More Stores About Disappointment And TV

James McDermott

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MORE STORIES ABOUT DISAPPOINTMENT AND TV

by

JAMES MCDERMOTT

Under the Direction of Joshua Russell, MFA

ABSTRACT

This MFA thesis, More Stories About Disappointment and TV, is a collection of short stories. I see them as being interconnected, if only in the loosest possible sense. I have certain ideas and themes that recur throughout my work, which I hope gives the stories a sense of cohesion without making the collection feel too monochromatic. The stories vary in narrative approach and point of view. My stories are character-driven literary fiction, to put it broadly, though they often incorporate characteristics of genre fiction. Some of them are more realistic than others, but they almost always have elements of the weird, the fabulist, and/or the absurd.

INDEX WORDS: Short fiction, Story collection, Contemporary fiction, Fabulism, Satire, Comic fiction
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JAMES MCDERMOTT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts
in the College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
2017
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by

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May 2017

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DEDICATION

I’d like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Andrew and Celia McDermott without whose endless support none of this would have been possible.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I couldn’t have written these stories without the guidance Josh Russell, Sheri Joseph, and John Holman have provided during my time at Georgia State University. I would also like to thank everybody who’s been in a workshop with me during the last several years, and any other friends who have endured early drafts of my stories.
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1 INTRODUCTION

My MFA thesis, *More Stories About Disappointment and TV*, derives its title from the first successful story I wrote in the graduate program here at Georgia State. In turn, the story’s title is a parodic riff on Talking Heads’ classic second album, *More Songs About Buildings and Food*. I gave the story that title at the last minute, right before bringing it into workshop. I’ve always had trouble coming up with titles, and I intended that one as a kind of self-deprecating *mea culpa* for my classmates: “Yeah, I know what you’re going to say about this one…” The title fits that story well enough—it *is* a story about disappointment and TV, broadly speaking—but it’s also a joke about my stories in general. My characters are frequently obsessed with mass media texts, and just as frequently disappointed with their lives, so it seems like as accurate a descriptor of my work as I could think of.

*More Stories About Disappointment and TV* is a collection of short stories. The stories are unconnected, except in the sense that they’re all products of the same writer working within the same 4-5 year span. I have certain ideas and themes that recur throughout my work, which I hope gives the stories a sense of cohesion without making the collection feel too monochromatic. The stories vary in narrative approach and point of view. More of them are written in first-person than in third, in part because I usually find it easier to figure out my characters if I’m writing them in first-person. Over my last two years in the program, I have tried to move away from this first-person voice; the results have been mixed, but I plan to keep testing my own limitations as I keep writing after I graduate. I see my stories as character-driven literary fiction, to put it broadly, but they often incorporate characteristics of genre fiction. Some of them are more realistic than others, but they almost always have elements of the weird, the fabulist, and/or the absurd.
They also typically always take place in the Atlanta area—or my own very specifically off-kilter version of the Atlanta area—and there are occasional, if minor, character overlaps between them. The primary reason for the shared location is pretty simple and utilitarian: I have lived in the Atlanta area since I was four years old, so I know it well enough to write about it confidently. When I try to write about other regions, the results usually feel a little flimsy, like they've been built out of secondhand materials—which, in a sense, they have. I am including a few pieces that are more geographically vague (ex.: “A Brief Dispatch on Proper Expectation Management” and “Countess Báthory Is Not Amused”), but they address similar themes and are written in a similar style as the rest of my work, so I can’t imagine the disparity in setting will be too jarring.

The most obvious characteristic all of my stories share is an odd, absurdist sense of humor. This is partially by design, and partially just a style I fell into when I started writing. When I try to write stories that aren’t funny, they almost invariably come across as maudlin and lifeless. Having accepted that humor will be present in just about anything I write, it’s my job to make sure that the humor enhances, rather than detracting from, the more serious content in the stories. I think of humor as a way of articulating and confronting anxieties. There’s a strain of absurdism in pretty much everything I write, which I hope is not only funny—I can’t really shake the influence of, e.g, The Simpsons and Mr. Show, no matter how serious my intentions—but also a little unsettling. To borrow an old Marxist phrase, I think of the absurd as a way of heightening the contradictions that are ubiquitous in contemporary life. Late-period capitalism already feels like a grotesque parody of its ideal self a lot of the time, and I’m trying to accentuate the gap between the ideal and the reality. I think humor and irony often come across as defense mechanisms in fiction, and in real life, for that matter. I’m trying to use them as
defamiliarizing tools, ways of foregrounding the ridiculous things we’ve been conditioned to take for granted.

I tend to use elements of genre fiction in my stories. Aside from my own personal enthusiasm for that stuff—especially sci-fi, horror, and comics as a medium—I think it makes sense as an element of my style of late-capitalist American fabulism. I find most North American attempts at Márquez-style magical realism unbearably cloying. Magical realism needs a solid grounding in postcolonial politics to really work; otherwise the “magic” just feels saccharine. So rather than borrowing elements from folklore, I borrow elements from pop cultural “junk” genres like pulp sci-fi, X-Men and 2000 AD comics, punk rock, video games, anime, B-horror movies, etc. It’s what my characters have in the absence of any “real” culture, whatever that even means; or at least, any real culture tends to get lost in the mass-cultural noise. Consequently, that’s the form my fabulism usually takes, when it occurs: it’s not the blend of folklore and religious iconography that shows up in Latin American fiction, because my characters don’t have much of a cultural bedrock beyond the commercial products they consume. That might be kind of a bleak outlook, but it doesn’t feel inaccurate to me.

I use genre elements, but I still think what I’m doing is literary fiction. I’m a fan of science fiction, but even at my most speculative and idea-driven, I don’t see my stories as sci-fi. They’re almost purely character-driven, often with very low-key plots even when the settings are strange. A sci-fi story is about an Important Person in a sci-fi setting, somebody who’s likely to change the way the world works—or to try, at least. Genre novels tend to deal in stories whose stakes are high on a massive scale: preventing the apocalypse, taking down the dystopian government and/or evil megacorporation, making first contact with an alien species, etc. Even the more prosaic works of, say, J.G. Ballard, Stanislaw Lem, and Philip K. Dick—both of whom
are major influences on my writing—often have serious life-and-death stakes. *A Scanner Darkly* is the most grounded novel of Dick’s “mature” period, and my favorite, but the protagonist still unwittingly stumbles upon a conspiracy to brainwash the American populace.

I’m more interested in what’s happening around the fringes, even when the stories have “big idea” sci-fi settings. Even at their most outlandish, my stories tend to deal more with people leading mundane lives under unusual circumstances, and the stakes are more personal than global. What happens when you put, say, Mary Robison or Raymond Carver characters in a Philip K. Dick world? Who works at convenience stores and bars in William Gibson’s Sprawl? Other writers have worked in a similar hybrid of literary and speculative fiction—most notably, George Saunders has built a very successful career out of it—but I still think this is potentially fertile territory to explore. I’m interested in hybridization and juxtaposition in general: the literary with the “genre,” the grounded with the absurd, the verisimilar with the metafictional, the tragic with the deliberately silly.

This interest extends to hybridizing approaches from different forms of media. I’m an avid cinephile—I majored in film as an undergrad, to whatever extent that matters now—and a lot of what I’m doing is inspired by cinematic techniques, especially montage. Jean-Luc Godard is an especially strong influence: I like how his movies collapse the boundaries between narrative and essay, between high and low culture, between fiction and documentary (I forget the exact quote, but he said something to the effect that all of his narrative films are documentaries about their own construction), and between the personal and the political. Godard’s editing tends to lead the movies toward the bits of a story that usually get cut out, or to emphasize details that wouldn’t normally show up onscreen, or to foreground the artifice of a scene. There’s a playfulness in Godard’s best movies—a subversive prankster sensibility, really—that keeps them
enjoyable even when they defy both logical and emotional interpretation. Nothing I’ve written is as radical as most Godard movies, but the influence is there.

Many of my stories have metafictional elements as well, and I count metafictionalists like Donald Barthelme, Italo Calvino, and Lydia Davis among my influences. If I’m being honest, though, I don’t think I’m an especially innovative or experimental writer. I like stories. I like reading stories, and I like telling stories. I want my stories to be entertaining. I like Barthelme, Calvino, and Davis in part because I find their work entertaining. The metafictional elements in my fiction aren’t typically as disruptive as they are in the most “out” postmodern writing. If anything, they should serve to enhance the reader’s understanding of the characters. My characters often filter their experiences through additional layers of fiction, and my work contains stories within stories: invented movies, television shows, songs, video games, Dungeons & Dragons campaigns, etc.

This tendency comes from real life as much as it does any artistic influences; I watch TV and movies, I listen to music, I read books, and consequently I know how those enthusiasms can manifest in day-to-day life. Most of my stories are more narratively straightforward than, say, Borges’s “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” but my characters are often as obsessed with their favorite fictions as Borges’s narrators are. This just seems natural to me. We all live in a heavily mediated world, and a lot of us spend a lot of time thinking about the media texts surrounding us. That’s just a part of the experience of living in contemporary America, as far as I’m concerned.

Now I’m going to move on to comment on each individual story in the collection.

“The Fiendish Perils of Modern Roleplaying” is a strong example of what I was describing, re: the overlapping layers of narrative and texts-within-texts in my work. The first-
person narrator is a teenage nerd who’s developed what he describes as a case of “mild clairvoyance.” He and his friends have reached a precipice in their relationship: they’re all high school seniors, they’re drinking alcohol for the first time, their respective lives are heading in different directions, and only the protagonist knows that this is the end. Like a lot of my stories, this one blends autobiography with fabulism. The story isn’t strictly autobiographical, but the events in here comprise a sort of objective correlative for the way my late adolescence felt.

The clairvoyance is a device for playing with memory in reverse; I often layer past and present in my stories, and I thought it might be interesting to add the future as an extra layer. I think of my standard approach to the quasi-Joycean epiphany, where the protagonist will remember something that casts their current experiences in a different light (or vice versa). This was a way to reverse that process a bit, to see if I could write a character who was simultaneously remembering the past and the future. How would that change the way the narration operates? I also thought it served a thematic purpose. The narrator is a brainy teen who knows more than his friends, but isn’t as capable of directly engaging with the world around him. I like this story a lot. I think it’s clever and imaginative, and that it applies its cleverness toward some fairly resonant ends. The pacing is a bit rushed toward the end, and I’d like to do more with the narrator’s clairvoyance, but I think it’s mostly working anyway.

“Countess Báthory Is Not Amused” is the newest story in the thesis, and one of the most high-concept. I spend a lot of time thinking about how comedy works, and in this case I was thinking specifically about the mechanics of the comedy roast: there is some appeal to seeing, e.g., Don Rickles jokingly insult people, but any description of the roast makes it seem perverse. I was also thinking, particularly in light of recent political events, about how pop culture and comedy—even satirical comedy—can alter our relationship to powerful people in dangerous
ways. Think of Richard Nixon on *Laugh-In*, for instance. Rowan and Martin had the chance to lampoon one of American history’s most destructively corrupt politicians *to his face*, so of course they took the opportunity. The jokes were ostensibly at Nixon’s expense, but the end result was that by agreeing to the appearance, Nixon proved to the American public that he could take a joke. (There are also more recent examples, equally horrific examples of this phenomenon, but I’ll leave those unmentioned for now.) I figured an extreme example would be a mid-1950s Friar’s Club roast of Countess Elizabeth Báthory, the legendary Hungarian aristocrat/serial killer, narrated from the vantage point of the American P.R. agent who decided it would be a good idea. I’m pretty happy with the way the story turned out, but I think it could use a little more tightening. The concept is so strange—so openly anachronistic—that I might need to do a little more work to make the disparate elements cohere.

“More Stories About Disappointment and TV” is the story the collection is named after. This is the first truly successful story I wrote in the MFA program here after two semesters of mostly failed experiments—the first time I managed an effective balance of moral and emotional weight, satirical comedy, and fabulist weirdness. Like a lot of my best stories, this is heavily grounded in my own experiences. My approach to autobiography is always a bit skewed, thankfully. I’m always trying to build fictional constructs that can convey to the reader how my memories *felt*, rather than presenting them literally. (I’m thinking again about Philip Dick’s *A Scanner Darkly*, a science fiction novel that he insisted was based entirely on his own experiences in the drug culture of the 1960s. Granted, Dick was schizophrenic, so his relationship to “reality” may have been a bit different from mine…) I was still working retail when I wrote it, and in hindsight it’s obvious how much I relished the opportunity to vent about work, but I think it’s going a bit deeper than that, thankfully.
I wanted to juxtapose a few different ways in which late capitalism dehumanizes its subjects—workers, managers, producers, consumers—as well as the profound weirdness of working in customer service. What is the fruit of a service worker’s labor, exactly? As with a lot of my stories, I wanted this one to be funny in a way that stung: a few threads of absurd events leading inexorably toward a fairly depressing (but still absurd) conclusion. I think I could probably still stand to weave these different threads together a little more smoothly—to demonstrate, for instance, how the narrator’s enthusiasm for *Melinda Von Peppercorn: Debutante of the High Seas* relates to his position working at the enormous big-box store, and how both of those threads relate to Officer Frank’s thwarted ambitions. But I think it’s a strong story, even with those reservations.

“A Brief Dispatch on Proper Expectation Management” is the only story I have published to date, and it was even shortlisted for the *Best Small Fictions 2016*. I think it’s a good story, though I do think it’s a little funny that my best-received work has been a jokey two-page metafiction I wrote in an hour and a half. This was written for the journal *The First Line*, as a response to a first-line-based prompt. The first line was “Fairy tales hardly ever come true for quiet girls.” I had trouble taking the line seriously—not that it’s a bad line on its own terms, but my stories don’t usually reference “fairy tales” in unironic/idealistic terms—so I started asking taxonomic questions about it. What does “fairy tale” mean in this context? What makes somebody a “quiet girl,” and why don’t fairy tales come true for her? I approached it as a report written for a strange Brazil-esque bureaucratic system: “You must be this loud for a fairy tale (which we will define as follows) to come true for you,” etc. It works, and at two pages it’s exactly long enough to explore the concept without exhausting it. Not my most substantial story, necessarily, though it asks similar questions about the relationship between fiction and personal
fulfillment. It’s not hard to see the protagonists of any of these other stories applying to this 
bureaucratic office, inquiring about their chances of living through a fairy tale.

“A Weekend at Home, First Semester (Or, I Was a Teenage Kaiju)” is exactly what the 
title indicates. This is one of the most overtly autobiographical stories in here, while 
simultaneously being among the most fabulist. The narrator is an eighteen-year old college 
freshman visiting home for a long weekend during his first semester of college, desperately 
trying not to let anybody else know how depressed and out-of-his-depth he has felt all semester. 
This is nearly 100% autobiographical. Most of the details of the plot are slightly different, as are 
the other characters; I’ve never felt ethically comfortable importing acquaintances of mine into 
my fiction, though I may create amalgam characters. The biggest difference between this story 
and my actual first semester of college is that this protagonist is turning into a **kaiju**, a **Godzilla**
esque giant monster. That never happened to me, or to any of my friends. But it seems like an apt 
(Obvious, even) metaphor for many college freshmen’s sense of displacement and confusion. I 
like this story. As I said, the metaphor feels a little obvious to me—I prefer when there’s a 
slipperier/more flexible relationship between surface action and emotional subtext—but maybe 
the directness is part of what makes it work. It’s a lot sillier, and **far** less sexually frank, but this 
story almost feels like a comic reaction to Charles Burns’ classic graphic novel **Black Hole**.

“A Few Suburban Myths Only I Seem to Remember” was written in between creative 
non-fiction pieces in the spring of 2017. I had been suffering writer’s block for several months, 
and the only pieces I had managed to write had been personal essays, so I thought I would write 
a story that looked like creative non-fiction. In many ways, this is creative non-fiction. The only 
difference is that about 40% of it is made up. Each myth is rooted in an actual myth I remember 
from my childhood, but taken just a bit further into the realm of the fabulist, the paranoid, the
absurd. I had a lot of fun writing this, and friends of mine have mostly liked reading it, but I get the impression that people who aren’t my age (give or take a few years) don’t find it as engaging…which means it isn’t working quite as well as it should. I need to give it more of a consistent narrative thread, I think, beyond the narrator recounting these disparate myths, in order to bring out the deeper resonance I’m aiming for.

