warren completely. He left it with his hair wet and plastered to his crown. The excited feeling returned, rapidly pushing blood through his veins, and he theatrically wrapped the towel around his waist. Warren applied toothpaste to his toothbrush and began to clean his teeth methodically. He brushed for a few moments at the back of his mouth, and then stopped in mid-stroke when he looked in the mirror above the sink. Toothbrush still in his mouth, his lips covered in the abrasive foam of his toothpaste, Warren felt a horror that made all of his tense, reawakened muscles sag. He took the toothbrush out of his mouth, spit into the sink, and rinsed his mouth with running water. He brought his face hopefully back to the mirror, but his horror was confirmed--the right side of his face, from his chin up his jaw and cheek to right under his eye, was a sickly powder blue color, as if the skin and the blood underneath were gangrenous or poisoned with ink. Dark blue growths, like boils, were scattered throughout this area, and Warren touched one of them, unsure of their existence, unsure of his own vision. The blue growth was moist, with the hard texture of a callous. Despair from horror began to spread from the strange infection.

What did it come from? Was it an allergic reaction? A disease? Warren did not feel particularly unwell aside from the great perturbation of having a half-blue face riddled with boils,

so he could rule out a disease. He thought that he might have a skin irritation, but the skin on his face did not feel irritated or even extra sensitive. He was nonplussed. He considered missing his class and his presentation for a fraction of a second, but viciously murdered the thought as soon as it appeared. The presentation had to be made. That day. But what was he to do with his hideous face? Warren viewed it very carefully in the mirror from a variety of angles. Again he took stock of his health, which seemed to be top-notch, and came to the conclusion that he must have had some strange dermatological reaction to something he had eaten or something he had come into contact with. A very strange reaction. What would people think when they saw him? Warren quickly catalogued a number of responses to inquiring people concerned for his health, to explain the mysterious appearance of a faded tattoo blue color throughout the side of his face, along with darker boils. Warren left his face at that, self-conscious and aware but resigned to fate. He dropped his towel and got into his clean clothes.

As Warren walked out of the bathroom down the hall, his wet hair combed back and drops of water falling from his ears, he noticed a shirtless student coming in his direction. The well-built student wore glasses, and his rubber slippers slapped against his heels as he walked. He held a towel around his waist with his hand. Warren moved closer to the wall, manipulating the right side of his face away from the student's view. He subtly watched the student's eyes as he passed; Warren caught no sense



of disgust or curiosity from him. His eyes barely glanced at Warren, without recognition. Warren sighed in relief as the student walked further down the hall to the bathroom, comforted that the boy did not notice his transformed face. He wasn't completely ready to deal with anyone's reaction just yet.

Warren entered his own room on tiptoe, slowly turning the key and knob to dampen the noise of the click. Dexter still slumbered, and the covers had been moved from his chin down to his waist. Warren hoped that he could gather all of things before his roommate woke up, and he set about pulling on his socks and putting on his shoes right away, silently, checking the inhalation and exhalation of his own breath for volume. After he had dressed, he threw his heavy backpack around his shoulders and froze--his roommate had turned over in bed and was looking directly at him with sleepy, heavy eyes. Warren rapidly went through his list of responses.

"Hey buddy, haven't seen you in a while," Dexter yawned as he stretched his arms. "You're heading for class already?" He turned and squinted in the direction of the digital alarm clock.

"Yes," Warren said as he adjusted his backpack. "I've got a presentation today. A big one." He steeled himself against the inevitable comment about his face, certain that it would come.

"Well, good luck to ya," Dexter said as he turned back to him. By now he was looking at Warren straight in the face. "As for me, I'm gonna catch some more z's. Gotta rest up for the big

party tonight." With that, Warren's roommate turned away from him and in seconds was softly snoring.

Warren felt more bewildered as he shut the door to his dorm room. He didn't know why his roommate had said nothing about his face, the disfigured right side that he felt so precisely through the skin of his cheek. He felt something under his shoe and lifted his foot. The penny, heads up, stared at him from the ground. What was happening? Dexter was not the most observant person in the world, but Warren felt as if his own face shone like a blue beacon to his marred features. He placed a finger to one of the growths again, to assure himself of its existence a second time, and there they were, tough and now dry, hard and corn-like. His bewilderment deepened.

To his dismay, the campus was alive with other students walking to class. The cement walkways were a sea of unblemished faces, drifting in alternating currents. Warren held his hand to the transfigured side of his face as he entered the crowd, glancing at the other faces through the side of his eyes. No one took a second look at him. Warren heard a laugh and quickly turned his head, noticing a young woman holding hands with an awkward looking fellow who was telling her a joke. His hand dropped away as he faced the crowd again, passing trees and buildings on the long eternal walkway. He stared straight at a pretty girl walking in his direction; she did not return his gaze. He saw a group of young men standing together, and one of them looked at him for a moment. But the boy was obviously

thinking of something else and returned to the conversation with his friends. His head turned this way and that--he waited for someone to stare. No one did. Warren felt the crowd pulling him under. He thought that he was going crazy; he began to doubt that his face was marked after all. It wasn't real. Sweating, Warren rushed to the side of a building to check his reflection in a window. There it was, blue-shaded, with mountainous boils. He was sure that he must be insane.

Warren finally made his way to class and entered the auditorium with extreme apprehension. He saw the shoulders of Leviathan, who was reading a paperback fantasy novel in his seat, something from a series called *Dragon's Realm*. For an instant, Warren almost went outside of his preoccupation to snort at the large student, but the greater obsession pulled him back. Two girls sitting together looked straight at him as he walked down the aisle, and he took a seat a couple of rows behind them so he could hear what they whispered to one another. He strained his ears and realized that they were talking about the party that Dexter had mentioned. Warren could feel moisture rolling off his underarm hairs in heavy droplets. He barely noticed when the professor walked heavily down the aisle, a stack of papers in his arms. He took his place at a large desk at the center of the auditorium.

"All righty--all right," the professor said without reason as he peered out to the auditorium. He patted the chest pocket of his white shirt and pulled out his glasses. Flipping through the

ubiquitous stack of papers on his desk, he began to hum un-melodically.

"Okay, here we go," he said, finding the appropriate sheet of paper. "All right--Dunne. Warren Dunne. Warren Dunne, you have a presentation today, so if you would please come to the podium.."

He heard his name while intently staring at the backs of his fellow students and looked up quickly. Warren had been so caught up in the condition of his face, in the indifference of the people who witnessed it, in his own confusion and frustration that he had not even considered that his presentation was at that moment. He had barely thought about it the whole morning, what with this seeming curse placed upon him. His brain locked into a high pitched scream while his body opened his book bag, pulled out the set of handouts and transparencies, and began to walk toward the podium to the right of the professor's desk.

"Now, for all of those that did not attend class today, I want you students who are here to be aware that their grades will be affected negatively--" the professor was saying as Warren made his way to the front of the auditorium. He gave his stack of handouts to a student, who took one without looking at him and passed the others to the scattered classmates, spread out in different rows throughout the auditorium. When Warren was satisfied that all of the handouts had been distributed, he walked to the rolled up white screen and pulled it down. It unrolled smoothly and stayed in position without forcing. He then turned on the overhead projector that had been set up next to the

podium, and the bright light temporarily blinded him. He tentatively adjusted the light projection to the white screen, and when he looked out to the seats all he could see was darkness. His entire face was illuminated by the light shining up from the glass plate on the overhead projector. Warren placed the introductory transparency on the projector with a growing sense of confidence. Sliding over to the podium, Warren gripped the edges of its top and felt power move from his tight fingers to the muscles in his body. He silently cleared his throat.

"To most of us, time travel seems as far-fetched a notion as robots that can think and feel," he began.

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The presentation went beyond, far beyond, Warren's expectations. If he had been a music conductor, he would have felt that he conducted a note perfect symphony with an emotional nuance that came from somewhere else, from up above. The transition between ideas was fluid, almost like a ballet, as was the transition between the visual and spoken side of the report. The handouts, which seemed so important before, were to Warren now merely programs for the actual show. At one point Warren even pounded the podium for theatrical effect, as he had fantasized. He felt exultant--and when he completed his presentation, he half-expected applause.

Warren turned off the overhead projector and looked out into the class, the audience. To his surprise, there seemed to be fewer students than there had been before he gave his

presentation. Loose handouts fluttered under empty chairs. Leviathan belched softly into his large hand, provoking laughter from two boys sitting behind him. The rest of the students focused on putting their books away into their backpacks.

"Interesting report," the professor said from his desk and Warren turned towards him. "Unfortunately, we won't have time for questions. The period has finished--you've gone over a little, in fact. But if you have any questions for Warren regarding his report," he addressed the students, "please feel free to email them to him."

Warren, feeling a mechanical urge to leave with the other students, started to walk away from the podium listlessly. He sighed. The image of him lit like a movie star had fallen to blackness.

Relief.

There was nothing in his head.

"Gus? Did you hear the question?"

"Yes—well Bowler, college wasn't like some hidden Aztec pyramid that contained the truths about astronomical observation. There were secrets, but as soon as you discovered them—poof."

"As it always is."

"Ah, it was just a popularity contest, anyway."

"College?"

"Sure. And as soon as I put something in my mind I wasn't happy until I'd gotten rid of it. Now look at me. I work in an ice cream parlor."

“You’re the *manager* of an ice cream parlor.”

“Jesus—when I graduated, they offered me the promotion. I thought, ‘what the hell?’”

Honeycut has slid to a space in the exact middle of us, prostrate and twitching with dreams on the carpet.

“You know, Gus, Mrs. Altman is sick.”

“Mrs. Altman? Sick?”

“You haven’t noticed?”

“I think perhaps she mentioned something—something—”

“She’s been sick for quite a while now—you can see it in her face.”

“Really?”

“Don’t you see her nearly everyday?”

“Yes, but—she’s always seemed all right to me—”

“Well, I thought I’d bring dinner over to her one of these nights. Let her rest. You know—”

“No, no—yes. That’s a good idea. Perhaps I could make soup for her. Something like that? Not because she’s sick, of course, but simply because it would be nice—”

“Fine, Gus. I’ll tell you what. I’ll take something to her tomorrow night, and say that you’ve got something lined up for her the next night. Let her rest a while, so she doesn’t have to worry about cooking. Maybe we could get Ezgi to make something as well.”

“Yes, that would be nice.”

Mrs. Altman sick. Mrs. Altman isn’t sick.

Honeycut shifts on the floor violently, waking herself up with a yelp.



## CHAPTER 5

I'm walking to work. Bad dreams last night. The dead kitten massaging its claws into my brain while I slept, sending tainted bolts to my synapses with ghostly electricity. The kitten, perched upon my dreaming head, silent, attentive, stretching its immaterial paws into my skull and tormenting me with its dead visions. I wish it would just stay in the ceiling, or the closet, or under the sink next to the cleansers or wherever it cries and lingers.

My grandmother painted over one of her kitchen cupboard doors, so it looked like part of the walls, and hung a cross where the knob handle was. She said the air was too cold in there—several degrees colder than in the rest of the house. At least she discovered where the ghost was. I wouldn't know the first place to hang a cross in my apartment. If it would simply stay out of my dreams, I could live with it. Perhaps I'll hang a cross from my bed post so that it circles around my head at night rather than entering it.

In the hallway I hear Bowler's loud wake up sniff, and Honeycut whining and pawing at the door. Ezgi's not here. One day in a string of a million days and she's not here today. She's with a fellow she met while working. Of course. Some idiotic style monger with product in his hair and his fingernails clipped and transparent sunglasses. He drinks Smirnoff Ice instead of beer. Of course. The first American who showed any interest in her and she dropped her drawers. Stayed over at his place, I bet. Taught him a few words of Turkish and he showed her his DVD collection, full of international movies that they both knew and loved, that they laughed over together while sneaking furtive glances at each other, waiting for the romantic moment that fate set up for them so that

they could take advantage of their thinly masked lust. But they didn't make love. They couldn't have made love. Damn him. Damn.

Ezgi.

She was supposed to be in the hallway. She's grown tired of our timed meetings. Tired of the falseness of superficial conversation, in words that aren't even her native tongue. Tired of seeing me in the mornings. Found someone else to fancy, eh? We'll see about that. We'll see about that, oh yes we will. Ezgi, so beautiful. I don't care about your accent any more. I don't care. Just come back into the hallway in the mornings. Perhaps she could read my mind all along. Or perhaps she could just read my face. It would be enough for her to hate me forever.

Bowler's right. It could go either way, couldn't it. But with a philosophy like that it's pretty easy to be right. Either way. What could go either way? Anything. I don't know if I want to be in that state of mind anymore. I don't know if I like anything all that much. Bad dreams. I don't want any of it. Not work. Not even Ezgi in the hallway. Not Bowler talking bullshit. And certainly not that god damn kitten.