Still, I love the ideas I’m working with here, and I think there’s something to this “lowbrow Borges” approach. Another model I had in mind while writing this story was the “Cetology” material in Moby-Dick. Ishmael’s quest to find meaning by organizing all the facts he knows about whales is patently absurd—and part of what makes Moby-Dick such a perversely funny, playful novel on top of everything else about it—but there’s still a kind of profundity in those chapters. This shouldn’t just be a funny nostalgia piece. This is a document of the narrator’s search for a coherent order to the universe, filtered through some of the dumbest ideas I’ve ever thought up: ridiculously silly riffs on Super Mario, Marilyn Manson, Blue’s Clues, and late 90s Garry Marshall movies. What I need is something solid to crash those ideas against, I think. I’m sure I’ll be able to figure that out in another draft or two.

“A Night Out” is not my favorite of the stories collected in the thesis by any means—if anything, it feels a bit clumsy and heavy-handed compared to my favorite stories in here—but it nonetheless documents an important stage in my aesthetic development. The story might just be a noteworthy piece of juvenilia, and there’s a good chance that I’ll find it hopelessly embarrassing a few years from now. Even so, that’s the story where I figured out what I was trying to do with my fiction, the place where my voice, thematic preoccupations, and approach to genre all fell into place. I wrote the original draft in Candace Nadon’s Narrative Techniques class during the final semester of my B.A. program at Georgia State, way back in fall 2010. It’s a story
by a 23-year-old student with ideas about mass media and consumption, an irony-soaked critique of what I saw, perhaps naively, as “hip” culture’s excessive reliance on irony. I hoped the critique was sufficiently inward-looking to work, though it wasn’t until I revised it in an MFA workshop that it started to feel as well-rounded and organic as I would like.

There’s almost no “plot” in the traditional sense, and the stakes are incredibly low. The climax occurs when the characters accidentally get a “real” meal rather than something frozen and microwaveable, and the kitsch-obsessed protagonist has a momentary identity crisis. It’s pretty corny. The irony is so heavy, the premise so absurd, and the characters so deliberately vacuous—self-conscious without being self-aware—that it’s hard to find an emotional entry point. Still, this is…the prototype for everything I’ve written since then, I suppose. A typical “McDermott character” (ugh) is a hyperarticulate observer who finds the world bewildering and sort of funny, only to gradually realize his own complicity in the systems that make the world so bewildering/funny. “A Night Out” is the first such story I ever wrote, and accordingly I feel like it has a place in this collection, even if I have explored similar ideas to stronger and more nuanced effect in later stories.

When I wrote “Purely Transactional Cephalopod Frottage,” I was feeling acutely self-conscious of my other stories’ tendency to meander. My characters are almost always mentally active, so I don’t think their external inaction—a reluctance to act that might superficially come across as passivity—is inherently a problem, but I still wanted to write something that had a bit more external action. So in this story, I threw a lot of impending deadlines at the protagonist: she’s working as a P.A. for a dispiritingly awful-sounding movie, dealing with all sorts of uncontrollable Hollywood egos, all while trying to help an old friend out of a crisis of his own. This is also the first of my stories to deal with the south outside of Atlanta, even if it’s definitely
filtered through a distinctly Atlantan lens. The characters are driving through South Georgia in the middle of the night, but this isn’t Flannery O’Connor’s South, or even the more contemporary South of Barry Hannah’s *Airships*. This is a version of the southeast where the so-called “Dixie Mafia” listens to Ibiza house remixes of Townes Van Zandt songs. I like this story. It feels a little too manic, maybe, and it rushes to a stop without resolving as substantially as I would like. I like ambiguous resolutions, where the story is heading in a clear enough trajectory that we can infer more or less where it’s heading even if the narration ends before the characters’ journeys are completely over. That’s what I’m aiming for with this one, but it might need a little more before the pieces are fully cohering. It’s full of ideas; I just need to give each one a little more space.

“Baptize Yourself in the Peroxide Stream of Tomorrow’s Future” is the most straightforward experiment with speculative fiction I’ve written so far. (Note: this is a working title. It was initially called “Duty Now for the Future,” named after my favorite Devo album, but I wasn’t comfortable leaning on a straight homage like that.) It’s a sci-fi story set in present-day Atlanta; the idea is that a tech corporation has managed to build an Arcology in the middle of contemporary Atlanta. I was aiming to juxtapose the futuristic setting with the mundane exterior, to explore the ways in which Silicon Valley corporate culture seems scary and cultish and dehumanizing from the outside. (The way people talk about working at Google, for instance, makes it sound more like a Scientology-style “New Religious Movement” than a company.)

I also wanted to capture the tech industry’s odd, queasy balance of genuinely amazing cutting-edge innovation with absolute cultural vacuity—the way Elon Musk can seem like a visionary genius and a hopeless cornball and a terrifying corporate overlord and a pathetic dweeb, all at once. That’s how this Arcology should feel. It’s amazing that it exists, but isn’t it
also kind of…lame, on top of being scary? I think this might end up becoming a novella, or at least a longer story than I’ve been able to manage for this thesis. I’m dealing with a lot of ideas in this story, and I think most of them are compelling enough that they might benefit from a larger canvas.

“Joel, et al, Vs. the Constantly Mutating Visage of History” is a terrible title for a pretty fun story. This story is to the past as the preceding story is to the future, to put it in reductive terms. I’ve always been fascinated by ancient and medieval history, but that fascination makes me a little uncomfortable when I think about it too long. I’ve seen medieval European iconography wedded to white ethno-nationalist rhetoric too often, for one thing. And it should go without saying that the Renaissance Fair version of European history is treacly and sanitized (even if it can be kind of fun, approached from a safe distance). If the last story started with the me asking questions about the tech industry, this one starts with me wondering what the deal is with Renaissance Fairs. I’m not sure if it’s exploring that question in sufficient depth yet; I think the characters are still a bit thinly developed, and any of the substance in here is purely conceptual, not emotional. But I like the juxtapositions of (various idealized versions of) the past with the present, and I think the story is getting some decent comic mileage out of the gap between the festival’s regal aspirations and the tacky results.

“In a House with Missing Windows” might be my favorite of the stories I’ve written. This is another of my most autobiographical, though it’s a collage of emotional impressions from my early twenties rather than a story with a conventional “plot,” per se. The vignette-driven form is inspired by Mary Robison’s Why Did I Ever?, which I thought was a revelation when I read it: “Oh, you can do this?” I wanted each individual vignette to be as finely-honed a snapshot as I could manage. I wanted to capture what it felt like to be twenty-one and barely capable of
communication or action, constantly surrounded by friends but still feeling somehow alienated from everybody around me. Obviously, the surface action, when there is “action,” is fictionalized—I never lived in a house with a room full of owls, for instance—but the overall impression feels authentic to me. I think I had also read Denis Johnson’s Jesus’ Son a few months before I wrote this story, and the influence is apparent. My youth was nowhere nearly as misspent as Johnson’s, thank God, so the story has a much lighter touch than most of his. But that feeling of blind searching, of dumb kids stumbling around in pursuit of goals they couldn’t even name, comes from Johnson.

I have sequenced these stories in a non-chronological order, mostly for the sake of flow. I think “Fiendish Perils” is the ideal way to start the collection, and I think “In a House with Missing Windows” opens up at the end in a way that makes it feel like a strong closer. For each other transition, I was aiming for tonal juxtapositions. None of the highest-concept fabulist stories are sequenced next to each other, for instance. I was aiming for a reading experience that would emphasize the collection’s variety without compromising its sense of coherence. I think I have succeeded, for the most part. Many of these stories are works in progress, but they are still pretty solid, all things considered. I may look back on this in a few years and find the whole collection embarrassing, of course, but it’s still a vital document of what has so far been the most important period in my evolution as a writer.

—JM
2 THE FIENDISH PERILS OF MODERN ROLEPLAYING

Right now it’s still early—just me and Darren, until the other guys get here. His house is one of those seventies-modern deals, all wood paneling and giant trapezoidal windows arching up to a violent peak, like a dingy cathedral erected by a short-lived cult. The Church of the Exalted Key Party, maybe, or of the Holy Jeff “Skunk” Baxter Guitar Lick. The finished basement, where we typically hang out, has obviously seen better days. A couple of the sconces along the wall are broken, and the umber carpet is torn in several spots, leaving the concrete foundation exposed. It gives the basement an earthy, cavernous vibe, the carpet spreading over the ground like lichen on stone. All of this is appropriate, I guess, for a place where we’ve spent most of our Saturday nights playing Dungeons & Dragons over the last few years. It’s an ideal location for it, really. The room is dark and dusty and smells like chain pizza and body odor, but the insularity suits us. Ours is a bizarre and mutant strain of adolescent geekdom, and—to paraphrase the old maxim about rattlesnakes or spiders or whatever—we’re just as put off by outsiders as they are by us.

Darren is on the floor near the basement’s dead center, hunched over a pile of rulebooks and scattered sheets of graph paper, a pair of ten-sided dice in his right hand, putting the finishing touches on his latest campaign. I’m here on the couch, letting the ancient cushions swallow me up, checking my phone. No missed calls, which is hardly surprising.

Marcus and Nick descend the stairs about half an hour later than they said they would, both carrying their own fully customized, house-rule-compliant character sheets. Marcus has a beaten-up Ziploc bag of extra dice and a couple of Surge two-liter bottles from Johnny Montauk’s, the retro convenience store down the street. Nick is holding a CD-R labeled, in scrawled metallic silver Sharpie, “DUNGEONEERING JAMS.” The handwriting is dripping with playful sarcasm,
each letter’s curves goofily exaggerated, the title embellished with crooked little eighth-notes around the margins.

“What’s up?” says Marcus.

Without looking up, Darren rolls the dice, stoically notes the result on the nearest sheet of paper, and says, “Took you long enough.”

“Yeah, sorry,” says Nick. “Yardwork day, unannounced. Fucking parents.”

“I’m sure,” says Darren, his voice flattening only slightly beyond its typical deadpan.

“Did you guys bring your passion and commitment this weekend, or is it going to be another paint-by-numbers debacle?”

“Wait, debacle?” says Nick, collapsing onto the opposite end of the couch. “I thought we did fine. I found an enchanted +1 longsword, we rescued some orphans. We saved a princess. I got laid.”

“Please,” says Darren. “Don’t remind me.”

“We might have genocided an entire subspecies of lizardfolk,” I add, doing what I can to help. “An evil subspecies, I mean. Obviously.”

“I leveled up,” says Marcus. “Twice.”

“Yet again, you’re thinking too linearly,” Darren says. “Too conventionally. We need to bring in some backbone, some emotional courage for once.”

He stands up perfectly straight, walks to the mini-fridge behind the bar, pulls out a bottle that says VIOLENT BOSTONIAN: ECONOMY VODKA in big red industrial-strength block letters, and says, “I’ve got an idea.” He puts the bottle on the countertop, and I see his eyes, steely and capricious, piercing through the thin field of dust motes floating in the last of the afternoon’s soft swollen light. I let the couch envelop me a little further, realizing that I’m
probably the thirtysomethingth person to sink into this specific cushion in this specific way. Nighttime’s coming. Let’s go.

* * * * *

Darren lives here, but the house belongs to his mom and stepdad. When Darren moves out during his sophomore year of college, it’ll be to a ranch-style place, sort of dilapidated, in an even older subdivision with an encroaching tide of McMansions ominously lining the corners, and he will have three roommates, none of whom are here right now. I know this because I’ve had selective clairvoyance since I was twelve.

It started when I was indulging my Thursday-afternoon routine, watching the Sci-Fi Channel during the hour-and-a-half of free time I had between school and trumpet lessons. That day, they happened to be airing that old Christopher Walken movie, The Dead Zone. It was probably a censored version, must have been, and pan-and-scanned to shit, but I still remember being struck, even at twelve, by how subdued Walken was in that movie compared to the braying self-parody we all know and love: the New York song-and-dance man with the halting speech patterns, like a man who’s constantly alarmed by the words escaping his own mouth. But in this movie he was something different, haunted, resigned, like he knew that he—Walken, the actor—was only a few years away from descending into caricature and archetype like all recognizable actors are doomed to do eventually, even as the character he was playing found himself plagued by prophetic visions of his own.

Mid-scene, the Sci-Fi Channel disrupted the movie for a commercial break, and I was struck, as they aired a commercial for some brand of paper towels or another, with a sense of all things being causally interconnected and thus, abstractly at least, predictable. Admittedly, I didn’t think about it in those terms, exactly, but the feeling was there, a secret incandescent pulse
between the pixels of the commercial. One perfectly composed image after another of an unknown actress cleaning up spilled coffee grounds, first with an unnamed leading brand and then with the more resilient advertised brand. Brawny, now I remember—that was the paper towel they were marketing. And I saw myself, between shots, looking at a gash on my left forearm, standing next to the enormous rectangle of sheet metal my parents had left resting against the garage wall after their latest home-expansion project. I was just looking at it, not really appearing frightened or upset or in pain, distantly curious more than anything.

A bit later, it was a quarter to six, past time to leave for my trumpet lesson, and I went running straight through the garage to my dad’s car, that big sheet of metal looming along the side of the room. I saw it there, of course, all its hulking rusted mass, and I certainly hadn’t forgotten the footage beneath the commercial, but a kind of dissociative fog, invisible but nonetheless felt, came creeping into the garage. It wasn’t quite like re-watching the hidden footage beneath the commercial, but I wasn’t fully embedded in the moment either. I was simultaneously seeing from my own perspective and seeing myself from a distance of two or three feet, partially present but only in the sense that, say, a character from a video game is present on a screen. I saw my arm smacking up against the edge of the metal, both from my own vantage point and another, displaced one, and after a second of deceptively dull impact I noticed the loose flap of skin, the welling blood, the exposed tendons and muscle and subcutaneous tissue.

I ended up getting twelve stitches that afternoon, and about a week and a half’s supply of Vicodin, which I know some of my current classmates regard as a fun, hazy recreational drug, but at the time hardly seemed like anything special. I didn’t really feel the cut even when it first happened—maybe it was shock, or the more general dissociation that had just taken hold—and I
didn’t as it was healing either, regardless of whether I was on or off the painkillers. The scar’s still there, a jagged swath of tissue, shaped almost like the Danube River, across the top of my forearm.

To this day it’s never given me a trace of physical pain or discomfort.

* * * * *

So the last four, nearly five years have been kind of weird. The visions aren’t constant or anything, and they’re often pretty mundane—it’s not a full-blown Dead Zone situation, thank God, with the apocalyptic violence you’d expect from a Stephen King adaptation—but when they happen they’re unpleasant and exhausting, like preemptively feeling all of an experience’s residual trauma before going through the experience itself. On top of that, for whatever arbitrary cosmic reasons, I can’t tell other people what I’m predicting without it coming out in hopelessly square self-righteous lingo, the argot of preachy after-school-specials and school-wide anti-drug assemblies. When I was fifteen I had a vision, clear as could be, of a chemistry classmate getting caught smoking weed in his car, and my attempt at a warning was neither cool nor useful:

“Hey, Brandt, you shouldn’t smoke that ‘Mary Jane.’ / It’ll rot your brain and slowly drive you insane. / Nancy Reagan was correct to say / you’d really rather live the clean and sober way.”

I had wanted to tell him what I knew was coming, but against my volition the warning came out as a stilted, embarrassing novelty rap, like something they would have shown us between McGruff segments back in elementary school. I was the laughingstock of the chemistry classroom for weeks. Brandt, understandably, proceeded to get arrested hotboxing his car, despite my best intentions.
That’s an extreme example, thankfully. More often they come out as sanctimonious halting monologues: less flamboyant but still deeply uncool, like Joe Friday talking down to delinquent kids in an old *Dragnet* episode.

Oh, well. Was it Spider-Man who coined the phrase, “My gift is my curse?” Maybe it was one of the X-Men, I’m not sure. I haven’t read many of those 60s comics yet, but I will when I get to college. I don’t know how I’ll resist the inclination to find them corny, but I will.

So generally I’ve just had to disengage altogether, refrain from socially interacting with other high school students, aside from a handful of my fellow weird gifted kids, like Darren, Nick, and Marcus. Dr. Ziegler, the Gifted Department head, took to calling us “boy geniuses” in freshman English, and the name stuck—deployed sarcastically, more often than not—among our more socially mobile classmates. To be honest, I’m not a fan. I can’t hear it without inferring a trace of mocking irony, even if on some level it’s probably true.

I usually like playing D&D with the guys, even with Darren’s increasing control issues and artistic pretensions, because it’s one of the only hobbies I can really enjoy without ever having the result spoiled for me in advance. It’s something about the absence of self in the role-playing experience, the noncorporeality of the game, the reliance on imperceptible chance. Our characters exist not in the real world but in a strange, interactive projection of Darren’s imagination, and thus, I guess, their fates aren’t as subject to any sense of causality I can grasp, or, by extension, to my clairvoyance. We sit around in the basement all night, drinking caffeinated soda and going on imaginary adventures in a fantastical, monster-infested world where God, in a near-literal sense, plays dice.

* * * *
Lately, though, we’ve been settling into an especially weird tabletop groove. It’s been developing in this direction for a few weeks now, since Darren, the only one of us who’s ever wanted to play as Dungeon Master—the one who designs the imaginary world, controls the non-player characters (NPCs), and essentially runs the game—decided to expand the game beyond D&D’s typical post-Tolkien fantasy setting. He had us design characters that don’t fit the templates in the Player’s Handbook, but at the same time, conversely, he had us use our own real names rather than made-up heroic-fantasy character names. To wit, the heroic adventuring party:

- Nick, the Elven Space Pirate. Male. Special Skill(s): Night Falconry.
- Tom (Me), the Human Street Samurai. Male. Special Skill(s): None.

“Aye, laddies,” Darren said, in character as a Dwarven barkeep, when we introduced the characters a few weeks ago. “It’s an inspiring crew indeed.”

“Though, really, Marcus,” he added, out of character, “I think it might work better if your character class wasn’t such an overtly contemporary reference. I mean, I like The Warriors as much as the next guy, but it kind of takes us out of the world we’re all coming together to build, breaking the fourth wall for no reason like that, doesn’t it?”

“Fuck that,” said Marcus, pounding the table. “Baseball Furies for life.”

“Okay,” said Darren, unusually tactful, with residue of the barkeep’s Scottish accent lingering sweetly in his cadence. “If that’s the message you want your chosen character to convey, then so be it. This time, the game is about personal expression, so if it feels right to you, then by all means, go with it.”

But despite his encouragement, things have turned stranger as we’ve fallen deeper into his campaign. Last week, Darren briefly introduced the Deck of Incommunicability and the
Spinner of Doubt, new game mechanics designed to make even the smallest actions nearly impossible. If we wanted our characters to talk, we needed to draw from the Deck, and if we wanted them to do anything else, we needed to spin the Spinner. The result was a 1:26 chance of our characters ever successfully communicating with one another, and a 1:15 chance of us ever accomplishing anything else. Darren insisted that the new rules were “thematically important” to the story he was trying to tell, but Marcus rallied us to mutiny, and he gloomily consented to give us some straightforward, functional adventuring.

So I knew this session would be rough, especially with all the passive-aggressive behavior Darren’s been exhibiting throughout the week. On Wednesday, in Dr. Ziegler’s E-Journalism class—a silly formal name for a class that mostly consists of gifted kids dicking around and only occasionally writing features for The Hive, our school’s online magazine—Marcus returned from a bathroom break to find an anonymously-bylined article on his computer entitled “BREAKING STORY: BOY GENIUS SECRETLY COMPLETE BUNGLING SIMPLETEON.” The subtitle, right below a giant picture of Marcus’s face: “Also Hopelessly Self-Centered and Sexually Impotent, Probably.”

And now Darren’s introducing this cheap vodka into the mix, which I know won’t work out the way he wants it to.

“Hey, cool,” says Nick. “How’d you get this stuff?”

“I took it from my dad’s place,” Darren says. “I doubt he’ll notice it’s missing, really. But my point in bringing it here is that you’ve all been a little unwilling to commit to this campaign. I mean, Nick, you’re always texting when it’s not your turn, Tom’s barely even trying half the time—you really couldn’t come up with any special skills for your character to have?”
“Hey,” I say. “Pardon me for thinking ‘Street Samurai’ was already intrinsically cool enough. *Snow Crash* style.”

“Sure, sure, whatever,” he says. “Just be mindful of this stuff, and how it makes you come across. And Marcus, you seriously need to keep your head out of the meta-game. This isn’t about statistics, about finding loot and experience or winning or losing. It’s about playing a role in a story. It’s life.”

All of which is true, I guess, although his last claim seems maybe a little specious. Nick and Marcus exchange a skeptical glance.

“Throughout history, people have used intoxicants to tap into some deeper well of inspiration and energy,” Darren says. “Like in AP World. Remember the Viking berserkers?”

“Well,” says Marcus. “Weren’t the berserkers eating, like, hallucinogenic spores or something? I don’t see”—he squints at the label—“‘Violent Bostonian’ vodka tricking us into thinking we’re grizzly bears or whatever.”

“That’s true,” says Darren, “but unless one of you guys happens to have some hallucinogenic spores lying around, this is the best we’ve got. Come on, Marcus, be pragmatic.”

So we all pour vodka into translucent smoky tumbler glasses and try drinking some and then every one of us opts to cut it with the Surge that Marcus brought over. Now it doesn’t taste much better: the Surge is sickeningly sweet, and the vodka’s burning sensation is somehow stale rather than the sharp sting I had expected, more like dying embers than proper fire. But I can get it down. I can see this stuff—not Violent Bostonian, necessarily, but alcohol in general—playing a recurring part in my adult life, though I hardly understand the appeal now. I’m not sure whether to take this as a bad omen or not. At what point does something transform from a hobby
or a social rite into a crutch or habit? Can I tell the difference from here, seventeen, in my weird
friend’s stepdad’s basement?

* * * * *

After a few drinks, our characters are wandering through the ruins of Xokh’tlan, an
ancient city built from the bleached bones of a giant interdimensional halibut. We’re accosted by
a host of enraged bipedal werefish in plate mail suits, and Iron Maiden’s “Rime of the Ancient
Mariner” starts playing on Nick’s mix CD.

“It is I,” I say, “Tom, of the Yancy Street Shogunate. We have come for the Enchanted
Amulet of—wait, what are we looking for, again?”

“I forget what it’s called,” says Marcus. “It lets whoever’s wearing it breathe
underwater, though.”

Bruce Dickinson from Iron Maiden wails something about an albatross.

“Nick, man,” says Marcus, “I feel like I’m listening to English homework. Could we put
on something else?”

Last Stand,’ some epic Viking metal stuff.”

“Nah,” says Marcus, who listens almost exclusively to 90s ska. “That’s got the same
problem. All this Beowulf music. And none of your weird showtuney Bowie shit, either, Tom.”

“Hey,” I say, “I didn’t say anything.”

I listen to plenty of stuff, for the record. I like a lot of new wave: Gary Numan, Devo,
XTC. There’s that XTC song, “Making Plans for Nigel,” where the singer keeps explaining that
the title character’s “whole future is as good as sealed” and that he’s perfectly happy about that future, but you can tell, from the angular churn of the guitars and from the way the drums sound like misfiring howitzers and from the singer’s smarmy British inflection, that Nigel’s a little more ambivalent about the situation. But I know my friends well enough not to make them listen to it.

Darren shakes a twenty-sided die in his right hand, looking around the table from person to person with no discernable expression on his face. His eyes have gone weirdly opaque. I know something is about to work its way out from behind them, but not what. He picks up his glass and takes a swig of vodka-and-Surge, then casts the die. It’s a 14, though all of us aside from Darren are unclear as to what it means.

“I’ll be right back,” he says, and runs upstairs.

We all stare into our glasses for a second. Mine is nearly empty, so I reach for the vodka bottle, but Nick beats me to it. I’m about to launch into a defense of Ziggy Stardust and the whole ’70s-glam project when Darren comes back down the stairs with a stack of CDs in hand. They’ve mostly got sort of abstract-art covers, cubist or expressionist or something. He ejects Nick’s CD-R from the player and inserts the CD from the top of his own stack, leaving the jewel case in the middle of the table. A Fistful of Mingus (UNAUTHORIZED), it says.

“More stuff from my dad’s place,” Darren says. “We’re going to go with this.”

Big loose heavy upright bass comes rumbling out of the stereo, a gatling-gun drum pattern following. Trombones lurch forward, drunk, wandering, a kind of hot red splash of sound.

Darren picks the die back up and says, “Now try to stick with it.”
The saxophones come in, puncturing the rubbery wall of plungered trombone, scattering dissonant glassy knives across the room.

“Dude,” says Marcus, “I’m not sure I can imagine focusing on anything while this music is playing.”

I don’t know if I can either, but I think I like it—it has a kind of rude chaotic searching beauty to it. I get a searing image of myself listening to this stuff ten, fifteen years down the line, long after losing touch with these guys, and I see a bristling energy coming off Darren, his hands shaking at the basement’s resonant frequency as the horns give way to a bass solo.

“Just give it a shot,” he says.

“Okay,” I say. Noticing that Nick is done with the bottle, I make myself another drink.

* * * * *

We’re negotiating with a gnomish gadgeteer named Hubertus Stumbleduck. He’s sitting on top of a huge mechanical pteranodon, with glowing emerald eyes and an amethyst heart and vast clockwork wings that keep extending and compressing, seemingly out of fidgety boredom. Hubertus is supposed to show us how to reach the astral plane, where Mayor Azad’s soul has been stranded for the last hour or so in real time.

“Look, man,” says Nick the Elf, “is there no way you can just take us there yourself? You seem pretty powerful, right? Like, how else could you have made that pterosaur thing?”

“Make a Persuade check,” says Darren, out of character.

Nick the teenage boy genius rolls a twenty-sided die to see if he’s successfully persuaded Hubertus to help us. He rolls a three.

Darren finishes another drink.
“‘Look, you big strapping ingrates,’” says Hubertus the gnome, “‘Do you think I made this flying machine because I thought it would be cool or impressive, or as a show of ingenuity? Do you think I like being a gnome in a full-sized humanoid’s world?’”

“Wait, Darren, let me try something,” says Marcus, but Darren isn’t having it.

“‘I built this thing just to get from point A to point B at a reasonable speed. You people really take for granted that you can ride horses rather than miniature ponies, that you’re more than 3 foot 6 and can actually hold your own in a fight, don’t you? You think I wouldn’t like to be on the cross-country team or the Baseball Furies? Don’t try to win me over with your flattery. This machine is strictly utilitarian, nothing more.’”

The pteranodon spews a plume of blue fire, singeing a nearby thatched roof. Darren makes a kind of wheezing Godzilla sound to approximate the actions.

Marcus the Half-Ogre, losing patience, grips his baseball bat and clenches his teeth. He swings at the pteranodon’s amethyst heart. The die hits the table at the same time that a massive cymbal crash comes in over the stereo. It’s a 19—a critical hit, smashing the amethyst. The pteranodon collapses in a cloud of rainbow sparks, and the gnome turns out to be all talk.

“‘All right,’” he says. “‘You want to reach the astral plane, puncture the veil, see the dimension beyond mortal perception? I have the scrolls you’ll need. It’ll cost you literally all the gold pieces you have—for the scrolls, for the guidance, and, of course, for breaking my sole means of long-distance transportation.’”

* * * * *

We’re on the astral plane, surrounded by magical streams of sentient light. Everything is glowing and immaterial. We hear the mayor’s hapless voice echoing through the air around us, assuring us that his soul is somewhere nearby.
“‘One fun fact about Charlie Mingus,’” says Hubertus the gnome in a drunken slur, his nasal gnome accent slipping a bit, “‘is that he absolutely despised being called “Charlie Mingus.”’

Another fun fact is that he was prone to explosively physical temper tantrums.’”

The words resound through the room, along with a massive spacy vibraphone chord. The sound leaves a smear of protoplasmic energy across the sky above us.

“‘And now you’re hearing some Eric Dolphy,’” says Mayor Azad’s disembodied voice.

“Yeah, look, Darren,” says Marcus the Half-Ogre. “I don’t know that this is for me.”

“‘Your opinion could not possibly be less interesting to us,’” say Hubertus and Mayor Azad and Darren the Dungeon Master, all in strange arrhythmic lockstep with Eric Dolphy’s bass clarinet.

I, Tom of the Yancy Street Shogunate, step forward, trying to find the source of the voice, when an ugly digitized bleep comes from Nick’s corner of the table. Nick is texting. A moment passes before anybody says or does anything. Darren grabs Nick’s phone and takes an enormous swig of vodka-and-Surge, leaving a neon green residue on his upper lip. He walks away towards the bar, looking with perverse fascination at Nick’s phone. As he walks away I realize that I can’t see the basement beyond the table where we’re sitting. The walls are shrouded with astral light and discordant noise, and Darren is just barely visible beyond the setting he created.

“He took my phone,” says Nick. He tries to stand up but instead tumbles over, his legs awkwardly intersecting with the chair’s. “Fucker took my phone.”

“‘Oh girl,’” he intones, his voice going dramatic and Shatnerian like he’s introducing a poem at a coffee-shop. “‘Oh girl you drive my innards allllll a-twitter. Gallbladder and lymph nodes doing the Batusi all up and down.’”
The vibraphone chords keep getting odder and more diffuse, like the vibraphonist is speaking with an alphabet he’s just invented. Nick is trying to stand up but the chair keeps getting in the way, turning over with each attempted movement.

“‘Girl I guess what I’m saying,’” Darren says, “‘and I know you already know what I’m saying—’ Nick! You Don Juan, you Casanova, you. ‘—is that there’s a party next Saturday and, hey, I’d sure as shit rather be there with you than doing what I’m doing now.’”

I hear it in his normal voice, but also in the voices of the enraged were-fish, Hubertus the gnome, Mayor Azad, and the dwarven barkeep from the beginning of the campaign.

“Okay, first of all,” says Marcus, “even leaving aside the question of who you’re texting to, has that been working for you? The whole like Barry White-meets-Dick Shawn kind of thing?!”

“We have very, um, similar styles of humor,” says Nick, finally upright. He wrestles his phone out of Darren’s hand and I see, superimposed onto the two of them, an elven space pirate wrestling dozens of NPCs like there’s never been anything so important in his life.

“Not your damn business anyway,” he adds, the d-sound in “damn” harder than usual.

Darren looks right at each one of us in succession. Nick is manically checking his phone, as if to make sure nothing’s been sabotaged. He tops off his drink, mostly with that vile rotgut vodka this time, and turns off the music.

“‘Kay,” he says, and takes another swig. “We’ll do it your way, starting next week. Corporate-approved rules only, strictly by the book. We’ll listen to eighties Metallica and whatever old Nintendo music you guys want to, and everything will be smooth and fun and unchallenging,” he says, but I know now that it’s too late, that we’ll finish out tonight’s session and slowly lose interest, all future attempts a sort of miserable hangover from the vodka and Surge.
Nick will go to a huge party at Sam Haldeman’s house next Saturday instead of coming here, and Marcus will be here but not really here, and I’ll also be here but not really here, which is admittedly typical by now. At Sam Haldeman’s party, the police will show up, to no real consequences—no arrests, just a warning—and Brandt Varrick, hopped up on Robitussin, will jump out of Sam’s bathroom window in a panic, and Nick will be irrevocably struck by the wild thrill of being a part of society proper. Marcus rolls a twenty-sided die to search for the Mayor’s soul, and only has a couple of weeks left playing this game, and will eventually win a Webby Award for his role in filming an online antacid commercial featuring the slogan, “A calzone, I understand—but the whole pizzeria?!”

For a little longer, at least, I see myself sitting here, trying to do what I can to help Darren, creator and destroyer of worlds, watching him wing it and oversteer and carelessly, drunkenly, intentionally dismantle his own ideas. I roll the die myself—an eighteen, which is a hopeful sign within the game, if nothing else. I look at my forearm, which I can see with absolute clarity. It itches.
Valeria had been hung over all day, and Henny Youngman was on the Friars Club stage in front of her, somehow still tuning his violin. He had been doing it for what felt like hours, long after his backing quintet had finished setting up: turning pegs, scraping strings, scowling each time. Every few tries, the timpanist would stand up and take a step toward the front of the stage, carrying his bag of tuning forks in front of him, and Henny Youngman waved him back to his seat each time.