The wind shoves its filthy shoulders into the trees, the buildings, my chest. My lungs fist up and I cough, and the wind moves to push me from behind. I walk past a fence barricading a gravel covered plot of land where they are building another parking lot. A long ream of black felt is draped over the chain link fence, with slits sporadically cut in the felt to allow the air through. The slits, like mouths, all exhale upon me at once, breathing concrete dust in to my eyes, where it builds up sediment under my eyelids. The torn lips take a moment to inhale as the wind decreases, but quickly begin again their obscene exhalations and clouds of construction dirt swirl into my face.

I can taste the asphalt. I shield my eyes with my hand as the wind continues its bullying, offensive motions. If I could only lie in the shelter of the raised curb, along with the grit and bits of exploded pavement and displaced asphalt. But I'd deface my work clothes. Oh, tear them off my body, hateful wind.

My eyes burn and I look down into the street. Through blurred vision I see my dream appear in front of me. Out of a crack in the street a red light bursts forth, along with a roiling, as if liquid, and a rumbling, the solid ground. Black pieces of steaming matter are thrown from the widening split in the street—and amidst the rumbling and roiling I see, emerging, the twitching of a pointed ear. The ear grows larger, and then the second ear behind it, the thin edges of the ears vibrating in the wind. Then the wet mane, limp and heavy over the long neck, and the muzzle, with its snorting, jerking nostrils. The head of a horse from a crack in the street—black, no red, no, *crimson*—and it tosses its head violently, its mane flopping from one side of its neck to the other, flecks of foam splashing off its twitching ears. The horse is running in place, pushing itself out of the jagged vagina in the street, its black, fist-sized eyeballs weeping the dark ooze of its birth fluid. The roiling and rumbling continues, and the horse's legs work in place, it's muscular frame taut, its head tossing to and fro, casting off thick foam. And the crack expands, and one hoof gains contact with the surface of the asphalt, then another hoof—it pulls itself out of the slit in the road, a slimy thing whose entrails can be seen through its translucent belly, it rears up and—

*Horror!*

From the window of the Hall of FRAME, Fiona in street clothes! Fiona lingering over the counter making eyes at some idiot co-worker—smiling! Laughing! Her smile is

askew. Her nose is too pointy, like a witch's. How the lights have betrayed you, Fiona, how your actions have betrayed me!

I despise her.

Is there nothing good? Is there nothing left in this world?

She goes into work on her day off simply to perpetuate some asinine courtship with her simple-minded co-worker. In street clothes, in shorts and a t-shirt. Where are the dresses that flowed so poetically from your arms, your shoulders, your hips? Was your repose an illusion? A façade meant to mask your ugly desperation? With a co-worker—you that I have placed so much into—you betray your own beauty for this pathetic display of dumb lust? She nods and skips and dances around the amateurish paintings, off the clock, to the delight of her foolish co-worker. I've seen him at the ATM. I've seen him at the hamburger stand. I've seen him at the salon, waiting in line for a seventy-five dollar haircut. Is that what draws you to him, Fiona of my fantasy? When did you associate with the mediocre?

I despise her.

I want nothing to do with her from this point on.

Is there nothing good? Look hard into me, denizens of the Taco Shop. Look hard. Take my soul if you want it, feed upon it if you like. Trade it to the drug dealer you meet in the parking lot as you move the trash bags to the dumpster. It is a foul lens in which to view this sickening world.

Fiona—why is it that you still distress me?

And of course Jackie's opened the store herself, smirking self-righteously as she sweats over the ice cream, scooping it out with repressed, irritated jerks while she

wonders where I am. She can go to hell. To a deeper level of Hell, to level of traitors with Ezgi and Fiona. I don't want her on my level anymore. I despise all of them.

“Did you—”

“Did I what, Jackie? Did I restock the plastic spoons? The napkins? Did I take inventory of the chocolate chip yesterday? No, I haven't Jackie, I haven't done a damn thing.”

“I was just going to ask you if you were watching TV last night.”

“I—no. What? Oh, shit. Look lively Jackie, we have an early riser with his insolent earwig of a child, waiting to fatten more their already fat faces.”

“All right, give me one of everything. No, just kidding.”

“Ha, ha.”

“Daddy, I want a cone. Ice cream, ice cream.” The child runs to the counter and places his hands on the cold display glass.

“What kind do you want, my son? My son, my son, my son?”

Jackie's moved to the side and is stuffing napkins into the metal dispenser. Betrayed. The child, squeakingly, slides his fingers down the glass. He lifts his hands off and does it again. Opaque white sweat streaks form underneath his palms.

“Do you want vanilla? Oh, look at that. Pecan praline. I'm more of a sherbet man myself.”

“Ha, ha.”

Jackie's out in the eating area, straightening chairs. The hollow metal of chair legs clang and screech across the linoleum floor.

“What kind of sherbet do you have? Or is there a sorbet—”

“There’s orange and pineapple. They’re right there.”

“Pick one out, Dylan. I think Daddy’s going to get some pineapple sherbet. Is it sherbet or sherbert?”

“What?”

“Is it sherbet or sherbert?”

BLAM BLAM BLAM

“Please—”

“No, no Dylan, don’t hit the glass. Pick out what kind you want. The man’s waiting.”

“Oh my god, Gus—did you see the disgusting mess behind the trash can? It smells—Jesus, I don’t want to think about what it smells like.”

BLAM BLAM BLAM

“Please—”

“Dylan, pick out what kind of cone you want. Any kind you want.”

“Hello, Stubby’s Ice Cream. Yes, we do make ice ream cakes. We usually have set patterns of decorations—you can come in to look at them if you like.”

BLAM BLAM BLAM

“Don’t—”

“Dylan, don’t hit the glass honey. What kind do you want?”

“Chocolate! Chocolate!”

BLAM BLAM BLAM

“Jackie, can I speak to you for a second? Put them on hold. Come over here. Now Jackie, isn’t it wonderful, isn’t it an inspiring feeling, to witness effective parenting in action? *Please, don’t hit the god damn glass.*”

“What?”

“What?”

“I’m just amazed by how well behaved your child is, how keen he is on instruction. You must be quite the disciplinarian.”

“Jesus, Gus—”

The pointing of a finger into my face. I cross my eyes to look at the fingertip.

“Look you—god damn—dolt. We just came in here for some ice cream. He’s just a kid.”

“With astonishing manners.”

“Hey, screw you—pal. Screw this. Listen, I’m going to tell your manager—”

“I’m the manager, sir. And I would be quite sympathetic to me, if I were an impartial third party.”

Silently stuttering and lifting his hands—and then his arms fall, lifeless.

“Some place! Some god damn place. Screw you, pal. Screw this place. We are *never* setting foot in here again. Come on, Dylan.”

“Waaah—”

“Come on, we’ll get a cookie instead. You like cookies don’t you? A nice big chocolate chip cookie?”

“Jesus Christ, Gus, what’s the matter with you?”

“I did that for the both of us, Ana. My little Ana bear.”

“What?”

“Come on, Jackie, these idiots need to be put in their place. This whole mall is filled with idiots, idiots and traitors and cowards. Think they can let their kids act anyway they want—well, they’ll get what’s coming to them. I don’t work this horrid job just to take their shit—”

“Look, you work this job because you don’t have anything else. Nothing. And if you lose this job, what will you have? If you hate it so much, just quit. Quit. See how far you get. See how far. But if you’re going to be working with me, you better smile at those idiots, those traitors and cowards—Jesus, you made that little boy cry! I don’t care how much you hate them. Sometimes I hate them too, but you don’t see me pissing them off. What’s the matter with you, huh?”

“I’m just tired of it. And bitter.”

“Then get the hell out of my face. I’ve got to work. You don’t want to work, leave. You know I can handle this place without you. But if you stay, you better stop pissing off *my* customers, stop bitching, and stop being such an asshole.”

You fucking bitch—

“You fu—

You’re right. Damn it—you’re right. Fine.”

I’m not too stupid to not know when I’m wrong. She’s right and I’m wrong.

I wonder how she’ll use that against me in the future.

“Incident ‘Round the Campfire”

Simon, his legs crossed Indian-style and his elbows on his knees, sat rapt. The heat from the fire brought out a little sweat on his upper lip; it was almost too warm a summer night for



a huge campfire. His gaze shifted slowly from Mr. Danny to the dancing, living flames. Mr. Danny's words took visual shape in the fire, beckoning like a finger when he reached a scary point in the story.

Simon loved Mr. Danny's tales of terror, even though this was the third straight year he had heard them. His counselor sat on an overturned log next to the fire, his fat face illuminated by a sheen of moisture. His large belly was thrust out and his underarms and chest were dark, soaked. The receding hairline before his curly blond hair was dotted with wet beads. His hands gestured along with his story, shadows moving in and out of the red-orange light.

"And out from the swamp, the couple heard a long moan."

Mr. Danny spread his arms out.

"Ooooooohhhhhh," he moaned, eyes closed.

The story was coming to Simon's favorite part. He leaned forward, keeping one eye on the shape-changing fire and the other on Mr. Danny.

"The couple clung to each other." Mr. Danny hugged himself. "Then they heard the footsteps--Toosh, toosh."

It was then that Taylor Miller fake farted.

The 12 other boys immediately began laughing. Like Simon, Taylor had also heard Mr. Danny's stories for the third year in a row, but he had never enjoyed them. Taylor was renowned amongst the kids for having a swimming pool at his house, and also

because he was the only boy that could beat Mr. Danny at one-on-one basketball. Simon did not like Taylor.

But he did like Mr. Danny. Mr. Danny was a nice man who seemed to read every comic book that Simon read a week before it came out in the stores. He never forced Simon to participate in games with the other boys when Simon did not want to; when the group went on Nature walks and Simon lagged behind, Mr. Danny would walk with him and swap superhero tales. They shared the same favorite comic book story, an issue of *Action Comics* where Superman is robbed of his superpowers and must defeat his enemy through sheer ingenuity. Simon was indignant at Taylor's crude interruption.

Mr. Danny laughed along with the other children, his hands on his knees and his belly bouncing. After the last giggle faded into the crackling of burning bark, he cleared his throat and wiped the back of his hand against his forehead.

"All right now, boys. Let's settle down. Back to the story." Mr. Danny closed his eyes. "And they heard the footsteps--toosh, toosh."

Taylor fake farted again, his lips blowing hard against the palms of his hands.

Mr. Danny's face dropped. A line of sweat raced down his cheek. Simon had never seen Mr. Danny get mad at anything or anyone before.

"Jesus Christ, Taylor, will you grow up?"

Taylor, with his dirty blond hair hanging in his eyes, looked stunned. His mouth was a gaping hole. When the boy flicked the hair out of his eyes with a well-practiced neck movement, Simon saw a look of malevolence so deep, so apparent, that a nail of panic drove itself through his belly. Mr. Danny was oblivious to the look. He settled himself back into the story for a third time.

"And then they heard footsteps..."

"I hate this stupid story."

Simon saw Mr. Danny's eyes become slits. His forehead shined.

"Then you can go to bed and not have to listen to it, Taylor," Mr. Danny said through clenched teeth. "And take your bathroom buddy with you. It's a shame he'll have to miss out on the story, too."

Simon looked around. All the other boys stared at Mr. Danny expectantly. He had never, not once in three years, disciplined any of the children he took care of, no matter how badly they behaved. They waited for him nervously to lose his cool and bust Taylor. Simon felt the dread knead his shoulders like an iron set of robot claws. Taylor punched a fist into an open hand.

"I hate you."

Mr. Danny simply glared. Another drop of sweat skied down to the end of his nose; to Simon it resembled a hanging bat with tightly folded wings. The group of children simultaneously

inhaled. Simon wondered why Mr. Danny didn't say anything. He could send Taylor to bed or call his parents to take him home.

"You're a fat bastard," Taylor continued.

Mr. Danny's mouth slowly opened, then quickly shut. The drop of sweat fell off his nose, and Simon watched as it exploded in the dust covered ground. Mr. Danny blinked. It was then that Simon felt someone flick his ear, a good painful shot.

"Owww!"

He cupped his hand over the injured ear. All the kids looked behind themselves at Simon after they heard him cry out from the back. Mr. Danny, taking advantage of the distraction, stood up.

"Okay, kids, it's getting late. Everyone get ready for bed."

Taylor sat after many of the boys stood and walked by the fire to their tents, but eventually he got up and followed the others.

Late that night, Simon woke up. He had to pee. His ear didn't hurt anymore. He threw off the hot sleeping bag and felt for his shoes. He slipped on his tennis shoes without socks and stood up, trying to keep his balance over the messy piles of boys' belongings. The tent air was a cloud of his tent-mates' heavy, uniform breathing. He tip-toed over their sleeping bodies to the tent flaps.

Simon opened the flaps and heard the soft crackling of the wood. The fire had become orange and low now, and Mr. Danny sat

on his log in front of it. A faded Star Wars sleeping bag was draped across his shoulders, the corners frayed and some of the stuffing poking through. Simon squinted. Mr. Danny was reading a comic book by the low light of the fire. It looked familiar, but the cover was in shadow.