“I do this all the time,” he would say, or, “I have perfect pitch,” or, “Is it humid in here? It must be the humidity, that’s all.”

“It sounds fine,” the timpanist would say, and that seemed right to Valeria, though she hadn’t had much in the way of musical training: a few years of piano lessons as a child, but nothing beyond that. Still, she thought, Henny Youngman could surely get away with performing even if the strings were slightly out of tune. He had a full quintet accompanying him, and the strings were only there to punctuate the jokes, after all. The comedy was the most vital element of the roast, and she was sure the great Henny Youngman would handle himself well enough with or without a well-tuned violin.

Mostly, though, she was tired of hearing the same screeching note over and over again. Whether in or out of tune, she thought, a comedian repeatedly playing a violin’s high note would never exactly be a pleasant sound. She rubbed her right temple, then stood and said, “I think it will be fine. I doubt anybody will notice. I’m sure the Countess won’t notice, at least, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Henny Youngman shook his head and turned the low string’s tuning peg again.

“It doesn’t sound right,” he said. “Why doesn’t it sound right?”
The roast was still several hours away. Milton Berle, the roastmaster, hadn’t even shown up yet. Countess Báthory was outside somewhere, getting some fresh air with the hussars and the hounds.

* * * * *

Valeria Fekete had been Countess Elizabeth Báthory’s public relations agent for just under a year by now. She would have chosen another assignment if she could. Nobody at the agency ever wanted the Báthory job, exactly. Most of Valeria’s colleagues saw it as something closer to a hazing ritual than a job in any real sense. The executives liked to break in the new hires by giving them a client so toxic, so unpalatable, that if they could make it a year without leaving the industry altogether they would be sufficiently battle-tested for nearly anything else. This had been the procedure for decades.

The Countess, in pursuit of a better public image, had inadvertently destroyed nineteen promising PR careers over the last thirty years. Fourteen agents had left for less demanding, if less prestigious, agencies. One had drowned in the Black Sea a mere two months into her tenure; people initially thought it was a boating accident, before they found the note on her desk. Another was found hanging from the rafters of his cousin’s barn, dangling above a sleeping mule. One had vanished under circumstances too nebulous for the word “mysterious” to suffice: not a word, not a trace of evidence, no signs of distress leading to the disappearance, nothing. Two had found religion, one joining a Catholic monastery and the second moving to Nepal to study the Vedas.

But Valeria was committed, a true believer in the power of public relations. She would rather have taken a different first assignment at the agency, but since this was the job they were offering her, she was determined to help clean up Countess Báthory’s reputation for a hip,
modern American audience. She was reasonably well-equipped for the job, she thought. She was young, and well attuned to contemporary popular culture. She had lived in America for most of her life, since before the War, but her family was Hungarian. She assumed the combination would help her with the job: she knew America, which could help her determine what audiences wanted, and she knew Hungary, which could help her communicate with the famously reticent Countess.

It was important to remind the audience, Valeria thought, that Countess Báthory was a reformed woman. She hadn’t killed any peasants since 1609. Those days were nearly three and a half centuries behind her. She had even issued an apology a year ago, dictated aloud to Valeria’s immediate predecessor, Henry Jensen (who joined the priesthood shortly thereafter):

“Dearest People of the World,

For the last time, people, I am sorry I tortured and murdered hundreds of peasants in my heyday, and I haven’t done it recently, and I had my reasons, not that I’m saying they were good reasons, but they were reasons, and also the commonly repeated estimate of 650 victims has been wildly inflated by enemies both personal and political. So yes, I apologize, and it won’t happen again, certainly not here in America, and please Henry, is this enough for now, I want to get back to my lunch.

Yours,

—Countess Báthory Erzsébet.”

It was a bad statement, and the public received it poorly.

Now that she had been working with the Countess for several months, though, Valeria understood the nuances of her speech—the dry humor, the neurotic self-deprecation, the traces of warmth, even kindness, that occasionally emerged through her cynical aristocratic façade—well
enough to think the apology may have played better spoken aloud than it did on the page. Humor, she thought. Humor was key. If only the people of America could know the Countess the way Valeria did. If they could see her as the complicated person she was: A cruel and sadistic boss? Yes. An allegedly reformed serial killer? Sure. A holdover from a medieval feudal system that most people would agree had no place in modern society? Of course. But human, all the same.

* * * * *

An hour into the roast, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis were doing shtick in the aisles. Martin was playing the straight man—alternately suave and derisive—to Lewis’s flailing manchild, setting Lewis up for punchlines that never quite landed the way Valeria expected them to. Deadpan questions led into pratfalls. Nonverbal yelps punctuated wry observations. Martin crooned the opening lines of “When You’re Smiling” to a stone-faced Countess. Lewis started rummaging through another audience member’s purse, sweating and crosseyed, thwacking himself on the head with his free hand as if swatting imaginary mosquitoes. Milton Berle was onstage, grinning. Valeria found herself laughing, but she wasn’t sure why.

* * * * *

A good roast takes a healthy balance of comedic savagery and performative camaraderie. The idea of the roast is predicated on camaraderie. A group of comedians all take turns celebrating a friend of theirs by mocking him ruthlessly. It’s all in good fun, of course. Otherwise it loses the quality of entertainment; it becomes a tribunal, an interrogation, not a comic performance. The performers need to at least act like they’re friends with one another, and the roastees need to seem like they’re genuinely enjoying their colleagues’ gauntlet of insults. Still, friendships are as mutable as anything else in show business.
A couple of months before the roast, Valeria met for drinks and seafood with Louise Oliver, a friend of hers who was better acquainted with the comedy world. Louise had spent the last few years working as a script supervisor on various television shows, most of them comedies: first *Your Show of Shows*, and now *The Ernie Kovacs Show*. She had helped Sid Caesar punch up his material at the previous year’s roast of Red Buttons—uncredited, of course.

“The problem with this roast idea of yours, as I see it, is that Countess Báthory doesn’t have any real friends in the comedy industry,” said Louise, sipping on her second gin fizz of the night. “It doesn’t work if they don’t know you. That’s the whole point: ‘I’m so comfortable with you that you can say unimaginably cruel things to my face and I’ll still take it in stride.’”

“Well, not *unimaginably* cruel, most likely,” said Valeria. “They’re saying mean things to each other. That’s not so bad.”

Comedians were inventive, she thought—none more so than Ernie Kovacs, Louise’s current boss. But surely they weren’t innovating new depths of cruelty beyond what other people in more naturally sadistic fields had already achieved: dictators, plantation owners, aristocrats, landlords.

“Sure, but you know what I mean,” said Louise. “It’s about trust. If Bob Hope tells Jonathan Winters that when he sits around the house, he really sits *around* the house, he’ll take it in stride, because they’re both pros. That’s just the language they speak. If he says it to Countess Báthory, she might have a harder time taking it as a joke. She has no reason to trust Bob Hope.”

Valeria frowned. “The Countess has maintained her figure very well for somebody her age.”
“Beside the point. It’s a bad joke, Val. I’m a script girl, not a comic. I can’t just ad-lib material like that; I need something on the page to work with. And Bob Hope’s a bad example. He would have meant it. Maybe something more like, ‘So they say Liz bathed in the blood of dozens of local peasants in Csejte, hoping it would give her eternal youth.’

“Then, after a beat, a punchline. I don’t know: ‘Eternal youth through endless slaughter? And here I thought my, ahhh, my ex-wife had some kooky ideas.’ For example. I’m just spit-balling here.”

“Hm,” said Valeria. “I don’t think she would find that funny, either.” The Countess had implied that she would rather not hear jokes about her old bad habits. She was fine with jokes about her wealth, her Hungarian-ness, her own protracted struggle for assimilation into United States culture. (“They could even make jokes about other countries, if they would prefer,” she once suggested. “We used to own Poland, you know. They seem to like Polish jokes for whatever reason.”) But the stories about her serial killing were off limits, even though Valeria knew they were the only reason many of these comics might have heard of the Countess in the first place.

Valeria prodded an oyster with her fork. “So these are still alive?”

“I think so,” said Louise. “Or they were a few minutes ago, at least. They’re alive, pre-shucking.”

“Is that—do they feel anything?”

“No,” said Louise. “I don’t think so. I read something in the New Yorker, an ethicist said the oyster was the most defensible form of meat. No real damage to the environment, no pain inflicted.” She spooned a bit of horseradish onto an oyster. “I mean, not that it really matters, right?”
“Do you think it’s true, though?”

“I don’t know, I’m not an ethicist,” said Louise. She tossed the oyster into her mouth and chewed it up, then added, “Neither ethicist nor comedian, but that hated middle ground between the two: the script girl.”

“These jobs!” agreed Valeria. “Imagine getting to be an ethicist. Just knowing what’s ethically right in any situation. Somehow getting paid to tell other people what they should be doing.” She shook some vinegar onto an oyster, then ate it. It tasted like vinegar, mostly.

“Do you think Mr. Kovacs could perform?” she said. “His show always has plenty of interesting ideas. I’d imagine he could come up with something funny.”

“Ernie doesn’t really like roasts,” said Louise. “He’s always busy ‘conceptualizing’ something or another. Does she have any friends who might want to perform? That’s a good way to fill out the roster, give the roast a little intimacy. They don’t have to be comedians. We have writers who can help them out.”

* * * *

Vlad “The Impaler” Țepeș, the former voivode of Wallachia, was at the podium in full regalia. He had the microphone in his left hand, awkwardly clasping it in a bejeweled gauntlet that was twice its size. In his right hand he held a lance that towered over the mic stand, its tip stained brown with what must have been centuries-old blood.

“I’m telling you, folks,” he bellowed, “I don’t know why I’m here. I never really knew Erzsébet very well. I was in Wallachia, she was further west. Plus, I was nearly a hundred years dead by the time she was around. I knew her great-grandfather, though—a pansy, a coward. I heard he went on to marry a Turk! Is that true, Erzsébet? Do you have the blood of the Ottoman coursing through your veins?”
He pounded the base of his lance on the stage and let out an ecstatic whoop, closer to a war cry than a laugh. The Countess leaned over and asked Valeria, “Why is he here? I barely know him. We’ve met a few times, but we’re not friends, exactly.”

Valeria started sinking into her seat. “I’m sorry, Your Magnificence. We had a slot left to fill, and it was either him or Gilles De Rais, who I know you wouldn’t have wanted.”

“Jesus Christ, Fekete,” said the Countess. “Are we that desperate? An uncouth warlord or a French pederast?”

“You know that you have a reputation to overcome. That’s why we’re doing this in the first place. These are the people who would answer our calls.”

The Countess looked to Valeria and said, “I suppose you made the right choice. Vlad is a buffoon, but if I never have to talk to Gilles de Rais again it will be too soon.”

Vlad was rhythmically thumping the lance against the stage, trying to lead the crowd in a schoolyard taunt: “Erzsébet is Turk-ish, Erzsébet is Turk-ish!”

Bob Hope eagerly joined in, but he was the only one who seemed comfortable with it. Milton Berle’s grin was still plastered to his face, now looking more rictal than joyous. Even Don Rickles, no stranger to racial insult humor, looked unusually tense. Jerry Lewis pantomimed an epileptic seizure and tumbled headfirst over a railing. The chant petered out after a couple of repetitions. Vlad, blushing with defeat, returned to his coffin at stage left.

* * * * *

The value of a roast, from Louise’s perspective, wasn’t just that it finds the friendly subtext in mockery, but that it exposes the cruelty inherent in friendship, consequently hardening the roastee’s defenses against real, unmitigated cruelty. Modern comedy had emerged, at least in part, as a means of articulating fear. It wasn’t a coincidence that almost all of the major
American comedians were Jewish. There were some exceptions—abstract conceptualists like Ernie Kovacs, straight-laced WASPs like Bob Hope—but most of the field had risen out of the Catskills circuit, where marginalized performers had carved out a niche where they could vent their anxieties. Comedy was a way to simultaneously confront and escape the atrocities that the rest of the world was ready to inflict upon them. In that sense, the roast was an inoculation: *This is the world. It's not getting any nicer. I'm doing you a favor. You're welcome. You're welcome.*

* * * * *

Sir Krisztían Balázs of Montauk Point (formerly of Sárvár) had been Countess Báthory’s most trusted hussar since he had helped her escape Austro-Hungary during the War. Now he was at the podium, trying something new. Valeria had encouraged Sir Krisztían to perform because he was loyal to the Countess, even though she had never heard him say anything *funny*, exactly. She decided that his unquestioning loyalty would be enough. He might not have many insults for the Countess, but he would at least feel compelled to roast the other participants. He had fought the French, the Russians, the Ottomans; surely he could channel some of his patriotism here at the Friars Club. He hunched forward, leaning toward the microphone.

“You, sir,” he said, pointing to Don Rickles. He looked around the room and said, “This man is professionally unkind, for a job. He thinks his unkindness will protect him. It will not.”

Don Rickles laughed and said, “If you say so.”

“Dean Martin,” continued Sir Krisztían, “You can sing, but the songs fail to ignite my heart. Why would the moon hit my eye like a big pizza pie? Does pizza hit eyes often? Or does that only happen to”—he paused, then doubled his volume—“*Italians*?”

Valeria winced. There was a certain joie-de-vivre, a degree of lightness and finesse, to Don Rickles’ racial material that Sir Krisztían didn’t seem to get.
“Jonathan Winters,” he continued. “What can one say? You are truly sitting around. I am sorry if that offends. I am sorry. Jerry Lewis, please leave. You are, to me, an annoying person. Henny Youngman, why do you and Jack Benny both play violin? I am not joking. Please tell me. Was one violin not enough? Explain.”

“Well,” said Jack Benny, “I—”

“After the show, perhaps,” said Sir Krisztian. He wasn’t laughing. “Sid Caesar: Your Show of Shows? No, it is not my show. It is yours—Sid Caesar’s. Phil Silvers, you are not this ‘Bilko’ Sergeant you claim to be on television. Reserve some valor for the real warriors, you fraudulent coward.”

“It’s a character, a comedy character. Fiction,” said Phil Silvers, but Sir Krisztian wasn’t hearing it.

“Who are any of you to mock the Countess?” he said, his forehead throbbing with righteous contempt. “A woman of such noble standing, who has made her mistakes, yes, but apologized for them. What gives you lowborn entertainers the right to question her actions?”

Milton Berle walked to the podium, still grinning. He gestured toward the microphone and whispered something to Sir Krisztian, but Valeria couldn’t hear it clearly. Sir Krisztian grabbed the microphone more firmly, his knuckles whitening.

“Milton Berle. ‘Roastmaster.’ ‘Uncle Milty’—hah. We have all heard stories about your prodigious genital scope, but you just look like another TV person to me. The reputation of your manhood, enormous though it may be, will outlive both you and your work. And so will Countess Báthory Erzsébet. She will outlive all of you.”

The Countess looked serene and comfortable for the first time all evening, but Valeria knew the roast needed to continue as planned. She stood up and walked to the podium.
“It’s fine, Sir Krisztián,” she said. “It’s like you said. She’ll survive this. It’s fine.”

* * * * *

The best moments at roasts were usually the most surprising, according to Louise. A cutting ad-lib, an unscripted back-and-forth, a moment of excessive drunken revelry. The more organic the surprise, the better. If the roastee was truly, profoundly caught off guard—then there would be a roast for the ages.

* * * * *

After an uncharacteristically sedate set from Jonathan Winters, a younger woman walked to the podium from stage right.

“Hey, folks,” she said. “My name’s Zsófia Halász, and I’m kind of new to comedy. I’ve been, ah, kicking around a while, though. I’ve known Countess Báthory for a few hundred years, since she hired me to help care for the horses at Castle Csejte.”

Something was off. Valeria hadn’t booked this comic. The Countess was looking paler than usual. Sir Krisztián was reddening, pulsating in his seat. Blood started to run, slowly, down Zsófia’s forehead—not much, but just a trickle of dark red running from her hairline between her eyebrows.

“It was a relief when I died, you know,” said Zsófia. “I was sick of everything. First the poverty, the constant hunger, the fear of Ottoman invaders. My parents had no real choice but to let the Countess hire me. I don’t blame them. They needed to live just like anybody else. They couldn’t have known. We all trusted the royalty in those days. We were peasants. We didn’t know any better. I’m not sure if people now have the same excuse.”

Her entire forehead was stained red now, the blood somehow caked solid to her face. She blinked and her eyes turned jaundice yellow.
“Fekete,” whispered the Countess, “Who is this and why is it here?”

Valeria shook her head. She had no idea. She wanted to stand up, reclaim control of the roast, but she was fixed to her seat, somehow bound in place. She looked at Milton Berle, who seemed to be having the same experience. He looked nervous, even frightened, but he wasn’t moving.

“Death was also a relief from, you know, from all the torture. And, ha, I’m not just talking about the beatings, or the needles, or the constant emotional belittlement, or the gradual systematic flaying.” By now her cardigan was deep red, soaked, glistening. Below where her left hand gripped its edge, the podium itself started to develop what looked like lacerations in flesh, somehow peeling open and resealing. It took on an odd, almost respiratory rhythm: slash open, heal shut, slash open, heal shut.

“I mean,” she continued, “have you heard this lady talk? Frankly, folks, the sound of her voice is just torture—enough to make anybody yearn for a swift and brutal demise.”

Zsófia paused. The room was silent. Countess Báthory’s eyes were wide open, vexed but fully alert. Valeria saw an opportunity to do the job nobody before her had managed.

“It’s a joke,” she said to the Countess. “Laugh. It doesn’t matter if it’s funny. Just laugh.”

This moment is, no doubt, familiar to you. You learned about it in history class. You may have seen the reenactment, if you have ever visited Báthory Hall in Manhattan. Countess Báthory started laughing. It seemed genuine, Valeria thought—the laughter emerging from her throat like something was forcing it out, exorcising it. Countess Báthory Erzsébet’s laughter echoed through the Friars Club, and the whole audience, both live and televised, knew she had finally become an American.
4 MORE STORIES ABOUT DISAPPOINTMENT AND TV

Marty is standing with a mild slouch in front of his favorite company policy poster, giving a new quarterly variation on his classic customer-service spiel. The poster shows a giant outline of a man, featureless aside from the dozens of tiny, smiling stick figures swimming around its interior. A caption underneath the outline says CUSTOMERS ARE OUR LIFE’S BLOOD. The stick figures look a little confused but, I guess, basically happy.

“The important thing you always, always, always, need to keep in mind, and I can’t possibly stress this enough,” Marty says, “is that customer satisfaction is the most important thing to keep in mind at all times. Our company has a long and distinguished history of caring about people, and it’s that history—that people-first philosophy—that truly separates us from the competition.”

He’s doing that thing he does at every quarterly meeting, the tic where he tepidly karate-chops the air in time with the last three syllables of each sentence for emphasis—a softer, mustachioed Steven Seagal, carefully swatting away any specks of uncertainty. Even though Marty turned down the P.A. to the quietest volume before the meeting started, we can still hear the insufferable chirp of Billy Joel’s “Uptown Girl” weaving through the training room. I think it’s having an unconscious effect on his karate-chopping rhythm, but I figure the jury’s out until I can see if his cadence changes when the inevitable Steely Dan follow-up starts.

“And to give you an idea of the math: look at the diagram on the poster here. One hundred percent of our sales are conducted with customers. If you look at the other end of it, zero percent are conducted with non-customers. Now, I’m no statistician, but that’s a pretty big difference, right?”
“Wow,” I say, because nobody else is going to. Looking around, I can see four of the dozen other staff members—or “cousins,” to use the company’s familial jargon—in the room rolling their eyes at the perceived sycophancy, but whatever. Validation is a good feeling, and I figure sometimes even Assistant Lieutenant Customer Service Managers deserve to feel okay.

“I know, right?” Marty says. “Jeff gets it.”

His voice drops about a third of an octave, as if to remind us that he is technically our boss, even if he’s only a couple of heads above me on the immeasurably high corporate totem pole.

“Now, all this being the case, we’re going to try out some new policies to maximize customer satisfaction. We’ve gotten some studies in pretty recently. You know, we’ve always got those call-in surveys on the receipts, and Corporate’s got a number of behavioral psychologists on the payroll collating the results. But the studies, they’re indicating that we might’ve been a little off with our old approach. The Customer Service department sells an experience, a kind of satisfaction. Grocery, Produce, et cetera—they handle the actual, physical products. In our case, though, we’re here to convince the customers that they can come to us to get what they want, whether that’s a steak, a bicycle, or—well, here’s the weird part, and where our department can really shine—a bit of vindication. The studies have been showing that an increasing percentage of customers view us as obstacles more than anything else. When they see us, they’re not thinking, ‘Oh, this guy’s here to help me find what I want as quickly and easily as possible.’ They see the uniform and, more often than you might expect, they think, ‘Boy, if this place didn’t have employees keeping an eye out, I probably wouldn’t even have to pay for this stuff.’ No matter how helpful we try to be, we’re basically obstacles as far as they’re concerned.”
He gulps. It’s barely audible, but his Adam’s apple bobs in preparation for whatever’s on its way.

“So we’re going to try something, see how it works out. Try to gauge where a customer’s coming from and what kind of experience they’re expecting: are they being rude or antagonistic? According to these studies—I’m not, you know, the guy running the studies—but according to them, certain customers will not leave fully satisfied until they’ve been proven right one way or the other. They want to feel like they’re overcoming some kind of opposition. So if they come in here looking for a fight, assuming you’re an unhelpful asshole, then, well…

“Heck,” he says, walking over to the storage closet. “We’ve got a video here that could probably explain it better than I could.”

He wheels out the store’s official Training Television and turns it on. A brief, cutesy Casio jingle plays over an incongruously VHS-grainy title card that says THE CUSTOMER AND YOU: SOMETIMES IT’S A COMPLICATED THING. Two former mid-level game show hosts whose careers peaked over a decade ago enter a sound stage designed to look like a supermarket aisle. The former game show host with the now-graying beard is wearing one of our store’s customary green-and-orange uniform aprons—made partially complete by a blank name-tag—and inspecting a seasonal end-cap display of Arbor Day-themed merchandise.

The second former game show host, the one with tiny Heinrich Himmler eyeglasses and an archaically snooty Middle-Atlantic accent, walks up to him and says, “Hey there, you imbecile. Can any of the subhuman proles in this establishment direct me to the canned garbanzo beans? I just got here, and haven’t started looking for anything yet, but I’m already angry at you—you and your disgusting moustache.
“In fact,” he adds, with a pointed glance at the camera, “you might say I’m being irrational.”

The camera slowly zooms in on the one with the moustache and the apron, and his disembodied voice—exuberant and Midwestern, and coated in soothing post-production reverb to signify internal monologue—says, “Golly, this customer seems riled up about something. I’ll help him find the garbanzo bean aisle, of course, but it doesn’t look like that’ll be enough to keep him satisfied.”

The ‘customer’ glowers, red-faced, as a steam-whistle sound effect plays.

“I’ve got it,” says the disembodied voice.

The ‘teammate’ rolls his eyes, drops the Arbor Day gift basket he’s been holding onto the floor, beckons for the ‘customer’ to follow him, and with a sarcastic eyebrow flourish says, “Did you try looking in Aisle 63’s Northern Quadrant, under the sign that says ‘Canned Beans’? You know, I’ve got more than enough on my plate as it is without you schmucks interrupting me with every last miniscule problem. Ugh. C’mon, I guess I could show you where they are.”

They both exit, stage right, and the scene star-wipes to a shot of the two of them standing Aisle 63, right in front of the canned garbanzo beans.

“See?” says the ‘teammate.’ “You could’ve easily done that without having to bother me about it.”

“Wow,” says the ‘customer.’ “Not only did I find what the item I was looking for, but I also gained a feeling of satisfaction and increased self-worth from having found the item despite your incredibly rude and unhelpful bearing. Thanks, whatever your name is!”

The ‘teammate’ slowly winks at the camera and says, “No problem.”
Marty turns off the TV. I still can’t figure out what shows used to feature the two former mid-level game show hosts. I think my parents used to watch one of them after dinner.

“Do you see what I mean?” says Marty. “The customer is still always right, of course, but if part of making them feel like they’re right is giving them a hard time—when that’s what they expect and, on some private level, want—then I guess what the highers-up have decided is that we should give them a hard time. It’s case by case, of course, and obviously we can’t be liable for any physical altercations, but if you think the customer is looking for an argument or a snide attitude, you should go ahead and engage. It’ll give ’em some… I think ‘catharsis’ is the word?”

And he’s going on like this in that half-authoritative-half-pathetic voice and I’m just looking at the poster and thinking: God, but doesn’t that hollow outline stuffed with tiny swimming people look like a giant effigy, sitting there waiting for immolation while “Hey Nineteen” wafts into the room at a near-ambient volume?

* * * * *

When I get back to the Service Station, Officer Frank Piesiewicz is there waiting for me, leaning against the counter at the base. Officer Frank is one of the several off-duty cops we hire to patrol the store. He’s been working here for about six months now, but I’m honestly not sure if he does much; he spends, as far as I can tell, most of his time standing up here talking with me. Right now he has an eye fixed on a customer—a white guy, blond, about thirtyish—who’s drifting down Aisle 17.

Frank is idly scratching the left corner of his mustache, evidently trying to get a bead on the customer’s intentions. I think I might be the only male employee here without a mustache. It’s like the dress code’s facial hair restrictions—no beards or long sideburns are permitted, but neatly trimmed mustaches are okay—spur everybody to grow a mustache, even if they wouldn’t
otherwise have even considered growing facial hair at all. As if the restriction itself brings out a
timid strain of almost-rebellion: they don’t want facial hair until somebody tells them they can’t
have it, and even then they’re only ready to tiptoe right up to the limit of what’s permitted.

“How’d the meeting go?” says Frank, looking away from the customer only after I’ve
been standing in front of him for a full minute.

I shrug.

“I think they want us to be aggressively rude to customers now,” I say slowly, like
chewing each syllable will make it easier for me to parse the logic. “Seems like some convoluted
reverse-psychology stuff.”

“What?”

“The meeting was pretty jargon-y, but I think the basic thrust was that some customers
don’t only want to buy products, but actually want to feel like they’re accomplishing something
by buying products. And according to Corporate, one way to help them do that is to be…prickly,
I guess?”

“Ah,” he says. “So it’s like a heel turn in wrestling.”

“I’ve got to admit that I never really watched wrestling,” I say. “I don’t know—it always
struck me as kind of dumb and pointlessly macho. Not for me.”

“Well!” he says, and then, gesturing to the mostly empty space around him, adds,
“Sounds like Jim Rockford here’s cracked the case of the century, everybody. Yeah, it’s a little
dumb, sure, but what isn’t? I tried watching that show you’re so big on—what is it, Miranda Van
Hammersmith, right? Couldn’t make it past the theme song.”

“Melinda Von Peppercorn,” I say. “And that’s different.”
It is, and the theme song is a pure dose of concentrated joy. I will hear no dissenting voices on the matter.

“But yeah, back to wrestling: The Iron Sheik wasn’t really a bad guy, probably,” he says. “But in order for Hulk Hogan to seem like a big heroic winner—I mean, think about it, Hulk Hogan’s not that likeable—the guy he was pinning had to present himself as totally disgusting and mean-spirited. And stereotypically foreign, but, eh, it was a different time.”

“So we’re basically, in this analogy, we’re supposed to be the Iron Sheik: come across like absolute tools so that, when customers finally get what they want, they can feel like…Hulk Hogan?”

“Sure, or it doesn’t have to be wrestling. Everybody needs a villain.”

“Like you and your Dick Wolf fixation?”

“That’s different,” he says. It’s not.

“Excuse me?” says the customer Officer Frank had been watching out for earlier. Apparently he couldn’t find what he was looking for on Aisle 17, and worked his way back to the Service Station without us noticing. The things you miss when you’re on the ground floor.

“Where could I find food processors?” he says. His voice is high and earnest, not at all the confrontational growl I had been bracing myself for since leaving the meeting. I guess the new policy will have to wait.

“Sorry to bother you,” he adds. “It’s just that this is my first time here, and this place is so big.”

“Oh, that’s easy,” I say, putting on my typical retail smile. “To get to the appliance section you’ll want to keep going the way you were going, down Aisle 17. Halfway down the aisle you’ll see an alleyway heading right. Take it and keep going about, say, two-thirds of a
mile. Once you hit Aisle 78, make a left. You’ll probably notice the floor shaking a little bit as you reach the end of the aisle, but it’s a natural phenomenon—just keep going. Food processors will be just past the microwaves, along the wall past the end of the aisle."

“Wow,” he says.

“You know, it might take a while on foot,” I say. “I’d recommend checking out one of our recumbent motorcarts, or—if you want to hold on a minute, I think the next monorail should be pulling up any moment now. Whatever you do, though, don’t follow Aisle 17 to the end. I know it seems simpler to just go the back of the store and then head to the corner, but that way’ll lead you past the Dockyard, and the stevedores get rowdy this time of day.”

I’m not sure how or why we have a Dockyard in this store, come to think of it. We’re totally landlocked, for one thing. It seems like once the place was built it just started taking on the features of a city; not any city in particular, and certainly not Atlanta, but just city as a concept, like it’s inching, with no intention of our own, towards some kind of platonic ideal. It’s a supermarket, yes, but a self-contained economy and culture has sprung up within its walls, totally functional and independent. Impromptu art demonstrations happen in the frozen food aisle; crust-punks squat in the sporting goods section. Corporate has tried to chase them out, but with only six or seven cops working here at any time, it’s not that easy to maintain control.

“Well, you know,” says the customer, “I guess I could use the exercise. I’ll just go on foot.”

When he’s gone, Officer Frank says, “Want to see my powers of observation in action? Some real detectivery?”

And now out comes Frank’s pet fixation.

“Sure,” I say. “Why not?”
“That guy you were just talking to,” he says. “He occasionally drops about six months of his ample salary to hire a high-end escort. He takes her to a luxury suite at the Ritz-Carlton, and, when they get there, he does dozens of push-ups for her to vocally admire. Then, they watch Wong Kar-Wai movies together. Eventually, after intercourse—perfunctory, distracted, done out of a sense of obligation on both sides—he whispers facts about Civil War-era submarine technology into her ear until they both fall asleep.”

“What, have you taken him in before? He seemed pretty normal to me.”

“No,” he says triumphantly. “He just fits the profile. There are all kinds of things there if you look closely enough.”

He pulls a notebook out of his pocket and shows me The Profile, located on page fifty-six. One of the sketches matches the guy almost perfectly, and the description mirrors Frank’s almost verbatim.

“Huh,” I say. “You know, that reminds me, I’ve got Crow’s Nest duty up top in a minute. Call me if you need me.”

Some of us call the Customer Service Station, the enormous watchtower overlooking the whole store, the “Crow’s Nest.” I guess the idea is that it makes surveillance duty more escapist—it works for me, but I’m not sure if the principle would apply to that many people. I board the elevator, thinking about swashbuckling nautical adventures, and see as the doors close that Frank’s already mumbling to himself about his theories.

Officer Frank has a whole hell of a lot of theories, the biggest and most central of which is his insistence that Dick Wolf and his Law & Order empire are directly responsible for his
career difficulties. On that, consider the following, patched together from months’ worth of paraphrased diatribes (or the parts I could use, at least):

The culmination of two generations of Chicago police, Frank Piesiewicz always knew he had an instinctive knack for both deductive and inductive reasoning. Growing up he idolized the Great Triumvirate of fictional detectives—Holmes, Columbo, and Batman—and knew, without a doubt, that he’d eventually be working for Chicago’s Homicide Unit, maybe even Major Crimes. He enlisted as a patrol officer after college (Criminal Justice, Northwestern, mostly covered by academic scholarships) and a brief, exemplary stint at the Recruit Academy.

Somebody in a position of authority would surely notice his innate talent for solving mysteries, his obsessive eye for minute details and the deftness with which he weaved those details into cohesive portraits. He was, and remains, immensely capable of noticing a stray bit of otherness about a scene—a skewed shadow, a staleness to the air, a frayed strand of polyester—and extrapolating from there to until the blanks are made un-blank, the answers clear and tidy and perfectly formed. He was right to think his natural aptitude, familial history with the force, and unflappable work ethic would garner his superiors’ attention, but history intervened in 1990, when Dick Wolf dropped the first season of Law & Order upon an unsuspecting public.