The stubby yellow hairs on Mr. Danny's chin glowed with their own light. Simon began to walk towards the fire--he thought about asking Mr. Danny a question about the comic--but quickly turned around and walked to a large tree. He pulled down his shorts and relieved himself, and then slipped through the heavy tent flaps unnoticed.

"The most frequent feeling in a person's lifetime, Jackie, is disillusionment. In order not to fall into despair you have to have a philosophy that accommodates the frequency of that feeling."

"Hmm." She's not listening. I'm just beginning to realize that there's a very few things that affect her. That act as stimulus. I'm not sure if it's been a long process of numbing herself, or if she lacks the capability to feel anything. It's a good instinctual defense, though. I see how she's able to keep her head with this job.

I was romanticizing her.

"Did I ever mention that I was a summer camp counselor at one time, Jackie?"

"Summer camp?"

"Yes, it was when I was eighteen, the summer before I began college."

"And you were in charge of children? You?"

"Oh, I wasn't always this high strung. Look, I don't hate kids—I envy them. You get a grace period of about twelve or thirteen years, if you don't live in a war-torn

country, before you start to realize things. And once you begin to realize things, you can't stop that process. Oh hell, if you want to know all about that, go listen to 'In My Life.' The Judy Collins version."

Jackie's wiping down the display case with a paper towel. Her aversion to reminiscing is obvious. I wonder what terror lurks hidden behind the trees that surround her memory lane, what thing claws in the dirt impatiently and snorts through its piggish nose, heaving snot on the growth around it. What does she not want to remember? My memories are so simple to circumnavigate—they involve fictional people in fictional situations.

Most likely her childhood was as much of a horror as it is for many girls, and for boys who wear perfume and whisper to themselves during class discussion, their faces greasy from lack of washing. Perhaps her pony suffered a heart attack while being put through its paces, crumbling underneath her in a snapping of bones. Perhaps some boy she'd held in affection dunked her ponytail in the inkwell, leaving the dark blue stain of puppy love offended and discarded upon her collarbone as ink splashed from her hair to her skin. Perhaps he was mocked as girls made rings around her, shouting her name as she wept.

I feel inclined to remember, so I decide to impose my own remembrances upon her silent plateau of uncertain and wavering attention.

"I was at summer camp myself—when I was kid. It was a Christian Camp in Tennessee. There was a large pond and in the middle of it, on a small island, was a wooden cross. At the beginning of summer, the pond would be covered in a thick layer of green scum. Have you ever seen scum, Jackie? Not like soap scum, this was real scum,

pond scum, living, slimy vegetation that reeked moist rot. The pond, at the beginning of the summer, would be completely green with scum that had multiplied on the surface during the spring. When we went swimming for the first time at camp, one boy did a cannonball off the wooden dock into the solid green pond, and the scum shattered beneath him. Then we all went in, and the scum broke apart—I watched it as it drifted in the wake of kids swimming and splashing, green clots of stench gathering at the edges of the water. We'd come out and it would be in our hair, dripping from our fingers, dangling off our shoulders—and the smell wouldn't come off even after we took showers.”

“That sounds really gross, Gus.”

“It does—it does when I say it, it sounds more gross than I thought it was then. There must have been so many germs breeding in that scum—and there were horseflies always hovering over it, and they'd ram you in the head trying to get closer to the scum without getting wet.”

“You said this was a Christian camp?”

“Yes—there would be sermons at night, sermons like you'd have at church. One afternoon I pissed in my shorts and to hide it, I just went swimming in the same pair of shorts. I didn't have the opportunity to change clothes so I went to the sermon in my wet shorts and wet underwear, which was already starting to itch. Terribly. But I couldn't scratch my ass during the sermon, amid the prayers and the testimonials. Then the youth pastor wheeled out a television and VCR and played a tape with a preacher that was in the Viet Nam war. Half of his body, including a whole side of his face, had been severely disfigured by a grenade that went off in his hand early. After the video, a man took the podium and told a story about his brother, who he kept saying was the nicest guy in the

world. He said that his brother had intended to get saved—accept Jesus Christ as his savior—but before he could do it he fell asleep while driving and died in a car crash. He was pretty certain that his brother was in Hell, even though he had been the nicest guy in the world.”

“That’s frightening, Gus. Is that too harsh, do you think, to be sentenced to Hell for eternity because you didn’t get around to accepting Jesus as your savior? You had other things, like a life, to attend to?”

“Well, it always scared me. But during his speech I had to run outside, I couldn’t take it anymore, I ran to a dark place on the side of the cabin and scratched—my butt, my hips, my thighs. I must have scratched for ten minutes straight, until the skin was red.”

“Are you still scared of Hell?”

“I was for a long time, Jackie. I was. But now it seems like an interesting change of pace, actually. But you see, life itself is a series of gradations from Heaven to Hell. Heaven would be—I don’t know—the climax point at sex. First love. Cocaine. Winning the spelling bee. Purgatory: working at a fast food restaurant. Taking care of an ailing parent. Limbo: Poverty. Helplessness. Living in prison. Hell: War, plague, pain. But it’s all a theory. Bowler’s right—it doesn’t matter which way it goes, it doesn’t even matter what you think about it.”

“Who’s Bowler?”

“He’s my friend. Lives in the apartment down the hall. Has a one-eyed dog named Honeycut. He once kicked a woman out of his apartment because she called Honeycut ‘ghastly.’ Can you believe that? She actually used the word ‘ghastly.’”

“Sounds like a very pleasant man.”



“Bowler’s great, very inspirational, if inspiration can be gauged on a scale of negativity. But I suppose inspiration doesn’t have to be defined as either positive or negative—it hits you like a cannonball to the ribcage and you can determine that as being positive or negative based on whatever lifestyle or set of philosophies determine your point of view.”

“I guess death is the same way, Gus. It hits you like a cannonball to the ribcage and you can make up your mind, in about a split-second’s time, whether that’s good or bad.”

“Bowler says that all things are inherently both. Whether something is good or bad is simply a matter of taste. And appetite. And, succeeding that, digestion. And after that, excretion, while other cycles of the same process are happening simultaneously with you barely recognizing them.”

“Hell is both good and bad.”

“Bad, to me, terrible. But to someone with leprosy, only a drag to think about. Why would anyone want to worry about Hell while we have genocide? Nuclear weapons? AIDS? It’s like imagining being whipped with a bicycle chain while you are presently being flogged with a bullwhip.”

Jackie rubs the counter again with a gray rag.

There is a moment of near-silence in the ice-cream parlor as the refrigeration motor clicks off—only the whisper of the dirty rag against the glossed wood of the counter top. Beating out of the entrance of the parlor is the light footfall of customers against the brick work floor, the occasional squeak of the rubber sole against the ground. A girl walking quickly turns, her arms crossed over her chest, and glares. Her mother

walks behind her, chastised, her head down. She tries to catch up, the large plastic bag swaying on her arm. The girl sighs with her whole body and begins to walk again, her mother following close behind. Further, there is the expressionless blending of voices in the distance and the steady breathing of centralized air conditioning.

“There’s no solid ground in my mind, Jackie. Every thought seems in the constant process of rising and falling, and then disappearing altogether. In patterns they all appear, but not set patterns—they’re ir-rhythmic sets of digitized lights dropping down a computer screen saver.”

Jackie sets a full garbage bag next to the counter and walks to the back to retrieve a new one. She waves the gray plastic bag into form out of its roll.

“Then death should be no problem for you, Gus. It will be a replay of the same patterns. The ultimate disappearance, except that you won’t have the comforting feeling you remember as forgetting something. A slow disappearance as the skin erodes—the worms crawl in, the worms crawl out—”

“I’m not afraid of worms, it’s true. If worms are the worst it gets, then I can handle it.”

As Jackie ties up the trash bag I am suddenly struck with an inspiration that I can interpret neither as positive nor negative. Perhaps it is in the way her hands manipulate the gathered strands of plastic in a knot, the humble bow of her head, her glasses falling forward to the end of her nose, the glimpse of her breast above the drooping shirt—

“Jackie—would you like to, perhaps—see a movie with me one evening?”

She looks up, straightening the skirt around her hips. I should have said nothing. Already, any respect for me I may have imagined is draining from her face—

“What?”

“The movies, Jackie. I thought it would be nice if we saw a movie together.”

“Gus, I—what’s the catch?”

“Nothing Jackie, no catch. If you don’t want to go, that’s fine. I just thought it would be nice.”

“No Gus—that would be nice. All right. There’s a film playing across the street that I’ve wanted to see for a while now—”

“Then we’ll go tomorrow. After work? After we cash out we’ll go to the movies. Perhaps even get something to eat beforehand.”

## CHAPTER 6

## "Ms. Thurber Encounters an Earthworm"

Ms. Delilah Thurber, on her knees and in her straw sun hat, denim shorts, sleeveless flannel shirt and canvas gardening gloves, dug up weeds from her flowerbed with a hand shovel. The dirt was soft and rich and black; she kept the soil nutritious with a mix of mulch, compost, and chemically enhanced fertilizer. But the healthy soil also gave rise to many weeds that invaded the flowerbed every other evening, when the sun and the heat went down. The ugly, predatory plants--with their alien, geometrically shaped leaves--had stubborn and hidden roots. To Ms. Thurber it seemed that the weeds grew back faster after being pulled out. Wiping her slick forehead with the back of her glove, she took two quick breaths before continuing to hack with her little gardening tool.

Ms. Thurber was retired from the post office after thirty-five years and had never married. It wasn't that she had hated men, or that she wanted to be with women; she simply felt comfortable alone with her small hobbies, like making pie for social pot lucks, mixing her own special lemonade for herself (a recipe that called for more tart than sweet), and gardening her flowerbed. Thirty-five years at the post office had afforded her a cottage in a quiet neighborhood with a decent sized lawn and the flower garden that she worked tirelessly to upkeep, more out of an inarticulate compulsion for gardening than for any aesthetic or philosophical reason.

No one, either in her family or in the neighborhood, considered her a grump or an old maid. Ms. Thurber gave candies and cookies and quarters to youngsters she considered her adopted nieces and nephews, chatted pleasantly with folks she knew at the grocery store or at neighborhood gatherings and displayed a palpable predisposition of beneficence from her cottage on the corner of the street, although she avoided bingo games or gin rummy tournaments where old men might hit on her. She decorated the house on holidays, opening it up to neighbors for warm cider around Christmas, giving chocolate rabbits on Easter, and on Halloween she dressed up to hand out the biggest, most elaborate chocolate treats to children. No one ever questioned why Ms. Thurber had never found her mate; instead, they praised her for being a strong and self-contained individual, in love with all people and life in general. To the older folks of the neighborhood, she resembled a saint, virginal and unsullied.

Ms. Thurber stood up to stretch tightening thighs that had begun to cramp in her kneeling position. She dusted a little of the black soil from her knees, and walked to the small concrete patio perpendicular to the flowerbed, where a modest table with two plastic lawn chairs stood. The patio was shaded by a long awning of corrugated metal that stretched out from the rear of her house, supported by cinder block pillars. Ms. Thurber moved into the shade to the table and picked up her glass of lemonade and drank. The ice cubes in the drink had grown smaller, the glass glistening with condensation, and she relished the taste of

the watered-down lemonade with just enough of a tamed bite. Ms. Thurber turned and studied her flower garden and the weeding work she'd done. Tall, strong stalks of flowers issued forth their colorful reproductive organs (as she had learned them to be in a high school classroom a lifetime ago), and their bright petals hinted at a skin-like softness. The bases of the flowers seemed thick and immobile, as if knotted forever to the ground by their labyrinthine roots.

An early evening bumblebee buried its face in the crevice of a begonia, dusting its legs with chalky pollen. Ms. Thurber half-smiled. When she watched the flowers reflect the fading orange sunlight into a myriad of shining colors, she felt satisfied. She nearly pulled off her gloves and took in her empty glass to wash when she saw from the corner of her eye one last weed among the flowers, growing from a distorted, lumpy mound at the edge of the garden. She thought it strange that she hadn't noticed the lump earlier. She immediately removed her weeding tool from the ground where she had buried it and knelt down and pulled the weed out, roots and all. Then Ms. Thurber started to smooth the bulbous lump of earth at the edge of the garden, dusting the loose dirt with her hands. For a moment, she began to fancy that something was buried. As she continued to slowly level the soil, she caught a glimpse of an odd discoloration under the dirt.

She stopped. Directly under the dirt was something that resembled bald human skin, something that pulsed slightly. She

removed more dirt from the surface of the thing. It was most definitely not human skin. It was carved with thin shallow fissures, creases that almost resembled the fine stitching of panty hose. There were no pores, as there would be on the surface of human flesh. Ms. Thurber took off her hat and placed it beside her. She removed one glove from her hand and placed the glove underneath her armpit, reaching down to touch the pink *whatever-it-was* with her uncovered hand. It was cool and soft, tender, and under her fingers the surface of the thing felt malleable. She massaged it; the near-flesh gave way under pressure, as if it were stiff bread dough. An instant later she pulled her hand away.