This is the part where the veins in Officer Frank’s neck swell until the whole neck looks like a knot of bright red bridge cable. His mustache actually bristles with apoplectic defiance when he starts talking about Law & Order.

But anyway: after Law & Order became a ubiquitous, network-swallowing hit—initiating a seismic wave of other procedural shows with a similar blend of formulaic artifice and ripped-from-the-headlines verisimilitude—people came to expect a kind of entertainer’s polish from their homicide detectives. By the mid-90s, when Frank was being groomed for a promotion,
friends and relatives of homicide victims nationwide were expressing disappointment at their local P.D.s’ lack of panache. They wanted detectives with symmetrical faces and solid jaw-lines, with the kind of readymade mordant wit that comes naturally to comedians and fictional characters (who, of course, have the benefit of a heavily worked-over script providing the quips).

“I know what you’re thinking,” he always says at this point. “Jerry Orbach: not exactly the youngest or most chiseled of T.V. detectives. But he had gravitas, damn it! He was dignified, a Tony-winning actor. How could I possibly live up to that level of expectation?”

The homicide units’ dwindling public approval ratings were starting to take a grievous toll on police budgets. Out of desperation, in 1996 the Chicago Police Department instituted a de facto “charisma quota,” barring potential detectives from getting promoted if they were deemed insufficiently good-looking, funny, or charming. It was the third department in the country to implement such a policy, after Los Angeles and New York.

Still, the Major sympathized with Frank and others like him: he wasn’t good-looking or particularly charming, at least not in the ready-for-prime-time sense, but he had a proven record as Good Police and a promising analytical mind. The Department enlisted Frank and several other potential detectives in a rigorous program of stand-up comedy open-mic nights and improv classes at Second City. The idea was to whip their extant recruits into a kind of fighting shape, charisma-wise, so they could continue to promote from within rather than filling the Homicide Unit with superficially clever actors who (in Frank’s words) “wouldn’t have been able to figure out who killed Lee Harvey Oswald, and that happened right there in front of everybody.”

It didn’t take. Frank could never quite stick the landing in his attempts at stand-up: he could captivate a crowd for maybe a joke or two, but he let that initial rush, the thrill of successful performance, get to his head too early in each set. Consequently, his delivery would
get stilted, rushed, or otherwise just a few inches short of effective. His improv efforts were even less successful. He never learned to stay in character or fully pay attention to his collaborators. To put it in improv terms, his “Yes, and”-ing instincts were desperately lacking.

“I’m just not that funny or adaptable,” he’ll say. “What can I say? I’m a cop, not an actor.”

He eventually got frustrated with Chicago, or they got frustrated with him. Not that Atlanta’s treating him any better, really—he’s twice my age and still having to work at a supermarket to make some extra cash, after all—but I like having him around. His presence usually makes the day go by a little faster.

In the intervening years, Law & Order has led to half a dozen spinoffs and at least three times as many imitations (CSI, NCIS, TNT’s sundry procedural shows, et cetera), and Officer Frank has strong opinions about every single one. Homicide rates in major cities have predictably skyrocketed since the charisma-quotas, but—maybe less predictably, I don’t know—so have approval ratings. That’s his take on the whole saga, anyway.

“And now the Sexy Homicide franchise is on its third spinoff,” he’s been saying in his latest variation on the rant. “You notice how since that show started, detectives have been working with more and more top buttons unbuttoned on their shirts? Pretty soon they won’t even bother pretending to investigate anything at all. They’ll just show up, waggle their chest hair around, maybe do some magic tricks or lead the bereaved in a round of karaoke.”

And then, always, his voice crumpling into something unrecognizably small: “You know, it’s not that I don’t like what I do, or that I think it’s beneath me or anything like that. It’s still an important job. So it’s not about prestige, and it’s not about respect. It’s just that I would’ve been really good at the other thing.”
I get home at 11:30ish after an otherwise-pretty-uneventful day and Lauren, my roommate, is zoned out, blogging about last night’s episode of our show, *Melinda Von Peppercorn: Debutante of the High Seas*.

“How was work,” she says, not looking up from her laptop.

“You know how there are usually weird days or boring days?” I say. “Somehow, today was both.”

“Drag,” she says, typing furiously.

Now, I describe *Melinda Von Peppercorn: Debutante of the High Seas* as “our show” even though in a very deep and personal and subjective sense it feels like *my* show, like something that was not only made for me but actually, in a way, crafted from extracted pieces of my unconscious mind. Still, I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t Lauren’s show first; I got hooked halfway through the first season by catching bits of episodes she was watching as I got home from work.

Besides, neither of us is at all unique in feeling strongly about the show. Its ratings have always struggled, but Lauren and I are part of what feels like a tremendous nationwide movement of devoted fans. Tumblr, Reddit, whatever you care to name—it seems like *Debutante* is the biggest thing to hit the internet in years. We’re both members of a LiveJournal group devoted to it, recapping, dissecting, and expanding upon each episode within a few days of the original airdate. It’s funny: Livejournal has mostly been a wasteland for years now, but this group is thriving.

Look, the premise of this show probably sounds dumb if you haven’t seen it, but I swear that the experience of watching it borders on a kind of spiritual transcendence. Basically,
Melinda Von Peppercorn is a high school junior by day, and a seafaring adventurer by night. At school she has to worry about typical high-school concerns: who, if anybody, will take her to prom? Will she ever be able to get Mr. Wilkins, the grumpy trigonometry teacher, off her back? How will she prepare for her AP exams on top of everything else? And, of course, at night she has all sorts of Harryhausen-esque monsters and morally ambiguous pirates to contend with. Can she reconcile the two without compromising her secret identity? It sounds cliché, I know, but there’s so much heart in the execution—such witty dialogue, such ebullient performances, such an infectious theme song—that it’s hard to watch without becoming obsessed.

I look over Lauren’s shoulder. She always takes a more formal approach to her analyses, compared to my more plot- and character-driven takes. Right now she’s dissecting a sequence from the latest episode:

When Melinda and Little Kevin enter the Cavern of the Cyclopes searching for the Haunted Trident at 16’34”, their conversation grows progressively more visually disjunctive and fragmented—cutting haphazardly between the two characters, the Trident, and the HyperClops lurking in the shadows—until, at 17’04”, the cuts reach a fever pitch of borderline incoherence, smashing the 180-degree rule with anarchic glee. In doing so, [episode director Stephen] Parkerson is freeing us from any conventional narrative suturing effect: when there’s literally no perceptible visual continuity, what can we do but invent our own diegetic space to inhabit with Melinda, Kevin, and the gang? What they’re doing here is a heroic feat of formal liberation, and
regardless of what [fledgling National Broadcasting System executive Timmy] Mackendrick may think, it deserves to be appla—

“Hey,” says Lauren. “I can’t really think with you standing right there like that.”

“Sorry,” I say, “but what did Timmy Mackendrick do now?”

Timmy Mackendrick is an eleven-year-old shithead—apparently some kind of business prodigy, but a shithead all the same—who’s had it out for MVP:DotHS since he took over N.B.S. as the primary shareholder earlier this year. He doesn’t get it, and makes no secret of his disdain during network press releases. He would cancel the show in a heartbeat if the fans weren’t so outspoken about it.

“Just being a dick, but what else is new?” she says. “Today he threatened to move the show to the Thursday morning death slot. He’s just taunting us, though, I think.”

I can only hope so. Lauren seems confident that this show is some sort of veiled avant-garde exercise, and I can only take her word for it. Her media literacy is leagues beyond mine. Still, to me this show’s real value is as an aspirational myth. It’s nothing short of miraculous that a guy like me can get home from work and sincerely dream about being a Debutante of the High Seas, and it honestly scares the shit out of me that my dreams are sitting in the hands of an eleven-year-old sociopath.

* * * * *

A few days later I’m on Aisle 95, checking the shelves with an industrial-grade flashlight to make sure all the towels are in the right place. The crimson towels are in a neatly-ordered stack next to the brick reds—good—but the Spanish reds are in a suspiciously disheveled heap. I
shine the flashlight between them, and it lands upon a teenager with a shaved head and a spiked denim vest, sleeping nestled deep on the shelf.

“Hey, kid,” I say. “You’ve got to go find somewhere else to sleep. Somebody’s going to come looking for towels eventually, and we can’t have them finding you squatting on the shelves.”

The punk rolls off the shelf with a quick burst of energy, knocking three different shades of red towels flying into the middle of the aisle.

“Don’t disrupt my reality, pig,” he says in an affected East London accent. He puts his fingers between his lips and whistles a Discharge riff. Seven other punks come speedily crawling from the other nearby shelves, in one swift act destroying the towel section’s careful sense of symmetry and order.

“Well,” says the first punk, “it looks like Big Brother here wants us elsewhere, so it’s time we beat feet, innit?”

This kid is trying way too hard to maintain an accent—he pronounces “brother” as “bruv-vah,” like he’s doing a Michael Caine impression. The whole gang dashes northward, a cyclone of Doc Martens and band-logo patches. As I’m cleaning up the mess, a customer ambles up to me, rubbing his scalp with his index finger. He mumbles something, but I can’t make it out beyond a general tone of hung-over exhaustion.

“Sorry?” I say, looking up from a pile of scarlet terrycloth.

“Motor oil,” he says. “Are you deaf?”

“Sir, I was just, ah, kind of preoccupied, sorry,” I say.

I think about the former mid-level game show host with the graying moustache, and about Melinda Von Peppercorn. I try to imagine the customer as a scurvy sea-dog, or a ravenous
HyperClops, or even as a former mid-level game show host with Himmler glasses. The customer sighs, and I remember that the host with the glasses had a show focusing on *Fortune* magazine-related trivia, and that Melinda has managed to forge valuable—if tenuous—alliances with even the scurviest of sea-dogs as circumstances have demanded, and that I’ve never been much good at direct confrontation either way.

“The motor oil is thirteen aisles west and about half a block south of here,” I say. “Here, you can take my motorcart if you need.”

“Whatever,” the customer says. He lurches himself into the cart and starts riding westward.

* * * * *

Marty tries to creep up behind me atop the Crow’s Nest as I’m surveying the horizon about a week later. I hear him coming as soon as he steps out of the elevator: his shoes always make a wet slapping sound when he walks, which I still can’t fathom. The floor isn’t wet, and presumably neither is he.

“Jeff,” he says, lilting slightly, like we’re just a couple of guys who have conversations with each other. He’s standing next to a box that’s maybe six inches taller than he is and four taller than me.

“Marty.”

“We’ve got a new directive from Corporate.”

He’s toned down his typically cheery countenance, like he’s legitimately upset about something.
“They’ve decided,” he says, “that we don’t actually need anybody working at the Station. The psychologists have gone a little, ah, a little beyond what they said last time: now it looks like they think customers are actually primarily looking for somebody to vent at.”

He opens the box and adds, “I don’t really agree with this decision, but I guess there’s a reason I’m not a behavioral psychologist.”

Standing before me is a life-sized foam dummy. Its face looks like mine, but fixed in a permanent, condescending scowl.

“Marty, what is this?” I say, as if it isn’t completely obvious.

“Well, we can’t really—legally, I mean—ask you to subject yourself to physical violence, or the level of emotional abuse you would also have to deal with under the new policy. It would open up all sorts of liability and insurance problems, and nobody wants that, right?”


“Right, right. The new new policy.”

“Just to be clear, you’re actually replacing me with a dummy replica of myself. Is that even legal?”

“Look on the bright side,” he says, smiling weakly. “You’ll be getting a monthly commission—not quite what you’re making now, sure, but still—for the use of your likeness. But, yes, it is fully legal under the terms of the contract you signed when you first applied here.”

And then I’m walking to the elevator and getting into the elevator and pressing the button that will take the elevator to the ground floor and Marty is mumbling some ineffectual apology and Paul McCartney is singing about “simply havin’ a Wonderful Christmastime” even though it’s the middle of June.

* * * * *
At the bottom, Frank is again looking down Aisle 17.

“Hey, look,” he says, pointing down the aisle. “The Chungking Kid is back.”

“I think I just got fired,” I say, trying to get to the exit before an aneurysm kicks in.

“Wait. ‘Chungking Kid’?”

“Oh,” he says, looking embarrassed. “My comic instincts fail me yet again. I was trying a pop culture reference. It’s the guy I was staking out here last week. I think—sorry, did you just say you got fired?”

“I think they’re trying to reduce their overhead and pass it off as ‘improved customer service,’” I say.

“Well, at least you’re young. I’m sure you’ll be able to find something else somewhere. I’m stuck on the beat, looking at potential long-term stings like this fuckin’ guy”—he points at the customer on Aisle 17, who’s carefully examining the label on a carton of Goldfish crackers—“and not being able to really do anything about it. Man, what I wouldn’t give to catch him in the act.

“I’ll tell you what, though. I think I smell something funny about this whole firing thing. This thing goes all the way to the top, without a doubt.”

And like that he’s off on another private case, even as I’m backing away towards the exit desperately trying to get some of what passes for fresh air these days.

* * * * *

On the drive home I’m envisioning the store being totally empty aside from Marty or one of the other Assistant Lieutenant Customer Service Managers, the products, and a battalion of showroom dummies, nobody buying or selling anything, just standing in place scowling at nothing. The space remains the shape and size of a miniature city, but perfectly motionless and
placid. On the radio, Little Lord Timmy Mackendrick is taking sadistic joy in teasing the possibility of moving *Melinda Von Peppercorn* to the death-slot, 3:30 in the morning every other Thursday, to make way for a new procedural show that will allegedly “bring the *Sexy Homicide* franchise back to its gritty, realistic roots.”

I’m not an aggressive person by nature, really, I swear, but right now I want to do some kind of violence to this awful kid. I’m sure the mood will pass by the time I get home, but right now I want to trip him up on his way home from tee-ball practice. I want to knock his oversized swirled lollipop into the dust at his feet, look right in his squinty little soulless eyes, and tell him that the customer is king.
5 A BRIEF DISPATCH ON PROPER EXPECTATION MANAGEMENT

Fairy tales hardly ever come true for quiet girls. In fact, according to our surveys, it only happens about 17% of the time for quiet girls, i.e., girls whose voices rarely rise above fifty decibels when heard from a distance of three yards. Actually, the majority of girls for whom fairy tales come true have names like Titania and Queen Mab, and are not really “girls” per se so much as they are fairies—for whom fairy tales always come true, by definition—but restricting the category to real girls rather than mythical figures, the odds of a fairy tale coming true are indeed very slim, especially if the girl in question has a quiet speaking voice and doesn’t play any loud instruments like, say, cymbals, or maybe the Fairlight CMI synthesizer that was so ubiquitous in the brasher strains of 1980s pop music. Otherwise, it’s just not very likely. They can be sad about this if they want, but there are certain incontrovertible laws dictating the way this universe works, and this is one of them.

Rip-roaring yarns are slightly likelier to come true for quiet girls, for reasons not even our most abstract and forward-thinking theoretical physicists have been able to figure out. A rip-roaring yarn has yet to come true for a girl whose speaking voice regularly exceeds fifty-six decibels when heard from a distance of three yards. If it has, the yarn in question remains unrecorded, which, we are sure you will agree, would certainly call into question the potency of its alleged rip-roaring qualities. Still, about 58% of the quiet girls in our sample group have reported rip-roaring yarns coming true, so there is hope yet, even if a fairy tale doesn’t come true for a particular subject. If the reader is not a quiet girl, she should consult the first paragraph. Fairy tales are still on the table for her. If she is unsure of her own standard decibel level, there is probably a volume-checking station at her local pharmacy.
Norse sagas mostly only come true for Vikings, and according to our surveys 100% of Vikings are deceased. We apologize for any disappointment this may cause subjects. If they are alive right now, Norse sagas are highly unlikely to come true for them. The Vikings are long gone, despite our theoretical physicists’ best efforts at bridging the gap between now and then. No, the examples you are thinking of are not real Vikings. Those are Scandinavian metal bands. It’s a very different thing.

The subject currently under observation has a quiet voice. Her voice is not abnormally quiet, mind you, but something closer to what parents and kindergarten teachers refer to as an “inside voice.” She plays the clarinet, which is neither especially loud nor especially quiet, as instruments go, so things could either way. She is a little bit troubled by being characterized as a “quiet girl,” because she is twenty-two years old and finds the word “girl” a little bit, to quote her file directly, “gross and paternalistic.” If the topic arises, please remind her that the nomenclature, however unfortunate and limited, is essentially set in stone at this point. In addition, she has exhibited signs of disappointment in her odds. Please, when you speak to her, encourage her to hold on to the possibility of a fairy tale or at least a rip-roaring yarn or one of the countless other narrative options available—the tall tale, the old wives’ tale, the Great American Novel, the old-fashioned oater, the two-fisted tale, the revisionist oater, the roman noir, the Sirkian melodrama, the light novel, the weird tale, the jewel heist potboiler, the space opera, the soap opera, the traditional opera, et cetera—coming true. Reassure her that if none of them does, she can always find work as a surveyor or a theoretical physicist.
6  A WEEKEND AT HOME, FIRST SEMESTER (OR, I WAS A TEENAGE KAIJU)

A. Landing

The airport is always smaller than it was before. It’s not clear how or why this keeps happening. Each time I come home—for Labor Day weekend, for Thanksgiving break, for my current unscheduled-but-necessary brief sabbatical—it has shrunk somehow, shriveled into something simultaneously smaller and more convoluted, like it’s trying to compress the same amount of terminals and foot traffic into less space. The halls, so straightforward when I first left town, have contorted into something unrecognizably knotty, tapering off at, narrowing at the corners like they’re made of separate parts crimped together. Even the ones that have remained straight seem to be shrinking toward the ends, too small for me to make my way down. The image that comes to mind, for reasons I can’t quite grasp, is a beehive whose wax has melted, the honeycombs caving in, the tunnels warping and converging. The whole place seems to have crumpled, like it’s been gradually deflating since the semester started.

Everybody else seems to know where they’re going. I latch on to a group, hoping they might pull me in the right direction. They’re all boarding a train, but I can’t fit through the door. One of them stares at me, confused. Another trips behind me and mutters a curse under his breath, and I feel a sharp kick behind me. Surprised at the sensation, I look down to see a tail on the floor. It appears to be mine. It’s covered in rocky gunmetal scales, with spiky outcroppings growing from the narrow end.

Well, I think as I watch the tail numbly convulse on the ground. This is new.

B. Waiting Around Before Dinner

It’s unseasonably warm this weekend, so my dad is outside grilling meat. I’m sitting on an armchair next to the fireplace reading *Naked Lunch*. I tell everybody that I’m reading it for an
American Literature term paper, but I don’t really have any clear ideas in mind, and finals week is approaching pretty quickly. The book’s not on the syllabus. I’ve been saying I was finding some “illuminating thematic connections” between it and *Winesburg, Ohio*, which *is* on the syllabus. I haven’t read the latter, though, so it’s anybody’s guess at this point.

Really, though, I’m reading *Naked Lunch* just for the hell of it. Jason, my roommate, has been trying to get me into all that Beat stuff, insisting that it’s our sacred duty as college students to dig into what he calls the “countercultural canon,” like we need to borrow bits of identity from the writers our grandparents found off-putting and strange fifty, sixty years ago. Burroughs is the only one who’s clicked so far for me. Maybe Kerouac will make more sense when I learn how to drive. Right now, *On The Road* just makes me think of the “Sons Of The Beat Generation” Tour that stopped at our campus last month—Neal Cassady’s kid, well into his sixties, hitting on my friends, my friends acting like it’s somehow flattering instead of creepy. Still, I like how Burroughs makes me feel a little dangerous while I’m home, the way his scenes often seem to start physically decaying halfway through. It’s like his words are toxic, infectious, like I’m introducing some sort of deadly pox to the suburbs.

My mom walks into the living room with a tray of cheese and crackers.

“Good book?” she says.

I nod.

“Is that for school?”

I nod again.

“What’s it about?” she says, putting the tray down on the coffee table.

Now’s my chance, I think. Time to show this square culture-void of a town what I’m made of.
“Well, it’s pretty surreal and fragmented, you know,” I say. Brace yourselves for impact, Bourgeois Parents Of America: “But in a sense—like, once you’ve put the fragmented pieces together—it’s mostly about heroin and gay sex.”

She doesn’t say anything, just lays some napkins down next to the tray, and for a moment I think, yes, this is a real shock. I am on the way to becoming the good kind of adult, the kind that’s basically a teenager, but with a clearer sense of direction and a wider array of options. After a few more seconds, she says, “Ah, I think they made a movie out of that, right? I never saw it, but the name rings a bell.”

Without warning, an enormous bright green flame comes streaming out of my mouth. The top of the coffee table ignites. For just a moment I can smell a hint of melting cheese, before lacquer fumes overtake it.

“Really, Scott?” says my mom, heading into the kitchen to get some wet towels. “In the house?”

It occurs to me for the first time that I might not be the first person in Marietta to ever read Naked Lunch.

**C. Coffee**

My friend Amanda also happens to be back in town this weekend. Her little brother played in some kind of All-State Band thing on Thursday. I was in band when I was in high school, and it doesn’t strike me as the sort of thing that’s worth flying all the way down from Amherst, but then, I realize I’m back from the Gulf for reasons I still can’t figure out, so hey. Anyway, I’m glad she’s in town.
On Saturday afternoon, my parents drop me off in front of the Starbucks connected to the Barnes and Noble by the mall. Amanda’s already sitting at a table in the corner, two cups of coffee in front of her.

“Hey, Scott,” she says, waving. “I already got you something.”

I walk over and take a seat. We start talking music. This was the routine in high school, when we both still lived here. We would meet up, swap CD-Rs, talk about bands from a few years before our time: she got me into a bunch of indie bands from Glasgow, I got her into some D.C. punk stuff.

I think that’s how it went, at least. I don’t know for sure if she still listens to the CDs I gave her, but I definitely still listen to hers. I like that Glasgow stuff, the way the songs tend to be sad and “pretty” in a traditional sense despite being sloppy and loud and sardonic in that classic 90s-slacker way—like they’re figuring out a way to work chamber-music arrangements into a D.I.Y. practice space. The D.C. bands are jumpier, more neurotic, like they’re trying to communicate “feeling” as a general idea without having any particular feeling in mind. It might be a tough sell for some people, but it still works for me.

“Have you heard anything good lately?” she says, and the weird thing is that I haven’t—nothing that’s coming to mind right now, at least. I take a sip of my latté, knowing it’s almost certainly still too hot, but my tongue doesn’t burn, at least not that I can feel.

“I’ve been to a few shows in Ybor City,” I say reluctantly, more for the sake of saying something than because I actually think it’s interesting. “Mostly some local-ish hardcore bands. Fun shows, but the music itself was nothing special.”

She tells me about some of the bands she’s been seeing up north. Half of them have albums coming out soon. I would really like them. She writes down some names, and I tell her,
meaning it sincerely, that I’ll check out their Bandcamps when I get the chance. She asks how school is going, if I’ve done anything exciting lately. I don’t want to tell her that this is one of the only recent Saturdays that I haven’t spent getting stoned and rewatching *The Wrath of Khan* with—or, occasionally, without—my roommates, so I say it’s been fine and leave it at that.

Other people at the Starbucks are looking at us. The head barista inhales deeply, crosses herself. Amanda says Amherst is great, and her wings open, deep ultramarine blue, spreading upward, just barely grazing the tile ceiling above her head. I wonder if she’s always had pterodactyl wings, and if so, why I’m just now noticing. When we’re ready, she picks me up with her talons and flies me back home.

**D. In the Square, At the Bar**

I’m meeting some high school friends for drinks at Tiamat’s Hollow, a bar in the square. Most of us are underage by at least two years, but Mike knows the bartender, so it’s cool. They have an arrangement: Mike brings Hunter (the bartender) free pastries from the nearby food truck where he’s been working for the last few months, and Hunter serves Mike and his friends, as long as his boss—Mr. Tiamat, presumably—isn’t around. It seems like kind of a lopsided arrangement, but, as Mike is quick to point out, the pastries aren’t cheap.

“The food truck isn’t called *More Expensive Than the Average Cronut* for no reason,” says Mike.

“Seriously?” I say.

“Admittedly,” says Mike, “My boss was going for sort of an ironic thing: ‘Hey, guys, how stupid would it be if I went and bought these wildly overpriced pastries from a place whose name straight-up admits that its pastries are wildly overpriced?’ Ironic purchases are always something to keep in mind where the youth market is concerned.”
“Is it working?” I say.

“So how’s school?” he says.

I try to think of an answer. I’ve been trying to think of an answer all semester. It’s not easy, especially right now. I’m having trouble focusing since karaoke night erupted in the opposite corner of the bar half an hour ago. Right now we’re all enduring the fourth consecutive duet of “Total Eclipse of the Heart,” each one of which has been performed by a different pair of what look like identical twins. Honestly, they’ve all been pretty accomplished singers, but their proficiency has done nothing to make it more tolerable. Halfway through this rendition, Courtney gets up to ask the DJ if he even has any other songs. I can’t hear what the DJ says back to her, but he’s giving her a look like it’s the dumbest question he’s heard in his life.

After the song ends, I walk up to the bar and ask Hunter for another pitcher.

“Do you speak English?” he says.

I say “Yes,” and he winces.

“Look, buddy,” he says, “You might need to tone it down a bit.”

People start looking at me funny. “Funny” might not be the right word. Hunter looks like he’s doing calculations in his head.

“Hey, Mike,” he yells. “You want to come talk some sense into your friend?”

“He’s cool,” says Mike. “He’s just going through some stuff, I think.”

Mike comes up to order for me, and I head back to the table. My tail knocks over a chair. I go to pick it back up, accidentally shoving a table a few feet to the left in the process.

A guy, probably in his late twenties, walks into the bar with a baby strapped to his chest. The baby’s wearing a salmon-colored onesie with a popped polo collar.
“Oh, come on, Brad,” says Hunter. “How many times do I have to tell you not to bring your kid in here?”

“I’m just proud of the little guy,” says Brad, throwing his hands up in the air. “I want to introduce him to the family. Hey, everybody”—he waves to the clientele—“this is my son, Nick.”

“You know what he did this morning?” he adds, turning back to Hunter.

“I don’t care,” says Hunter.

“He made this, like, this burbling sound? It was so rad.”

The baby looks straight at me. He doesn’t have an expression on his face, but, to be fair, I’m not sure if they ever really do. His eyes are wide open, and there’s nothing in them that I can read.

“Anyway,” says Brad, pointing at our table, “they all look pretty young, too, huh? And that thing that’s with them—I don’t know what’s going on there. How come you didn’t card them, huh, Mister, uh, Mister Officer?”

Feigning surprise, Hunter points at Mike, who’s in the process of carefully placing an overflowing pitcher onto our table.

“Hey,” he says unconvincingly. “Who let you kids in here?”

“Nice going, Brad,” says Mike.

“Sorry, Mike,” says Brad with a shrug.

“Come on, guys,” says Mike. I put on my coat. We start heading to the door. Brad’s baby makes a burbling noise, a tiny thread of drool running down the side of its chin like half a Fu Manchu mustache made of spittle, and flashes a huge toothless grin. Recognition, maybe.

**E. On the Square, Outdoors.**
It’s almost eleven o’clock at night, and Mike is on the playground at the east end of the park in the middle of the Square, drunk, sitting on top of the replica Civil War-era train, saying something about Buster Keaton. Courtney nods. She and Jonathan are sitting on a bench nearby, trading sips of something cheap from Jonathan’s flask. I’m standing near the train, scanning the perimeter: all the shops that closed before sundown, the handful of bars that didn’t. A breeze hits, and my hands start to hurt, so I pull my gloves out of my coat pocket and put them on. The last few days have mostly been warmer than Georgia would normally be in December, but it’s cooled down dramatically since the sun went down a few hours ago.

Either way, it’s much colder than the Gulf, and my skin can’t handle the exposure. My knuckles have grown chapped and irritable, scaly, and the scales will occasionally crack open, allowing little droplets of congealed blood out onto the surface, and, I guess resulting from some kind of chemical reaction, the blood sizzles, emitting a red-orange vapor. The vapor doesn’t smell great: it’s kind of like a mix between pool chlorine and grape Dimetapp. So I’ve been carrying these gloves around. I got them yesterday afternoon. My last pair corroded away when I put them on after my knuckles had already started bleeding, so it seems like prevention is the best approach.

I stagger over to the northern gazebo, tired, a little drunk, probably ready to go home. I think I’m ready to go home, at least. I’m not sure what it is. I’m ready to not be in the park in Marietta Square, how’s that? I lean forward, grabbing a couple of the poles on my left and right, stretching my arms backward, breathing in the chilly air, watching a solitary car ease its way down the street. Cars are interesting, especially here, now, driving twenty-five miles an hour at eleven p.m. in downtown Marietta, Georgia. I wonder why somebody with a car would be here. I realize that Mike has a car, and he’s here, but I don’t think I would be. Even Mike’s over there
on the tiny fake train, acting like he’s on some kind of great locomotive chase from a hundred fifty years ago.

I lean too far forward and, with an awful crack, the poles in my hands snap in two, causing the gazebo to careen back over me, collapsing. The canopy crashes onto my head on its way down, but my head is resilient—the canopy breaks into a dozen or more fragments, big splintery pieces falling to the ground, some of them lodging in my hair along the way, some of them bouncing off the shell that’s starting to emerge on my back. The impact hurts, but not too badly—like I’m lightly bumping my head on a doorframe.

Mike comes running up the brick path.

“Jesus, Scott,” says Mike. “What did you do?”

“I just,” I say, “I don’t know, I was stretching out and—”

“Yeah, okay,” says Mike, “Enough with the yelling. We just need to get out of here before anybody else notices the, you know, the underage kids drinking in the park.”

Jonathan, looking a little bashful, tosses his flask into a nearby bush.

“And the, the whatever is going on with you, on top of that,” Mike adds, like it’s a footnote, a postscript. I reach up to dislodge a piece of wood that’s starting to scrape against my scalp, and when my friends see me raising my arm, they all recoil in panic.

“Okay,” I say, returning my hands to my sides like I’m a Boy Scout at attention. “Let’s go.” I carefully trudge my way out of the rubble, and we all start walking back to Mike’s car, parked outside of the square.

“So, uh,” says Jonathan. “How long are you planning on being in town for?”

**F. Back on Campus**
I spend most of Monday after Philosophy class sitting in front of my computer looking at a Word document. After the MLA heading and working title, “United States of [NOTE: REMEMBER TO COME UP WITH A NOUN, SCOTT]: Burroughs, Anderson, and Industrial Decay in 20th Century America,” it just says “Throughout American literature’s brief, vibrant history,” before plummeting into a sea of white space.

I’m streaming some indie band Amanda recommended, from somewhere in Connecticut, I think. One guitar is making a noise like a rusty power drill, and the other is playing something more fluid and elegant. The vocalist is singing—in that artless half-spoken vocal cadence of indie singers dating back to Lou Reed at least—something about her menial day job, how she works not because she cares about work but because it makes it possible for her to do other things she does care about. I like it. Jason seems a little less enthused. He rises to his feet, and his chair crumbles to bits. I can’t tell if it fell apart from the force of him standing up, or if the weight he was putting on it was the only thing holding it together. Either way, there it is, pulverized, little chunks of wood and sawdust on the floor of our dorm.

He belches something about heading to the beach to get some air, if I would like to join. I look back at my monitor and decide that, yeah, I’m not getting anywhere with this paper today. We mumble a “later” to our other roommate, who’s been lying in bed all day and whose name neither of us has been able to figure out, and step outside.

It’s typically muggy outside, even in early December. It rained earlier this afternoon, as it does every afternoon down here. There’s no rainbow that I can see, but the air has achieved some kind of hyperclarity, like it’s been strained through a filter, miraculously sapped of impurities. Everything is radiant, almost blindingly so, and—aside from a handful of seagulls hovering over
the horizon—near perfectly still. The air has that kind of silence that almost hurts to listen to, like it’s somehow amplifying the sound of my own pulse to deafening levels.

Over a dozen other students are also at the beach: fellow freshmen and upper classmen alike, all emitting pale greenish halos in the sunlight. Some are slowly walking along the tide sharing joints, some have taken off their shoes and gone wading up to their knees. One tosses a football to another; the other screams and fires a concussive light ray from his eyes, bouncing the ball up fifty feet or so into the air. The scream hangs there in the air, ringing out until after the ball has landed in the other student’s claws.