She was looking into the eyeless face of a giant earthworm. She realized the thought before she acknowledged it. She moved the small piles of dirt back over what she could only guess was its face, patted the dirt down lightly, and walked into the house, dazed. *How nice*, she thought. *A guest. A what?*

And as soon as she thought those words she forgot them. Upon entering her home, Ms. Thurber threw her dirty canvas gloves into the open mouth of the washing machine and grabbed a towel from a wire shelf above it. She carried the towel to the bathroom, not thinking, as if a programmed, mechanical being. For some reason, showering was crucial at the moment. The warm water ran from the top of her head and she scrubbed her dark knees with a lathered terry washcloth. As the last remnants of soapsuds disappeared, she began to sag under the warm water, the effects

of a day in the sun of heavy gardening landing upon her. She thought she might take a nap before supper. She didn't think of what she had witnessed. She didn't think.

After her shower, Ms. Thurber dressed and fell asleep on a couch in her living room. Her nap lasted until mid-morning the next day, and she woke up surprised at where she had slept the whole night. She changed from the comfortable cotton pants and T-shirt in which she had slept into jeans and a polo shirt with the collar up, her daily outfit for going on errands. She needed to mail out a few letters to relatives and stop by the grocery store for some sundries. While she was brewing her morning coffee, Ms. Thurber looked out of the window of her kitchen to the backyard. She saw that she had left her empty glass of lemonade on the patio table, and sighed as she walked outside to retrieve it. She placed the glass in the basin of the sink and took her standard breakfast--a cup of coffee and two slices of wheat toast lightly buttered--to the patio table, as was her custom, so that she could eat and enjoy the sunshine before heading out. Usually Ms. Thurber couldn't finish one half of the toast and she would throw it into her yard to watch the birds fight over the crumbs. Looking over at her garden while sipping on warm coffee, she noticed that she had also left her sun hat in the garden, in the dirt. The straw hat was soggy and limp from the moisture of the morning--it looked pitiful, shapeless. Ms. Thurber sighed once again.



She walked to the hat and picked it up and quickly dropped it.

Underneath the hat, like an upside down turnip, was the pointed top of an earthworm head. It moved itself further out of the ground as soon as she dropped her hat. It was a cone of flesh with a dull rounded point. Ms. Thurber bent down and patted the earthworm's head tentatively, receiving no response. She admired the softness. At that moment, the raw morning sun fell upon her skin. Once the sun was high, she thought, the giant earthworm's tender exterior would get burned by the ultraviolet heat, as stationary as the head was in the ground. After all, earthworms did live in cool, moist, dark dirt. Ms. Thurber got an idea and walked back into the house to a closet outside of the laundry room. She returned to the garden with an umbrella in her hand. The old woman opened the umbrella, which was black and shined synthetically in the sunlight, and forced the imitation wood handle off of its metal shaft. Placing the handle in her pocket, Ms. Thurber shoved the shaft of the opened umbrella into the ground, next to the expressionless earthworm head. The makeshift shade covered the head from the sun that was sure to blaze as noon came. She dusted off her hands, grabbed her ruined hat, and sat back down at the patio table to drink her coffee and consider what she needed from town that day.

Ms. Thurber went to town confident in the worm's protection. She went first to the post office, to send out her correspondence and check her own box for mail. She flipped

through a stack of bills before she left to the grocery store, where she ran into an acquaintance, a young woman who led her quiet son through the store holding his hand, and chatted for a bit. Ms. Thurber didn't even consider mentioning the giant earthworm to her; she didn't believe it would be appropriate to mention the appearance in casual conversation. While she wandered the aisles guessing at what earthworms might like to eat, Ms. Thurber remembered that earthworms fed on dirt. She left the store with a quart of milk and a dozen eggs.

When Ms. Thurber returned home, she hurried to the kitchen refrigerator to place the milk and eggs inside. Looking out the window towards the garden, she nearly cried out. The old woman rushed to her flowerbed and saw that the spokes of the open umbrella, as low as it was to the ground, were jabbing into the swollen neck of the earthworm, which had emerged while she was gone. The metal points were sunken into the flesh of the neck, and the shaft of the umbrella, though tilted, was still tight in the ground. Ms. Thurber yanked the umbrella out of the dirt and threw it behind her. She watched, entranced, as the indentations in the earthworm's neck slowly disappeared into smoothness once again. She kneaded the enlarged ring of the neck and noted that the pointed head, now fully emerged, was three times the size of a watermelon. The great worm abruptly wrenched itself more out of the ground with massive heaves of the top of its body, until its head and neck rested on the smooth concrete of the patio, under the shade of the awning. Ms. Thurber scooted a chair away from

the table that the earthworm had displaced in its propulsion forward.

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Days passed and the giant earthworm moved more and more of its hulking long body out of the ground, looping itself around the patio table, cooling itself on the shady concrete. Ms. Thurber now brought all of her meals out to the patio, and while she ate at the table in her plastic lawn chair, she would place her bare feet on the clammy hide of the worm, occasionally working her toes into the flesh. The way it felt, the way it looked, its plaintive, droopy head, soothed her.

She wanted to give the earthworm a name and considered several. Desmond? Christine? Jerome? None were suitable. She didn't know the sex of the thing anyway; she didn't know if earthworms were even assigned a sex. So she kept thinking of the earthworm as a *thing*, asexual. Meanwhile her flowerbed, the garden she had worked at so obsessively, grew bushy and untamed. She let it go--she even convinced herself that there was a certain natural beauty in the vegetable harmony between the weeds and the flowers.

Rarely did Ms. Thurber change from her cotton bed-clothes into the stiff outfits she usually wore on a daily basis. To folks that would call to check up on her, to make sure that nothing ill had happened, she would happily tell them over the telephone that she was watching over a child that was keeping her tied up. A bigger piece of the worm's body made its way to the

surface everyday; it didn't seem to mind Ms. Thurber taking comfort from its gentle pulsing girth. She even began talking to the worm. Not absentmindedly--as an elderly person forcing dull anecdotes onto a silent audience--rather, she spoke to the earthworm as if it were a pet of some sort, her voice akin to baby talk. Sometimes she would even bend down and wrap her arms around its thick neck and tell it what a good thing it was. The worm simply pulsed on the concrete, silent, featureless. There was no mouth on its empty face by which to smile or frown.

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That last afternoon that Ms. Thurber saw the earthworm, she was standing by the hole out of which it was still in the process of emerging, and she wondered how much of the thing was under the ground, how much more of its body there was still to come out. All at once, the unburied portion of the earthworm jerked. Ms. Thurber stepped back. The worm jerked again, and this time the massive section of it under the awning slid from the patio to the yard, wriggling in large movements. It rippled in the yard spasmodically, and Ms. Thurber, her mouth open, could not move or speak. The worm continued its mad gyrations, pounding the ground with its pointed head, sloppily circling and uncircling her. She attempted to touch it, to grab a part of it. But before she could get her arm up the giant earthworm reared up and held itself erect, quivering, as if it were pulled to the sky by some unseen force. Ms. Thurber, to her stupefaction, finally saw the full height of the surfaced worm, as tall as a pine tree--she was

stunned at seeing its long body unfurled. Its loose, soft skin was pulled taut. The sight turned her insides to water and started to unlock her knees.

As soon as she stretched out her arm, attempting to touch the earthworm again, the gigantic thing, its large head rolling in the air, began to sink back in the ground, as rapid and as fluid as liquid poured from a pitcher. Ms. Thurber had no time to react. The worm's forceful submergence knocked her off balance, and when the last of its pointed head went underground, a portion of the lawn caved in after it. Ms. Thurber's right leg, knees already weak, gave out, and she fell backwards on her behind, her right foot partially buried in the earthworm's wake.

Dazed, she regained her bearings after realizing that she was sitting on the edge of her flower garden. She then saw that her flowerbed looked as though it had been tilled with a bulldozer, and all the plants removed by their roots. Everything was gone, the flowers, the weeds, all of it; only the black dirt glowed with reflecting particles in the afternoon light.

Again, strange dreams in the night. Monsters born in my sleeping head, their shapes bursting from silhouettes in shocking, painfully defined color. Monsters swarming in my dreams, the foul offspring of an embittered apartment cat as it concocted them in the crucible of my mind. Have they gripped my soul yet? How long until what is in the mind begins to infect the soul?

Do I even have a soul?

Or simply a frightened ghost in the pit of my belly, too scared to leave the contents of my body?

“Kitten, cat, do I have a soul? Or simply a frightened ghost too scared to depart from my body?”

“Cat?”

No answer.

I’m not sure if I hear it when I’m consciously thinking about it, or subconsciously addressing it, or when I consciously or subconsciously stop unconsciously thinking about it.

I’ve betrayed myself. I told myself I would never ever let our relationship develop beyond what it has been for years. Soon we’ll start recognizing each other’s birthdays.

Trading gifts on Christmas.

One capricious decision made upon a moment’s inspiration.

Shall I shave?

No, I won’t shave. I won’t clean myself up. Not for this. No deodorant, no cologne—I should be clean at least. But nothing more. Nothing that claims I went through any effort. And if my appearance doesn’t give me away I’m sure my despondency will.

All these years, I’ve only maintained one solid principle: never, ever would I get involved with Jackie. And then, one capricious decision upon a moment’s inspiration. Positive or negative? Indubitably negative. I’ve revealed my desperation to her; the only recourse is to mask it with defiance.

Simply a shower and a brushing of the teeth. That's all. No hair parted to the side or styled with gel in any certain way. Just a shower and a teeth washing.

And I'm walking to work.

Again, Ezgi's not in the hallway.

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There's nothing more unattractive than a woman eating a chimichunga. Not on a date. No matter how thin and artificial the premise for the date. Even taquitos would have been better. She cuts into the fried tortilla with her knife and it splits into greasy flakes on the Styrofoam plate. Her lips are slick from the oil and red from the taco sauce.

"What made you decide to come to the Taco Shop for a bite to eat? I remember you saying something bad about this place, or about the workers—"

"Oh, I suppose I was in the mood for Mexican. And it's like I always say, Jackie, once you're on a certain bus ride headed in a certain direction there's really no way to get off the bus until it has reached its destination, wherever that may be."

"Huh."

She's not listening again. She's moving pieces of the chimichunga in slow arcs through the red sauce with her knife and fork. I shove my fork into the mound of refried beans and the cheddar cheese hardened around the beans, and it stands erect. From behind the counter at the Taco Shop, they observe us. I can't tell if they are laughing behind their open hands or wiping their noses with their open hands.

"Want to try a piece of this chimichunga? It's actually very good. Whenever I eat Mexican I always get the chimichunga. If the chimichunga's good, then I know the restaurant is good."

“But if you always get the chimichunga, how can you tell if the rest of the food is good?”

“It’s a theory. Theories are things you can’t prove, right? But it works for me.”

I find her theory disturbing, but I wonder if it would be disturbing if I had fostered it myself. It’s exactly the type of theory I would come up with, in order to reinforce my identity to myself, to reinforce that I was the kind of person to formulate theories and acknowledge them as theories, to congratulate myself on having the breadth of mind with which to theorize. I find it disturbing that our thought processes are so similar—before, that idea was comforting. Perhaps I find her theory disturbing because it deals with the ingestion of chimichungas. I look at it, lying on the plate like a brown, husked-out caterpillar in a pool of its own blood. Its skin stuffed with whatever demonic fillings they manufacture in the back cauldrons of the Taco Shop. The boy at the counter stares at me as he punches the order of another customer into the register. He nods. *How much? How much more?*

“Shouldn’t you have ordered chicken or something? Something with chicken?”

“What?”

“Nothing. Look, we probably have to hurry so we can get to movie on time.”

“Jeez, Gus, all right. I’m a slow eater. I like enjoying my food, unlike you. I just think this chimichunga is really good.”

And it disappears in slow, small bites. Painfully slow.

“Did I tell you about my dream last night?”

“Uh-uh.”



All her concentration is focused on the manipulation of her utensils, the slow elimination of the chimichunga.

Four tables away: Fiona with her co-worker, two orange trays with burgers and pile of French fries. Fiona dipping the French fry into the oval of ketchup, lifting the red end slowly to her mouth and biting it off with her teeth exposed, first like some sideshow beauty biting the head off a giant match, then like a fish snapping at the end of a golden worm. Fiona in profile again, her eyes half closed as she chews, eyeing her co-worker seductively with food in her mouth—I hear the click of her teeth and her co-worker wipes his fingers on another napkin and tosses it on the growing hill of soiled white at the middle of the table. Fiona melting into the food court, in profile, as always, a hieroglyph in fixed perspective, her eyes half closed, revealing nothing.

“Well, what was it?”

“What was what?”

“Your dream. What was your dream about?”

“Oh—it was nothing. Quite silly, actually. If you’re finished, perhaps we should start for the theater—”

In the line for tickets, her arm brushes against mine—careless? In a positive way, or negative? A flirt, perhaps? It is only a single brush, but slow enough so that I catch the process of movement against the sleeve of my shirt. Was it careless in that she is not afraid to show some guarded affection towards me? Or careless in that she has little control over her arm movements?

“I’ve heard a lot of good things about this movie, Gus.”

The smell of her gum doesn't completely cover the scent of taco sauce on her breath. An oily residue nestled at the back of her throat perhaps, festering.

"Are you sure you don't want a piece of gum?"

"No. Thank you."

A shower and a washing of the teeth. That's it.

"Whoa—is that Gus? And hey, it's Jackie!"

I turn—Mark and Jolene, holding hands behind us in line. So this is what's been occurring while I wasn't watching. While I was thinking of other things. While I wasn't caring. Love was building a nest at Stubby's out of pubic hair and the secretions of post-adolescent hormones. Perhaps there was always a subdued attraction between the two of them, something hot and moist that made the ice cream melt into puddles of sticky milk that formed under Mark's upraised ice cream scoop. It doesn't matter. Perhaps it was the result of a mutual apathy.

I see what they're thinking as their eyes move from me to Jackie to me again. Their notion of it is almost too cute to comprehend—lovers on the day shift, lovers on the night shift. Couples.

"So what made you two kids come to see this movie?"

"This is a completely asexual—axexual?—I mean *platonic*, thing, Mark, Jolene—there is nothing happening here, other than we've decided to see the same movie at the same time. Together."

Jackie's eyes look at me sideways, from the naked area her glasses don't cover.

Mark and Jolene take seats above us. Jackie sits a seat away from me, her body curled up into itself. She turns her head several times to the seats behind us, waiting for

me to notice. I stare straight ahead to the screen showing dim advertisement stills of colleges, banking firms, and restaurants.

“Oh, look at that. *El Gato Loco*’s got a new and improved menu.”

“Maybe I should sit up with Mark and Jolene.”

“I thought you didn’t like Mark or Jolene.”

“I don’t like *working* with them.”

“You can sit up there, with them, if you want, Jackie. I don’t mind.”

When she doesn’t move I stand up and take the empty seat next to her. For a moment I regret it, feeling the tension rise again, but the lights go down as the reel starts spinning and forgetfulness puts up a white screen in our minds that foreign pictures move across, echoes of their movement sounding in our ears.

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When the movie ends the benign feeling of forgetfulness still remains, pulsing softly with memories from the present. We leave the theater along with the discomfort and awkwardness, both of us enthusiastic about the movie we’ve just seen.

I walk her to her house a mile away but neither of us marks the distance; we’re caught up in discussing the movie, the near-perfection of it, with the right amount of faults to provoke comment. As we are walking, lust-less, I admire what good taste in movies Jackie has. How much there truly is in common between us. How nice it would be to flow along like two parallel streams.

I apologize in front of the door for my remark earlier in the evening, how it came from nervousness more than anything else, how I’m no good on dates anyway. In the lowering of her eyes and in the wave of hand and in her “forget about it” I feel a genuine

affection for her, something physical, and inspiration strikes me again—I turn away from it. The peace she gives me with a shutting of her door.

A light from under Ezgi's door in the dark hallway—I hear voices. She's with someone. She's entertaining a guest. I step closer to the door, leaning my head—the muffled sounds of canned laughter. She's watching television. Perhaps her man isn't with her tonight. Perhaps she doesn't have a man. I could knock on her door right now, but for fear.

My apartment is silent. Night after night of the kitten lamenting, and now it is silent. Its silence bothers me. I wait, holding my breath, upon its cry—it doesn't come. My grandmother told me that ghosts leave their residences when there are other ghosts to consort with.

## CHAPTER 7

Saturday. Slept well, no dreams, the kitten still silent. People think that ghosts don't leave their homes, but they do. My grandmother once told me that ghosts leave to attend funerals—they sit in the empty spaces on the pew—on anniversaries of their own death, and to watch newborn babies look on the world when they first gain the function of their eyesight. I wonder where the kitten went. But it's best not to wonder too strongly.

Saturday. No work today. Everything blessed, my head included, everything at peace and in order. Jackie there, always behind the counter, when I need her and when I don't. Jackie always there, physically there. Ezgi behind the door to her apartment, watching television alone. In the hallway, eventually. She must come into the hallway eventually, and then we'll talk about what we've done in the time that we haven't seen each other. Ezgi always there also.

And Mrs. Altman. Mrs. Altman in for tea on Saturdays and Tuesdays, today, with another tale about the post office or about the supermarket. And, if she'll listen, I'll tell her about Jackie and my job and Fiona at the mall, Fiona beautiful and distant like a painting on the ceiling. I'll talk to her about cats and ghosts and Bowler's dog Honeycut over a tray of graham crackers and sweetened milk. Mrs. Altman will be here at three—always there, always.

I'll go to the market and buy everything. Mrs. Altman shouldn't have to bring tea from the both of us all the time. I'll buy some—grapes, perhaps. And perhaps some dried figs? No, those wouldn't be appropriate for her dentures. Does she wear dentures? No, she has caps on her teeth. Metal caps. I admire a woman who's had her teeth in her mouth

as long as she's had. I'll go to the market and get everything and make it just so for tea. And if I have some time left over, I'll get some work done. My work is important—

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Strange—ten past three and no Mrs. Altman. It's inconceivable. You could program the blast-off of a rocket ship to Mrs. Altman's punctuality.

Outside: no Mrs. Altman. Back inside. Outside: no Mrs. Altman.

Well, how do you like that. Three years of tea time together and not even a telegram, a note, a phone call. Just an absence. A stand-up. Thanks, Mrs. Altman.

Half past three and she's not even in the hallway yet. Perhaps I should go to her door—no, that would ruin everything. That's not the way it usually happens, not the way it's supposed to be. It's supposed to be Mrs. Altman in the hallway at two-fifty-nine, in my apartment at three, steam from the spout of the teapot, crackers or biscuits or cookies spread out on the plate in circular fashion.

"Gus, what are you doing standing halfway out of your door like that?"

Bowler in the hallway—Honeycut whimpering at the door, at the sound of his footsteps.

"I'm just—hanging out. It's quite warm in my apartment. Did Mrs. Altman, by any chance, say anything to you about tea—"

Bowler stopping short, the leather bag in his hand jerking forward once and then freezing.

"—or anything, if you happened to run into her lately?"

Bowler's mouth opening once, then closing, then opening again.

“Jesus, Gus—every time I step into the hallway after work the only thing that’s on my mind is taking Honeycut out to use the bathroom. Isn’t that weird? It’s like a reflex.”

“That’s interesting Bowler—”

“Gus—you—you haven’t heard? Oh, who would you hear it from? Look—ah, Mrs. Altman’s dead.”

“What.”

“Ezgi went to look in on her this morning—she said she wouldn’t have time tonight. She was just going to check up on her to see if she needed anything. But Mrs. Altman wouldn’t answer the door. I was getting ready for work, and I saw her in the hall, and we got the key from the landlord. Mrs. Altman was—Gus, it wasn’t pretty. She was gone. We called the ambulance and—”

“If you called the ambulance then she must have been alive, right? Ambulances don’t come for dead people.”

“Gus, she wasn’t breathing. One of the guys said she must have passed away early in the morning.”

“No.”

“Gus—you saw her last night. Did she—look bad? Did it look like she had to go to the doctor then?”

No. No no no.

“Did she eat, Gus?”

“Bowler—I didn’t go to Mrs. Altman’s apartment last night. I—forgot. I was—”

“But Gus, I told her you were coming.”

“Jesus, I know, I know—”

“Oh hell. There’s no point in worrying about that now. There’s nothing you could have done. Nothing that either of us could have done. Jesus, Gus—”

I know. I know I know I know.

“Well, I’ve got to take Honeycut out or she’ll piss all over the floor. I’m sorry Gus. I hate to be the one to tell you all this. I know she was your friend. She was our friend.”

What?

Dead.

What?

Mrs. Altman dead. Mrs. Altman’s not dead.

Bowler told that I’d bring dinner over to her and I went to the movies with Jackie.

What was that movie about?

There will be an inquiry, an investigation. The police will come, their dogs too, and they’ll ask from my door how long I knew Mrs. Altman. Then the dogs will begin sniffing at the door, pawing at it, and the policemen will look from their notepads down to the excited dogs, then back at me. They’ll be wary. They’ll ask to come inside, making it seem more than a request, more than even a suggestion, and I’ll say yes, but ask them to please leave the dogs outside.

They’ll wander around, lifting covers, sniffing the insides of pots, running their fingers over surfaces. One will call from the kitchen:

“Is this your teacup, Mr. Jones?”

“No, officer. That’s ah, that’s Mrs. Altman’s.”

The main one in the tan trench coat will turn his head towards me quickly.



“Mrs. Altman? Mrs. Altman, did you say?”

“Yes. She would come on Tuesdays. And Saturdays. We would have tea together.”

“Tea, did you say? That’s very *interesting*, Mr. Jones—a woman Mrs. Altman’s age taking tea with a young man like yourself. Don’t have much luck with the ladies, do you Mr. Jones?” One of the officers inspecting a statuette in his hand would snort and the main one would turn to him, smirking ironically. Then he’d turn back to me.

“Tea’s not so much of an *American* pastime—but Mrs. Altman was Scotch, wasn’t she?”

“She was Scottish, yes.”

“An older Scotch woman having tea with a strange single man—you are single, aren’t you, Mr. Jones? Tell me, Mr. Jones, what kinds of things would you and Mrs. Altman have at your little tea parties?”

“When you say ‘tea parties,’ you make it sound so—”

“What? Speak up, Jones.”

“Well, there would be tea—and biscuits—”

“Biscuits?”

“Cookies. Sometimes sandwiches. It changed.”

“Uh-oh, look what we got here! Seems like Mr. Jones was taking a little more than tea.”

“Let me have a look at that, Valdez.”

“It’s a box—of things. There’s some pictures of the deceased in Italy, a woman’s bracelet, a letter addressed to—well, looky here, *Mrs. Altman*—a pen from Last Hours Life Insurance, and what appears to be a miniature—wig.”

“A wiglet.”

“Shut your mouth, Jones.”

The main one would look in the box, shifting around the contents, and then nod at the officer.

“Good work Valdez. Put that with the other evidence. That’s exactly what we needed.”

He’d turn back to me.

“It’s all becoming perfectly clear, Jones. Like a, like a, a crystal, or a diamond, or a glass window that just been Windexed. It’s clear what’s been going on.”

“What’s, ah, been going on?”

“Give it a rest, Jones. Now I don’t know, and I really don’t want to know, what you’ve been doing with all that stuff, you sick bastard—”

“What? No! No!”

“—but it’s perfectly clear that you’ve been poisoning Mrs. Altman at your little *tea parties* for the past three years, little by little, just enough to be effective but not enough to show up on an autopsy. To what ends, Jones? Her money? Her—god help me—sex? And on top of poisoning her you’ve been robbing the poor woman blind, using her personal items for some perverted acts—”

“No—she left them here. She left them. I was going to give them back!”

“Come clean, Jones, and we *might* just go easy on you. Confess that you killed Mrs. Altman—”

No. No. No.

I didn't kill Mrs. Altman. But Bowler told her I'd bring her dinner and I didn't. I went out with Jackie instead. They couldn't prove I killed Mrs. Altman unless they made Bowler testify. Bowler wouldn't testify against me, would he?

I can't—

I can't—

All that stuff I bought for tea—

No, Mrs. Altman's not dead. I couldn't have killed her because she's not dead.

I can't—

No more tea. Tuesdays and Saturdays. All that stuff for nothing—

I can't—

No.

I'll drink now.

I can't think about this now. It makes me so sad.

I'll drink until I'm drunk. And when I'm drunk it won't matter either way. And drugs—I have drugs—

I'll put all the drugs into a pile and do all of it. All of it. I can't think about this now. Too depressing, too sad.

## CHAPTER 8

## "The Last Pageant"

His grandmother, her fingers and wrists adorned with large pieces of costume jewelry, is sitting on a white couch, brushing dark polish onto her fingernails. When she finishes one hand, she paints the other; when she finishes the second hand, she goes back to the first, red splashing from the small brush. She repeats this process over and over again.

The entire room is white: white light from a window shines onto a white carpet. His grandmother's white gown is splattered with dark red nail polish. He moves closer to the couch, but does not feel himself walking. His grandmother turns from her nails to him slowly, brow furrowed. She looks as if she is concentrating. When she sees him, when she finally sees him, her face lights up--her gray wig is askew. Heavy blue-black eyebrows, which look as if they have been painted on by a finger, rise into the creases of her forehead. Dark bags of fluid and flesh tighten around her sinking eyes--her eyeballs appear to be falling off her face completely. When his grandmother's face lights up and her infinite wrinkles deepen, he thinks he should cry, but really, there is no feeling.

"Isn't it pretty, Doug?" she says, as she holds out one of her hands to him. "Isn't it all so *pretty*?"

-----

His tie hangs limp around his neck, and he tries very hard to listen to what Mr. Comstock and Mrs. Comstock are saying. Mr.

Comstock is a lean old man dressed more casually than Mrs. Comstock, in a blue dress shirt and khakis. His stringy hair is combed neatly to his scalp. Mrs. Comstock wears a black dress with long, billowing sleeves and gold stripes that cross her abdomen diagonally. She looks nearly identical to Mr. Comstock, at least in the face--the resemblance is extraordinary, he thinks, except for her dress and her sagging dyed-black permanent hair and chalky makeup. The closer she gets to him, the more he sees the dust of the makeup, on her chin, around her eyes --he can't help but to look at it.

"You'll be fine, Doug," Mr. Comstock says as he pats him on the shoulder. "You've been hosting this pageant for the past five years."

"Four years," he says quietly, as he attempts to put the bowtie in the correct knot. "I've only been here four years."

"Has it only been four years?" Mrs. Comstock says. She looks over at her husband. "Well, it seems as if you have been doing this forever, as natural as you are at it."

He shudders a little and misses the knot again. "You know, after four years you'd think I'd be able to tie this thing already--"

"Oh, let me see that," Mrs. Comstock says. "It's so easy to--oh shoot!" She misses the knot and starts over again. "Here we go. That goes in that and--all right." She straightens the bowtie around his collar, tightens it, and reaches up to pat his

cheek. Her hands are soft and cold. He wonders what the reaction would be if he grabbed her wrist.

"Okay, Hester, let's leave him alone now," Mr. Comstock says. He begins to lead her out of the room by her elbow. "The boy's got a lot to think about."

"But I just wanted to wish him good luck--"

"I know, dear, but the boy's a professional," and Mr. Comstock takes his wife out of the dressing room. Before the door closes completely, he pops his head back through the opening.

"Now Doug, I want you to think about--"

"Please Mr. Comstock--"

"Doug," Mr. Comstock says, raising his voice, "hear me out now. I just want you to *think* about what we discussed earlier. You don't have to give me a definitive answer just yet."

The head disappears, the door closes. He sighs as he sits down in front of his dressing room mirror, framed by light bulbs. He begins to thumb through his dog-eared Bible, which he takes from a red athletic bag at his feet. Nothing reaches his eyes but the marks he has made with a highlighter in fluorescent pink and yellow.

-----

He tries to place his back straight, flush against the hard back of the pew, but his spine keeps curling and slouching. He doesn't think he has the strength to keep his back straight for an hour-and-a-half sermon. But he tries, because his grandmother is always telling him to sit up straight. She sits next to him,

erect as the Empire State Building--and he has grown as tall as her, or taller. She still looks giant in her pink Sunday dress, panty hose, purse on her lap, hair sprayed and molded into a round gray cloud--he tries to imitate her posture, immaculately set against the back of the wooden pew. In moments he can feel the give in his back, and his head and shoulders creep forward. His grandmother glances at him, from the side of her eyes. He grabs his hands and stops moving.

He looks up at the pastor, on the stage and at the podium. The pastor is really in a heat now, and he is thumping the surface of the podium with his hand. The thumping drowns out the pastor's voice--and suddenly he feels something twisting in his belly. He feels wrong. He goes over the events in his mind again--his grandmother's purse is in front of him, on the nightstand in her room. He is in her room again. He slides the zipper down slowly, quietly--she can't possibly hear because she is outside pulling weeds. The zipper is open and he shoves his hand into the purse past used and unused tissue clumped together, past loose pieces of Spearmint gum, until he feels her pocketbook at the bottom, next to her keys. The pocketbook is open in his hands and there's a thin stack of crisp, identical twenty-dollar bill---he knows when she goes to the bank--and he takes one, knowing also that she'll never miss it. She's too tired in the head. Later when he's in his room reading comic books, she stands in his door. "Phew," she says, patting her face with a paper towel. "It's boiling out there today. I'm going to go lie down for a

little while. Here, why don't you take this and go to the show or something." It's a twenty-dollar bill. "And pick up some fried chicken on the way back, so we can eat when I wake up." And now he feels wrong. He never felt wrong before. Just excited, happy. He feels the same way when he hears the pastor thumping on the podium again. He is uncomfortable. He doesn't like feeling this way, looking up at the pastor and feeling this way. He begins to squirm on the pew. He feels a hand on his knee--his grandmother holds her hand on his knee, her hand with the strong red fingernails, and he relaxes. He feels a little better.

-----

There are voices behind his dressing room door. In the mirror, he adjusts the jacket on his shoulders and taps down his styled blond hair. He looks perfect, better than he has for the past three years. He feels awful, though--sick. A residue of guilt always emerges when he considers his feelings, a thin membrane wraps itself around him, tightly. Sometimes it is hard for him to breathe. But he focuses on his face in the mirror, forces the air through his nostrils until the feelings are out of his system. He knows that he has a job to do. He opens the door into a hallway with painted white cinder block walls and a smooth concrete floor.

The noise of the corridor drowns out even the echoes; he remembers fondly when the hallway was empty, earlier in the day. Now it is alive and crowded like a blocked artery. Girls, young yet garishly attempting to be adult-like, line the walls of the



corridors, standing next to their mothers. He feels embarrassed for them, for himself. This is his fourth year. The girls are made-up and in various costumes: cowgirl outfits, princess gowns, in imitations of movie stars they are too young to remember. They are the contestants in the "Little Miss Spectacular Pageant, 1994," held at the F. D. Hinckley Auditorium annually in Jonestown, Tennessee. Mothers, grandmothers and aunts are at the sides of the girls, focusing their remarks secretively, driving the girls to outperform their rivals. The daughters roll their shoulders against the cinder block wall, petulant, only half-listening. The mothers--the women--are as ambitiously dressed as the girls, in their gaudiest church clothes: their outfits are a variation on a single theme, the same mid-length skirt and rayon, button down blouse with shoulder pads combination, in bright colors for higher visibility. He knows that the competition occurs between the mothers on a different level from the girls, on a nastier, more hateful level. They all are charged with the tension that their daughters are trying to ignore.

"Did you go over that song again like I told you? Did you get the words right this time? Did you?"

"Come here--come here right this instant! Now look, if you keep moving around like that these buttons will come undone--"

"Will you please stop rubbing your eyes? You're smearing your eye shadow, Emily--"

"Mommy, I know what I'm doing! You don't have to keep telling

me--"

"Would you just get off of me? God!"

"Do you want to win the trophy this time? You better straighten up and behave or--"

"Please mommy, it wasn't my fault last time. The stupid shoes--"

"No! And you can just forget about it. You are not getting a candy bar this close to the competition--"

"I hope those judges don't have their heads up their asses like they did last year."

When he gets to the end of the hall he feels relieved. He has made it out alive. A woman and a girl step in front of him.

"Mr. Marcher? Hello, Mr. Marcher, I'm Susanna Owens and this is my daughter Jessica. Jessica Owens. You remember Jessica, don't you?"

He looks at the woman, who is pretty and has just made a visit to the hairdresser. Her stiff bangs go straight across her forehead, and the rest of her light brown hair nearly falls to her shoulders. The girl is wearing a faux sailor outfit.

"Jessica--oh yes, Jessica Owens," he says as he looks from mother to daughter.

Susanna smiles. "We knew you'd remember us from last year. Jessica was the third runner-up."

"I see. Congratulations." He nods down at the girl, who stares at him silently. He tries to see the cute little girl

under the makeup, but he can't. He can't feel sorry for her either. She looks callous and cynical.

"Jessica and I just love you--we think you're a terrific host and well--what would you say our chances are this year?" Susanna's hands grip tightly around Jessica's shoulders, and the girl shrugs to get from under them.

"I'm--well, I'm not really involved with the judging of the 'Little Miss' pageant--" He pauses, trying to think of something conciliatory, or at least nice. Nothing comes to mind. "I'm sorry, but I've got to do some last minute preparations before we begin. Good luck, Jessica." He sidesteps them and hastens to the backstage area, a small room between the corridor and the stage. He sits on the single metal folding chair, pulls out a stack of index cards from his breast pocket, and shuffles them through his fingers as he stares at the purple velvet curtain.

*"Doug, let me level with you. Mrs. Comstock and I--Hester and I--well, we've never had the blessing of having children--now before you start apologizing and all that, I'm going to tell you that we've dealt with it, with the help of the Lord. But we're getting older, son, and pretty soon we won't be able to supervise these pageants. This is Mrs. Comstock's baby, Doug, you know that. And we want to see that it goes into good hands when we're not around anymore. I know you've been on both sides of the fence regarding this whole thing, but I want you to know that you have people here that care about you. Mrs. Comstock and I feel, with*

*your experience, that you'd be the perfect one to take over coordinating this event."*

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Her name is Mariana--she is beautiful and she is laughing. Her large breasts strain against the bust of her dress with every vocal heave. She is currently opposite his lead in a play called "The Internal Revolution," written by a local playwright of some renown. The playwright has been a little skeptical of the Myrtle Community Theater's production of her play, but when she sees an early rehearsal of it, she enthuses about the talents of the leading man, Douglas Marcher. Mariana has picked up on this enthusiasm, has offered him a variety of signals in rehearsal regarding her interest (to which he does not respond) and has finally invited him over to her apartment, where they are drinking wine at her small kitchen table. Doug, who is very hot at the moment and red from the wine, feels that the apartment has the quality of a set--the way the lighting is arranged onto the furniture, the way the books on her living room bookshelf lean into one another at even intervals--the old fashioned kitchen too, with its olive green gas stove looks as if it has been transplanted from the stage. He knows he is drunk, and that his interest in her apartment is only a distraction; he is absorbed in her. Her clean smell he likes most of all, the smell of shampoo and her fragrant body odor devoid of perfume. He likes that he can see her bra strap indent itself into her flesh, against the paisley patterned synthetic material of her dress.

She is the most captivating woman Doug has ever met, other than his grandmother, and he thinks he might be falling in love with her. He hopes he is.

"Oh Doug," she says, and she puts the back of her hand to her mouth, catching her breath. "I never knew you could be so funny. I mean, you're just so *quiet* on the set and everything, at least to me--"

"Well, I don't know, sometimes I don't know what to say around people." He looks at the wine in his glass, rolling the bottom of the glass on the surface of the table.

"But Doug, you're an actor."

"I don't know if you could say *that*--"

"No Doug, really. I've been acting since high school, I've been all over Tennessee doing theater, and you are seriously the best actor I've ever seen. Really." She looks at him, and he doesn't know how to interpret the look. He feels that he should say something, something funny, so that the awkward silence is averted. He just gets redder.

Before he realizes it she is kissing him on the lips, her tongue swirling in his mouth. The tongue is forceful and he accepts it, trying his best to duel with his own tongue. She takes him by the arm and leads him to the bedroom, which is remarkably messy compared to the rest of the apartment. Clothes are strewn everywhere, and she slides piles of shirts off the bed and lies down. This is his first time and he lets her guide him.

She takes off his clothes slowly, still kissing him, and when they are both naked, she puts him into her. He works and works at it until he feels a familiar rush in his groin. It doesn't take long--he falls asleep next to her, on his stomach, naked, exhausted and drunk.

Sick and embarrassed, he does not know what to say the next day. He is even a little scared. He realizes that he did not use "protection" and the worry that his act might lead to something very bad makes it hard for him to communicate anything to her--she seems just as embarrassed. In the days that follow, he stumbles at rehearsal, forgetting lines, movements--he is unnerved by her presence, although she soon grows cool and unaffected. This makes him wonder what is wrong with himself, and he continues to make mistakes in rehearsal. The playwright's and the director's enthusiasm in Douglas Marcher's talent wanes, and several days before opening they ask him to step down as the lead, offering that he switch positions with his understudy. He agrees to the proposition and doesn't show up the next day at rehearsals or ever again.

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The wireless microphone is on. He is sweating now, patting his forehead with a white handkerchief. He doesn't want to do this. He doesn't want to do this again, and he only realizes that fact when he hears his name called over the PA, from behind the purple velvet curtain. Tan foundation makeup is running down his face and he feels as if he is melting. He sees the illuminated

circles of the twin spotlights moving around the opposite side of the curtain, searching for him.

"Uh, Mr. Marcher, they're calling your name." He turns, and sees a young woman with a headset and a clipboard. She has kittens on her tee-shirt.

He smiles and grips the edge of the curtain. The applause behind the curtain is feeding upon itself. The eyes of the spotlights are still combing the empty stage.

He thrusts back the curtains and appears; the audience, its senses magnified with eager impatience, explodes when the spotlights fix upon him. He bows a little, and raises up the microphone when he hears the prerecorded music. He makes a conscious effort not to scream into the mike.

*"Who's that special angel, drifting down from up above?"*

-----

The intense lighting used for film production makes him sweat profusely the moment it is switched on. It's not exactly film production, it's instructional videotape production, and he is the "talent." This particular video deals with on-the-job first-aid, and he plays the victim of chemical poisoning, a man who has wandered into an enclosed room full of open chemical agents. The agents have entered his system. The set for this shot is simply a brick wall, supposedly outside. He doesn't know why the lights have to be so intense--but the director, a man younger than himself with a thin beard, dressed in a flower-print shirt, says that lighting is the essential element to making projects

look authentic on videotape. The director makes sure that the lights are right there in his face.

He enjoys making these types of videos when he is involved with the right sort of technical people, the kind that don't boss him around so much, let him breathe a little. This kind of work makes him feel like a humanitarian, like a person doing worthy things, and he feels decent when he takes the small check home after every day of shooting. He doesn't know if he'll go back to the stage soon, back to theater acting, but he does sing lead in the choir every Sunday, after which he places a tulip on the grave of his grandmother. He likes Sundays the best. If he remembers correctly, tulips were her favorite flower.

"All right, Marcher," the director says, clenching a cigarette between his teeth. He looks at a clipboard. "I want you to sit down here, get nice and tight, and lean against the wall, looking sick, really sick. You can handle that, can't you? You might want to throw some water on your face--uh, never mind, it looks like you're already pretty sweaty. Now I'm going to come from here--"

"Wouldn't it be better if you came from this side? That way you could get a tight shot on my face, really illustrate what a poison victim looks like."

"Marcher, we've got you and we've got the guy who's been electrocuted. We have to finish with both of you today. We have to. Now I've already got the camera set up, how it's going to be, so just sit down and let's get this thing over with."



"I just thought--"

"Marcher, are you going to give me problems?"

"All right." He sits down, breathing hard, trying to find the essence of a poisoned man.

"Okay, lights," the director says. "Let's get some more lights on him. We've got to make this thing look real."

Projects like these are rather easy to come by--he has garnered some reputation as a small-scale actor, moving from medical videos to library videos with relative ease. He even tries his hand at low budget cooking instruction, and he is a success. When this type of work dries up he does commercials, which he doesn't like as much. Commercials make him feel cheap. Ironically, they pay well, and he survives, eating small meals in his small apartment, watching television by himself. He is alone, but manages to convince himself, daily, that he is not lonely. *Just like the song*, he thinks. *Or is there even a song like that?* He has become used to the fact that he will be alone. On the evening news he sees a feature about a man stealing people's money on the streets of Nashville by knocking them unconscious with a stun gun. The suspect is a small-time actor, like himself, and he fantasizes that he is the actual perpetrator, committing the crimes in his sleep.

-----

He has exactly two minutes and forty-three seconds to make it to the bathroom and back, before the song "Material Girl" finishes and the evening wear competition is over. He felt the

urge to vomit before he introduced this segment of the pageant, but thought that with a lot of swallowing and even-breathing he could resist the urge. But once the synthesized instruments came up and the spotlight alternated between the girls strutting and posing in long gowns with sequins and spangles and fetters that seemed to originate from some Hollywood designer at his most perverse, the feeling became large and uncontrollable. The song is well into the second verse now, and he needs to reach the toilet quickly before he ruins his tuxedo. He can hear the second chorus resounding through the restroom while he grips the white edges of the toilet bowl, expunging water through his mouth. It occurs to him that he has not eaten all day.

*"This is Mrs. Comstock's baby, Doug, you know that. And we want to see that it goes into good hands when we're not around anymore."* He heaves again, and the burning aspirin taste of bile catches in his throat. He coughs. The song continues in the background. *"Doug, my boy, you've got a beautiful little voice in that throat of yours,"* his grandmother is saying. *"Won't you sing your poor old grandma a song?"* She's propped up in bed, with a kerchief around her bald head. Her skin is yellow, and she looks sick, worse than sick--he doesn't like the way she looks. He doesn't feel like singing. He wants to get away from her. *"Please, Doug? I know you can do it. Do it for your old grandma."* He pretends he has to be somewhere else, but only to himself--he says nothing to his grandmother. He just wants to run away. He turns from her sick bed. *"Doug? Where are you going? Doug!"*

The water is running down his face as he stands at the mirror and he pats at it with a paper towel. The song is winding down--he runs from the restroom to the backstage as it ends: "a material, a material..." and the girls are awkwardly performing a collective dance on stage, in a line, handicapped by their high heels and their long, flowing garments. When the last note fades and each girl adopts a particular pose--the "vogue," the popular hands-on-hips pose, or the arms-crossed-on-chest-head-tilted pose--the audience is sucked back from utter astonishment to the here and now, as if from a vacuum, and they erupt in applause to compensate for their powerful emotional transition.

"Now that was just great--wonderful!" he says as he takes the stage again. "Aren't these girls beautiful? Aren't they all so pretty?"

The audience roars in agreement.

-----

He carries his black leather garment bag over his shoulder, his red athletic bag in the other hand. He feels better after having showered and changed out of his tuxedo and is always amazed at how soft hair feels after the styling gel is washed out of it. He's now dressed in jeans and a knitted polo shirt, and sneakers. He likes the way the sneakers squeak loudly through the empty halls of the auditorium complex--more, he likes that the halls are empty.

He opens a door and there is again an explosion of noise, of applause and cheers. Mr. and Mrs. Comstock, along with several

of their older friends, are celebrating in the temporary office set up especially for the pageant. The office, which is a lounge the rest of the year round, is full of stooped elderly people, leaning on Formica tables, slouching in vinyl chairs. All eyes are focused on Douglas Marcher, drinks are raised, salutes made. Mrs. Comstock throws her arms around him.

"Oh Doug, you were wonderful! Absolutely wonderful! You were just perfect! They loved you!" She lets him go, looks at him, and hugs him close again. "I'm so proud of you!"

"Let the boy relax," Mr. Comstock says, moving close to his wife. When Mrs. Comstock releases her grip, Mr. Comstock grabs his arm. "He just got in. Let him take a load off. Come on son, drop your bags over here and have a drink. Join the party." Mr. Comstock attempts to pull him towards the party, but he doesn't move.

"I'm afraid I can't join your party, Mr. and Mrs. Comstock. I'm kind of on a tight schedule. I have to leave right away."

"So soon?" Mrs. Comstock asks, her eyes wide. "But Doug, all of these people are here to meet you. You were fantastic tonight and they want to congratulate you."

"I appreciate that Mrs. Comstock," he says, and he looks around, nodding at everyone looking at him, smiling at him. "I really do appreciate it, but I really have to get out of here. Now."

"Well, all right," she says and she looks at her husband, who is considering Doug gravely. "All right, well, let me just give you your check and send you on your way."

She leads him through the crowd of people, who clap him on the back with "Good job, son!" and "I really enjoyed your performance out there tonight." They come to a table, a circular end table with handbags and purses all around it. She pulls a checkbook from the pile and fills in the check at the table.

"I know the usual amount is five thousand dollars," she says as she is writing," but we thought you did so exceptionally well that we're going to give you an extra thousand. A little bonus." She rips off the check and hands it to him, while he sets his red bag on the table.

"That's very generous of you, Mrs. Comstock," he says, as he deposits the check in his shirt pocket.

"Well, you deserved it."

"Thank you," he says, and he grabs his bag, turning towards the exit. He is half-expecting a request that doesn't come. He is a little confused.

"Thank you, Doug. We'll see you next year."

He is only three steps out of the lounge when he hears Mr. Comstock's voice behind him.

"Doug! Now wait a minute, son."

He turns slightly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Comstock, but I really have to be going."

"But did you think about what I said, Doug? Did you think about it?"

"I did Mr. Comstock and--I don't think I'll be a part of this pageant anymore, Mr. Comstock. In any capacity. You see, I'm going away and--well, I can't really explain it here. Thank you for the offer, though."

-----

He is rocking in his grandmother's lap, his ear pressed against her chest. The fabric of her muumuu is soft. The rocking motion is putting him to sleep. She twists herself from under his head and looks at him. The rocking stops.

"You know that grandma loves you, don't you Douggie?"

His eyes are heavy. "Yes, grandma."

"Say it, Douggie. Say 'I know you love me, grandma.'"

He looks at her face. Her eyes are so hopeful--he knows he could say an evil word that would break her heart. He is almost tempted.

"I know you love me, grandma."

She pulls him tighter to her chest. The rocking continues.

"Oh, I do love you, Douggie," she says. "I do."

## CHAPTER 9

“Gus—Gus? Are you all right? Gus?”

Ezgi in strange clothes—white shirt, black skirt, dark nylons. A costume? Her nose pointed directly at my face. And makeup. Black mascara dust at the corners of her eyes.

Ezgi—Ezgi in the hallway. I’m in the hallway. My back against the door frame, the door propped open against my foot.

“Oh, I just had the most fantastic dream—everybody was dancing in the moonlight. Everybody was feeling warm and right, such a fine and natural sight—where have you been?”

“What? Gus, I told you I got another job—you remember me telling you, right? I was at work.”

“At work—no, don’t try to lift me. I can get up on my own.”

The weight of a quarter full bottle of whiskey in my hand, spilling onto the carpet from my hand as I point the neck downward. Slowly it all pours out and I watch it, falling like urine, sounding like urination, until the last drop hits the dark carpet puddle with a clap.

“*God damn it!*”

The shattering of the empty bottle against the wall is unsatisfying. It sounds like a tinkling, the tinkling crumple of a distant thing.

“Stay right here, Ezgi, I’ll go get another bottle—”

“No, Gus, please—”

“Jesus Christ—Gus? No, Honeycut, stay inside. Good girl. Gus, what the hell’s the matter with you? What’s going on?”

Bowler in a robe. I hate the robe. I hate it. I hate Bowler and his robe. It’s disgusting, like terry cloth animal hide. He probably masturbates in it. Doesn’t launder it.

“You fag. You faggot.”

“He’s drunk, Bowler.”

“Here—he can barely hold himself up! Let me help you get him to his apartment—”

“No, I’m fine. I can take him.”

“All right, I’ll get a towel and clean this stuff up.”

“Fuck you, Bowler. You’re a bad influence. Fuck you.”

“Gus—”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. You’re my best friend—”

“Get him to bed, Ezgi.”

And it’s all moving in smooth, spiral revolutions inwards and outwards, movements growing out of one another like from one limb constantly stretching, flexing, changing its position.

*Meow*

“Mrs. Altman, Ezgi—she dead.”

“I know, Gus. It is very sad.”

*Meow*

“Sadness, happiness—it’s all the same thing, right? Have we even the right to be sad? Have we? Who should be sad and who shouldn’t be sad? How can we be sad when



there's an AIDS pandemic in other parts of the world? Why am I not sad for them? Mrs. Altman—it's probably the best news I've gotten all year!"

*Merow*

"All right Gus, I'm going to set you down right here—"

When she sets me on the couch I can't pull my head back from where it lies on the head rest.

"Wow, would you look at that!"

*Rar*

"What? What are you talking about, Gus?"

*Meow Meow Merow Meowr*

"Up there in the ceiling—in the stucco. See those black shapes moving? Swirling? I've never noticed them before. Are they ghosts, Ezgi?"

"Gus, I don't think that they're ghosts—"

"Is Mrs. Altman's ghost up there too, Ezgi?"

*Meow Rar Merow Meow Meow Meowr Reow Meow Mraw Mower*

"Gus, that's very morbid of you to think that—"

"Fucking Mrs. Altman."

*Meow Rar Merow Meow Meow Meowr Reow Meow Mraw Mower Meow Meow  
Meow Meowr Meow Rar Merow Meow Meow Meowr Reow Meow Mraw Mower Meow  
Meow Merow Meowr Meow Rar Merow Meow Meow Meowr Reow Meow Mraw Mower  
Meow Meow Merow Meowr Meow Rar Merow Meow Meow Meowr Reow Meow Mraw  
Mower Meow Meow Merow*

"Jesus Christ, woman, can't you hear it? Tell me that you can hear it!"

*Meow Meow Merow Meowr*

“What, Gus, what? You are too drunk—”

“The cat, Ezgi, the cat! Can’t you hear it?”

“Gus, you must listen to yourself! You are so drunk that you imagining things—  
ghosts in the ceiling, cats—”

“I killed it, Ezgi!”

“What?”

“I killed it. I killed them all.”

“Killed what?”

“They’re all dead.”

“What Gus, what? Mrs. Altman? She was a sick woman, Gus, and very old—you  
are talking crazy. You are too drunk. You don’t know what you are saying—”

*Meow*

I know what I’m saying.

“Ezgi—”

I know what I’m saying. But I can’t stop saying it. Stop saying it. Don’t say it—

“I’m in love with you.”

Stop talking, stop talking right now—

“Please—stay with me. Stay with me tonight. Everything is—too much. Too  
much.”

“I will sit here with you for a while, Gus Jones, to make sure you don’t do  
anything else foolish before you pass out.”

## CHAPTER 10

A girl asleep on my loveseat, sitting up. Her curled, golden hair still in pins and spread behind her head in the shape of a triangle with a rounded point. In the shape of a Badminton birdie. Dark circles in the corners of her eyes from smudged mascara. Breathing through her nostrils that inflate and deflate in unhurried rhythm. Her brow is uncreased and even. Her hands are on her lap, palms up, the fingers bent slightly upwards. Next to my head, her foot, the nylons with a short run at the Achilles heel. Through the nylons, black dots where leg hairs are beginning to emerge.

I must have slipped off the sofa during the night. Oh, aching head—to describe it, to acknowledge it even, would simply be an exercise in self-flagellation, in self-torture. A dragon's tooth lodged at the base of my skull, the dull point putting intense pressure on my brain. Ezgi breathes in and out and her fingers bend and unbend as I lift myself from the floor in a broken, slithering motion. My muscles sag from my bones like canvas bags of grain. My body feels like a wooden wagon from the old west, with wooden wheels, rolling over a rocky half-path transporting bogs of inanimate, heavy grain and pick axes and shovels, the tools with which to bury the dead.

I am at my knees, my wobbling body moving not as if I am controlling it, but as if I can't stop it, and from my pants I feel, as if seconding the pressure in my head, the pressure of an unconscious erection. Birthed sometime in the morning preceding awakening, now in my pants, lurking.

Standing is too much an effort so I sit back on the floor, leaning against the sofa, Ezgi's legs hanging in front of me. Lust is beginning to infiltrate me now, feeding upon itself, perpetuating itself through my thoughts, the vision in front of me magnified into

some great, throbbing female sex organ—my body weak while the erection grows ever stronger.

She stayed all night. She must be in love with me. The meetings in the hallway, all to be in the presence of—me. Must not think of me, must only think of her. Thinking of me only ruins it. Ezgi in my room, us brought together by a single circumstance, the death—

The death?

Mrs. Altman.

And Mrs. Altman is there for only a moment, then she is washed away by the stream of erotic blood rushing up my thighs, only blood now, no images even, not even Ezgi in front of me, only blood, no sight, nothing but feeling and blood up my thighs—

When her eyes open, I look away. Lurking. Waiting. Guilty. She wipes her eyes and looks at her finger before she realizes where she is. Ezgi sitting upright, pulling her legs up, gathering herself together on the sofa.

“Gus! I can’t believe that I fell asleep on your sofa. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right. It’s fine.”

No imagination returns as the erection subsides. A wagon rolling down the road without a driver, without a team of horses, a wagon rolling and trembling, freighted with an inert load of heavy objects.

“You were pretty crazy last night.”

“I know, Ezgi. Thank you for looking out for me.”

“You were talking about cats and things—ghosts.”

“I was?”

“Yes. And then you began to talk about Mrs. Altman—”

“Mrs. Altman?”

“Yes.”

“What did I say about Mrs. Altman?”

“You honestly don’t remember? It was as you were sitting on the sofa, where I put you. You were quiet for a while, and I began to leave. But you held my arm and asked me to stay with you. Your eyes were closed.”

What did she learn of me? Of my thoughts? What will she do with that information—

“You said that Mrs. Altman asked you to go to the store with her, because it was night and she needed—brown sugar?—because she was making something. You said that she’d forgotten she used it all up the last time she made—oatmeal cookies, yes, that’s what you said. You said that you didn’t want to go, that you weren’t feeling well, but mostly that you didn’t want to go with her, but you went anyway. And you said you thought she’d get ready, that she’d get dressed at least, but you walked her to the store in her robe and with a plastic thing over her hair. When you were both in line, Mrs. Altman paid with a ten dollar bill, and when the clerk gave her change for the ten she said that she gave him a twenty. He said ten, and it went back and forth until you told her, in front of everybody, that she had given him a ten and you saw it. You said that she got quiet until you were outside, and on the way back she kept saying ‘I could have sworn I had a twenty in my purse,’ pulling the purse out and checking it again, putting it back. And you swore to yourself that you would never be seen with Mrs. Altman in public again.”

Her slow tentative words crawling, embarrassed.

“Ezgi, I didn’t mean—”

“I know, Gus, it’s all right.”

“It’s hard for me to—Ezgi, I just can’t believe Mrs. Altman died.”

Mrs. Altman dead—the thought falls again and disappears before I can grasp it. I feel nothing but an uneasiness, a confusion, not pain—only a receding of something I can’t understand, and then an absence of something which I never knew. Mrs. Altman dead. Again, another clang inside and its echo, and then silence and emptiness, and pressure from above.

I told Ezgi that I was in love with her.

“Gus, I—found her. With Bowler. It was very hard for me as well. Working last night was very strange—on my break I finally cried, for nearly a half-hour straight. I’m sure everyone in the building will miss her.”

“Miss Mrs. Altman. Ha.”

“That is not funny, Gus.”

“Everything is funny, Ezgi, in a way.”

Ezgi using my bathroom and leaving. I sit all day, having called in sick to work, the ghost in the ceiling cleaning itself—its cries now only a soft, hypnotic whisper.

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I’m with Bowler on the sidewalk, Honeycut nosing in the grass ahead. The apartment complex looks over our shoulders towards the setting sun, its side colored a pleasing golden orange. A car passes in the street and other cars like it merge into a long continuous humming emitting from somewhere.

“Jesus, you must think that dog eats all day with the kind of shit it takes.”

Her tail pumps stiffly, like a lever, and a soft pile forms on the grass. She kicks her rear paws through the grass at the pile before she skips away, sniffing.

“Bowler, do you think that change is possible? I know you said you didn’t believe it before, but I’m wondering what you think now.”

“What do you mean, Gus? Like world peace?”

“I mean like a personal change. Do you think that people have souls, this predetermined self, and that they spend their lives looking for this self, always gravitating towards what their souls really are? To become more of what they really are than what they are now?”

“As opposed to what?”

“As opposed to thinking one way, and then learning something, and then thinking something completely different. Not opposite, but different. In essence, changing.”

“I wouldn’t know that, Gus. What if we didn’t have souls? What if everyone was a nebula, and you could decorate your own nebula in any way you liked, only adding layers, never subtracting anything, never changing anything but modifying it? Or what if there was nothing to change from? Wouldn’t changing to simply be a matter of becoming?”

“If you think about it too much, it’s just a trap, Bowler. If you break it down then it goes beyond comprehension. Do you always have to do that? Tell me straight—do you have any answer, or any possible answer, or any interpretation or perspective, no matter how bullshit?”

Bowler looking at me while Honeycut pulls the leash taut while looking at a bird hopping.

“In all honesty, Gus, people don’t change. They can look different at various times, they can earn more money, others may *think* they have changed, but inside they’re always the same. Like television static, incoherent even to themselves, driven to whatever slobbering and irrational ends their souls fancy, if we’re dealing with the hypothesis that people have souls. People may not know the source of what drives them—but they always know what they are, and that knowledge, like you said, traps them. The coward, to himself, will remain a coward, no matter how many feats of bravery he performs.”



## CHAPTER 11

Out with Ezgi several times—disappointment. Oh, so tiresome. Jackie mad at me at work again—the traditional dynamic reinstated.

The kitten there—always some dead thing there, always, whether I live in this apartment or another.

Ezgi—disappointment.

Of everyone, her—tiresome. Tiresome. Tiresome. Always some dead thing calling out to me, forcing my attention elsewhere.

I recall our conversation near the end—

“Ezgi—how would you describe your life, your life so far?”

“Well, in one word—difficult.”

“Difficult? Oh. I would have never thought of that.”

“Well, you may have noticed that English isn’t my first language.”

“I see.”

“But there are other things—I don’t know if I feel comfortable talking about them.”

The things that rustle in her memories like dark torn cloth, that rustle in Jackie’s memories, that threaten, that cover the bright areas with the sinister, that cling and smother.

“How would you describe your life, Gus?”

“Well—in one word—languid.”

“Languid. Like water.”

“No—but yes, in some ways, I suppose so. Like water. Like liquid. Languid—it’s a waiting feeling. Of watching, of being aware of all things around you but not being involved, of all things being near and far at the same time. Of all things being impossible. It’s waiting, waiting for nothing, at least nothing specific, but waiting only for waiting, putting all energy into the act of waiting. So that when, or if, the vague, waited-upon thing appears, you finally let go of waiting and watch, not moving towards it, watching it only to watch it pass.”

Ezgi—but it’s all right. Jackie and I still sharing Karmic punishment for sins committed lifetimes ago. Mrs. Altman in for tea on Tuesdays and Saturdays—no. That’s not anymore. But Fiona still in the Hall of FRAME, her beauty appearing and disappearing according only to the light, not to my eyes, only the light—I still have Fiona, if simply to watch, to imagine, and not to hope.

A yawn and a grin and a yawn and a yawn and a grin. That’s how they’ll recognize me—  
two base expressions, boredom and amusement, each overlapping the other inopportunely. A yawn and a grin and a yawn and a yawn and a grin.

“Toby”

Toby strained at the red leash, his dog collar burrowing deeper into the furry flesh of his neck. He had been trained to respect and love his leash, but the tautness of it occasionally annoyed him. Although Toby couldn’t quite visualize when he was a puppy, memory’s fingertip stroke--an existence without the restriction of the leash, without the constant constriction

around his throat--frequently brushed the back of his canine mind.

"Hold on Toby. Jesus, hold on a minute."

Toby was a mutt. A most exceptional mutt, but still a mongrel. Many mixed-breed canines lack the symmetry of their purebred counterparts, and display their inequality in their physical make up: a large head sometimes on a small body, or a large body on small legs --or discolored eyes, odd shaped ears, a short snout where it should be long. But Toby was as beautiful as any dog owner would want their pet to be. His sleek black fur was interrupted only with clean white patches on his paws and his strong chest. A white spot on the tip of his tail finished his body like a punctuation mark. And like most mutts, Toby exhibited the healthy happiness and dedicated curiosity that bored and spoiled purebreds always seemed to lack.

The man lit a cigarette. "Damn it Toby, would you do your business so we can go home?"

A wash of smells absent from the confines of the house brought multiple sensations to Toby as he nosed around in the grass. He smelled children's bare feet. Residue from the car exhaust in the street. Out on his walks, Toby lived through the histories of these past scents. Stray pieces of cat fur raised his hackles and made him want to sneeze. When he smelled old dog urine on a thin tree, Toby lifted his leg and added to the scent

with his own. It was his piece of conversation to neighborhood dogs he rarely encountered in person.

"All right, you're done. Let's go home."

Toby felt the familiar yank on his leash as soon as he had finished, as soon as the last drop splattered and disappeared into the grass. He tried to ignore the physical order while studying an enclave of insects swarming around a mound of dirt.

"I said, let's go."

The yank was more forceful this time, and Toby reluctantly obeyed, his housebroken reason asserting control. He would consider the nest of insects later, back at home, while the television projected images he could not discern. Making a slight visual account of the neighborhood around him, Toby trotted ahead of the man. He wondered if he was to have moist or dry food tonight. And it had been a while since he had gotten hold of a decent bone...

Toby stopped. He lifted his head, his black nose pulling at the air in strong draughts. Something was on the wind that he could not see, but the dense, tangible beauty of a remarkable scent made him alert, his muscles tense, his tail moving slowly from side to side. He felt the unwilling arm of the man and his leash again in the folds of his neck as he rushed ahead.

"Whoa, Toby. Easy, easy. What's the rush?"

Toby finally saw the source of the infuriating and intoxicating smell. A female border collie, well groomed and obviously high strung, led a young woman holding a petite leather

leash. Toby caught the expensive dog shampoo in his nostrils and shook it out, irritated. He sniffed harder until he found the distinctive canine scent he had smelled on the wind, a damp smell of blood and skin and greasy fur.

"Hey, Eileen. Taking Mindy for a walk? Hey Mindy girl, hey Mindy."

Moving closer to Mindy, Toby's feelings intensified. Something he vaguely remembered suddenly came alive and suppressed all of the human logic that had been carved into him. The leash disappeared. He sniffed the female dog over her face and head, all the way down her body. He had dreamed the smell before, this smell that reminded of something ancient and natural, something wet from the saliva of a panting tongue. When he reached her anus, Toby only barely recognized the change. Mindy had been rigid with fear as Toby inspected her body with his nose, but now she was welcoming. As he sniffed Mindy's rear end, awash in her overpowering pheromones, a blinding visual entered into his stunned imagination. Toby was confused. He supposed that he should know what to do, but he couldn't do it, he didn't know what it was. He didn't know why he wanted to smell her, why it felt so good. Still sniffing the dog's behind, Toby waited for the scent to direct him. Elastic moments stretched out further as he continued to work his nostrils, a black leather hand grabbing at empty air. A panic came over him as he sensed Mindy tense up again. He continued to smell her, but something was wrong. There was no feeling--there was nothing. Toby wanted

something to drive him on, to make the smell make sense, but there was nothing. As Mindy started to move away, the dread realization that he had lost his moment struck him. He almost yelped in frustration.

"Yeah, don't worry, Toby's been fixed. You find someone to breed Mindy with yet?"

Toby was frozen. But his nostrils kept working, opening and closing.

"Come on Toby, let's go home. You hungry? You hungry boy?"

Toby felt again the yank on his collar. He strained less on the red leash, which now felt strangely comforting.

Toby chose not to remember the incident for long. After all, there were still insects in the grass and urine on the trees. Walking slightly faster than the leisurely pace set by the man who held his leash, Toby considered warm thoughts of the moist food that might enter his bowl when he got home.