I feel small, around the height of the upper-classmen’s knees, and shrinking still. I look out at the ocean. Jason is following some of the waders out into the water. They’re all growing, growing, even as they recede farther away from where I am. Some of them roar, and the roars all clash together into something cacophonous and ugly and weirdly alluring. They march out into the Gulf, growing more immense as the water gets deeper. The horizon becomes a wall of armored scales, of matted lavender fur, of massive jagged spinal plates jutting toward the sky. A clarion signal rings through the air, a near-unison cry beckoning me to wander out into the surf. I look at my classmates—exponentially growing titans of the Gulf, their collective hulking shadow shielding me from the sun—and at my tail, suddenly curved inward like a submissive dog’s, and I know that I’ll almost certainly drown if I go too deep.
7  A FEW SUBURBAN MYTHS ONLY I SEEM TO REMEMBER

I. *Super Mario 64*, Clean-Shaven Mode:

If you ask any of my friends about Clean-Shaven Mode in *Super Mario 64*, they’ll tell you they don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know if they’re lying, or if they’ve actually forgotten about it somehow. But I remember the late 90s, when everybody I knew wanted to see how it felt to play as a demustachioed Super Mario.

The premillennial moment was the golden age of unverifiable myths about video games. The medium had undergone a massive artistic growth over the preceding decade: from the simple, goal-oriented tests of skill in *Pac-Man* and *Galaga* to *Super Metroid*’s mysterious world-building and *Chrono Trigger*’s complex, multi-pronged narrative. Even the arcade classic *Donkey Kong*’s straightforward premise had shifted drastically. In 1981’s original *Donkey Kong*, Jumpman (later renamed Super Mario) is attempting to climb several ladders to rescue his girlfriend from the eponymous ape, who rudely persists in throwing barrels at him. In 1994’s *Donkey Kong Country*, Donkey Kong has reinvented himself as a heroic freedom fighter, exploring jungles, coral reefs, and mountain ranges in order to protect his homeland from an army of fascistic reptiles. The narrative remains simple—heroes moving from point A to point B in pursuit of a goal, vanquishing monsters and finding treasure along the way—but the medium had evolved substantially. Characters could display multiple emotions, levels could diverge onto multiple paths, a game’s story could have multiple endings depending on the choices the player made. Certain games—*Super Mario 64* among them—were especially mysterious, the targets of endless speculation among fans. Who knew what corners remained unexplored, what secrets they might have held?
These were also the early days of widespread internet access, so myths about games would spread almost instantaneously. The veracity of any story was irrelevant. Once enough people heard a rumor, the rumor became true. You could find Mew, the hidden 151st Pokémon, by pushing a truck out of the way behind the cruise liner “S.S. Anne” in Pokémon Red for the Game Boy. You could play as Luigi or ride the friendly dinosaur, Yoshi, in Super Mario 64 if you followed an impossibly convoluted set of directions. You could unlock “Nude Raider” mode in Tomb Raider for PlayStation, removing the implausibly-proportioned protagonist Lara Croft’s clothing for the game’s entire running time.

None of those “secrets” actually existed in the games, but that didn’t matter. Enough secrets did exist in games for the ones that didn’t to seem plausible, and the imaginations of eleven-year-old boys are highly resilient against the harsh tide of reality. It didn’t matter that players could easily disprove a rumor by trying to follow the directions only to find that they didn’t lead to the alleged secret reward. If a player tried to unlock Nude Raider mode and it didn’t work, they must have been doing something wrong. That thousands of preadolescent gamers around the world tried and failed was immaterial; the mode had to exist. The possibility of playing as naked Lara Croft was too thrilling for any of my friends to conceive a world without such a thing.¹ Just think of what the PlayStation was capable of 1996: The polygonal breasts! The 32-bit textural resolution! The countless shades of beige! Why would an eleven-year-old boy believe in anything else?

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¹ As I recall, this excitement was rooted not in lust, but in curiosity filtered through empty performance of sexual bravado: none of us had hit puberty at the time, and we only had a vague idea of what sex even entailed, but we had inferred through cultural osmosis—from older kids, from pop lyrics, from watching South Park in secret after our parents had gone to bed—that we were supposed to be interested in naked women. Even those of us who knew the reasons for this interest didn’t understand it, at least not on the fundamental, instinctive level many of us would a couple of years later.
This was the climate in which I first heard of Super Mario 64’s rumored Clean-Shaven Mode. It was sixth grade, and an acquaintance named Corin told everybody at the lunchroom table about a secret new mode we could unlock in Super Mario 64: “My friend Joe, we went to YMCA day camp together, his uncle works for Nintendo of America. He says if you find the ‘Razor Star’ hidden behind a boulder in Lethal Lava Land, you can play as Mario without a mustache. ‘Clean Shaven Mode,’ it’s called. You can’t move the boulder unless you’ve already gotten all 120 stars three times, and the third time needs to be on a save file named ‘SNOWBALL.’ After that, the intro screen will let you use the Razor Star to shave Mario’s mustache. I haven’t done it yet, but it’s supposed to be really cool.”

“Last week you were telling us about Luigi Mode, and that hasn’t worked for me yet,” said Kevin, a smaller kid who, I remember, always brought hard-boiled eggs for lunch. Most of the time the smell ruined my appetite, so I always tried to sit as far away as I could without accidentally merging with a different social circle.

“Keep trying, dude,” said Corin. “It’s so fun. Luigi jumps way cooler than Mario.”

I had a PlayStation, not a Nintendo 64, so I couldn’t verify the story for myself, but I saw no reason at the time not to believe him. I thought it sounded interesting enough, though. The mustache was Super Mario’s distinguishing characteristic. When Shigeru Miyamoto, Nintendo’s legendary game designer, created Mario in 1981, he gave him a mustache because that was the most efficient way to set the character apart with the arcade machine’s graphical limitations. In the 1980s, Mario couldn’t really have a face, he couldn’t have a voice, and his body language was limited to utilitarian actions: running, jumping, climbing, throwing fireballs, swinging hammers, etc. But the machine could depict a red hat and brown mustache clearly enough, even

2 Super Mario 64’s introductory screen famously allowed the player to interact with a three-dimensional depiction of Mario’s face, in the process introducing not only the game itself, but also the way Mario would look, act, and sound for the next twenty-plus years.
with the limited number of available pixels. Therein lay Mario’s entire personality, for the first
decade of his career at least. If he shaved his mustache, would we be able to recognize him?
Would he even be Mario?

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The Nintendo 64 was newer and more technologically advanced than the Sony
PlayStation. The friends of mine who owned N64s were always the ones hosting sleepovers,
which at the time made me assume their families had more money—a faulty assumption, as I
discovered later. We would stay up until two or three in the morning, drinking Kroger-brand
cola and playing Wave Race and Mario Kart, until enough of us had fallen asleep for the
holdouts to move on to the more complex single-player games. I only had a few chances to play
Super Mario 64 myself in those days, but I remember watching my friends play for hours,
finding endless new ways to run through the game’s fifteen levels. I always found it fascinating
how Nintendo’s designers had managed to condense so many different experiences within such a
limited amount of in-game space: there were only fifteen levels, but each one had several
objectives, each of which called for a different style of play, a different route to follow, a
different perspective on the game. I watched my friends play Lethal Lava Land dozens of times,
each time exposing a new layer of the game’s world—all in vain pursuit of the fabled Clean-


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2 It might be worth remembering, though, that Mario’s success was primarily a result of the games being fun, not of
the character’s own personality. Many of my friends in the 90s preferred “edgier” characters like Sega’s Sonic the
Hedgehog, dismissing Mario’s amiable persona as overly goofy, even lame. Still, even those of us in the Sonic camp
had to admit that Mario’s games were better: more aesthetically pleasing, more carefully designed, more fun, and, importantly, more full of secrets.

4 One comparison that seemed noteworthy at the time is that the N64 had a 64-bit central processing unit, where the
PlayStation’s CPU only had 32. None of us knew what that meant, really, and I still don’t. But 64 is twice as high as
32. Even if each console’s roster of games seemed roughly comparable to the other’s, the numbers were different,
which had to mean something.

5 The real reason was the Nintendo 64 had four controllers, as opposed to the PlayStation’s two, and consequently a
better range of multiplayer games. That was the key difference between the two: the PlayStation’s best games were
moody single-player narrative experiences like Final Fantasy VII and Metal Gear Solid, whereas Nintendo
specialized in the colorful and communal, the “party game.” I only rarely saw my fellow PlayStation owners’ living
rooms, mostly because it wouldn’t have occurred to them to invite people over to play video games in the first place.
Shaven Mode. It never quite worked, but they kept trying well after I went home to my PlayStation. They needed to keep trying. They must have gotten the wrong directions, or maybe they weren’t executing them as faithfully as they had to. The mode definitely existed, we all thought, even if none of us had the skill or insight to unlock it.

I didn’t own a Nintendo 64 until college, when I found one used on eBay at a reasonable price. It had been years since I had last seen Corin or most of the other kids from the sixth-grade lunch table, and even longer since I had last heard them talk about Clean-Shaven Mode. At nineteen, my curiosity wasn’t as powerful as it had been when I was younger—I had learned a lot since then, about art, about science, about politics—but I still couldn’t help but wonder what Super Mario would look like without a mustache. When I finally had the chance to play Super Mario 64 all the way through by myself, I followed Corin’s directions to the letter, still to no avail.

By now I’ve given up, realized that many of these “secret modes” were essentially urban legends with no real basis in fact. But I still think about it from time to time. I’ve tried to draw clean-shaven Mario a few times recently, just to see if I could, and the entire lower half of his face has invariably come out as an illegible scrawl, a gaseous smear of graphite. I’m left wondering: if there was actually a Clean-Shaven Mode, would any of us have been able to process it? Or is there something about Mario’s upper lip that defies comprehension, something eerie and unknowable? I still wonder, but I’ve let my curiosity subside for the sake of my own sanity. There are some things humankind was not intended to understand.

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II. The Man Who Bought Marilyn Manson’s Lower Rib
The first thing I ever knew about the industrial-metal shock-rock superstar Marilyn Manson was that he had allegedly had two of his lower ribs surgically removed “so he [could] suck his own dick,” as my fifth-grade classmate Tyler put it. This was well before I ever heard a note of his music,6 and before I was even aware of fellatio as a concept, so my reaction was doubly vexed:

“Why would anybody want to do that?” I said. “Also, who is Marilyn Manson?”

“Oh, child,” he said, shaking his head, before describing a scene he had watched on a scrambled pay-per-view network a couple of nights earlier. “Everything was weirdly colored and I could only see some of what was happening, but there was a purplish rainbow blob kind of melting into another rainbow blob. That one was blue. I think the purple one was a lady. It had light streaming off it like hair. The blue one sounded like a guy. But yeah, the purple blob, it was crouched in front of the blue one and the colors kept shifting. I asked my friend’s brother about it—he’s thirteen—he said the purple blob was probably sucking the blue blob’s dick.”

This hadn’t really answered my question, and I said so.

“Oh, man. Well, it sounded like the blue blob was enjoying it. Or he might have been angry. I guess it was hard to tell. My friend’s brother says it’s awesome. He played us this Red Hot Chili Peppers song about it, ‘Sir Psycho Sexy.’ That’s what he said it was about, anyway.”

6 Some of which I was surprised to find myself actually liking, years later; despite his deliberately Crowleyesque “wicked man on Earth” public image, his best records had more in common with playful glam-rock and new wave than with the tortured self-seriousness of other late-90s rock music. Manson’s songs were, of course, silly and adolescent and mostly meaningless, but I have come to believe that even the silliest adolescents deserve some kind of gateway into the idea of transgressive art, no matter how prefabricated and commercial.

7 I had actually heard the first few minutes of this song, a lead-footed eight-minute funk marathon, a few years earlier, without realizing who had performed it or what it was called. I heard it on a friend of a friend’s Walkman, near the far edge of the back playground, after he promised several of us that it contained “lots of cuss words.” A teacher noticed a few of us huddled around a pair of headphones, the oldest members of the group giggling, and chastised us for listening to such inappropriate music—but I didn’t actually recognize any of the profanity in the song, so I came away feeling both embarrassed and disappointed. Later, in high school, I would hear the allegedly classic Red Hot Chili Peppers album Blood Sugar Sex Magik in its entirety, and feel essentially the same mix of embarrassment and disappointment.
A lunch lady came by to check on the table, and Tyler shut up, but not quickly enough. She wrote him up. Before leaving the table, she shook her head at me in disapproval, then, as if out of contempt, she squirted a viscous glob of ketchup onto my corn dog without asking if I wanted any. I still don’t think I did anything wrong. Tyler had been talking about something I didn’t understand, and I asked him to explain. I’ve always thought of curiosity as the backbone of a good education. This wasn’t the first or last time people within the education system tried to disabuse me of that notion, but here I am, still in college, possibly for the rest of my life.

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Over the next two years, the Marilyn Manson story became more and more widespread, increasingly received as undeniable truth. Manson had had his lower ribs surgically removed to become flexible enough to perform autofellatio. That was the one thing I knew about him. In fifth grade, I only listened to “Weird Al” Yankovic, and by the time I was listening to more serious music in middle school, it was British Invasion stuff I had inherited from my parents, nothing contemporary. Besides, most of my friends had moved on to newer, less knowingly camp-inflected antisocial bogeymen: Eminem, Limp Bizkit, Slipknot. Most of my friends and I were about two years too young for Marilyn Manson to have registered as anything but the source of urban legends, most of which we accepted as true. He was directly responsible for Columbine. He had ritualistically drowned several guinea pigs in his own home-brewed absinthe. And, of course, he had had his lower ribs removed.

What I didn’t hear until eighth grade, when I finally had consistent internet access at home, was that somebody else had purchased Manson’s lower ribs at a secret occult auction in

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8 I didn’t, and couldn’t finish my lunch as a result. Even in fifth grade, my position on ketchup was: “Ketchup is for children.”

9 Curiously, the first trace of Manson’s music I ever heard was actually an excerpt of “The Dope Show” included in the parodic polka medley on Running with Scissors, the last “Weird Al” CD I bought before moving on to my next musical phase.
Los Angeles’s deep corporate underbelly. I found out on a bizarre Angelfire site called *Larry’s Reppositorium [sic] of Hollyweird Illuminutiae [sic]*, which my semi-goth friend Markus had linked me to over AIM. The story was that the reclusive tech billionaire Gottfried Vermaak, a young venture capitalist from Johannesburg who made some enormously savvy investments on the rising dot-com market, had bought the ribs as a crucial step in his own rehabilitation.

According the website’s enigmatic “Larry,” Vermaak had been preternaturally flexible since adolescence, and in recent years his predilection for autofellatio had grown out of control.

“Larry” hypothesized three possible reasons for the problem:

- Vermaak was having trouble adjusting to the new pressures he faced as a rising “industry leader,” and autofellatio was the most readily available form of escape he could access.
- Vermaak was dealing with some other undisclosed personal problems—Larry claimed to “have people trying to figure out his family sitch [sic], but no luck so far”—and [see the second half of the previous bullet point].
- It started like almost any addiction starts, as a casual vice that gradually blossoms into a psychological necessity: first it’s an occasional indulgence, then weekly, then semiweekly, then the next thing he knows he’s blowing off crucial meetings, missing

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10 The website’s text was blood-red on a navy blue background, soundtracked by a poorly rendered MIDI arrangement of Georges Delerue’s score for the Jean-Luc Godard classic *Contempt*. I wouldn’t realize this until years later, when I took a French New Wave class in college. I love Godard, and that film in particular, but when I first watched it, I was shocked to recognize the score and find the recognition accompanied by hallucinated ghosts of long-dead Angelfire and Geocities sites: gifs of dancing clipart illustrations, strident catchphrases written in distractingly colored Papyrus font, unsolicited pop-ups silently shouting “LIKE MY SITE? SIGN THE GUESTBOOK!”

11 AOL Instant Messenger, an online communications tool that essentially served as the closest thing I had to a social life between ages twelve and sixteen.
deadlines, et cetera, so he can curl himself into a “pathetic ouroboros of unceasing oral
pleasure”\textsuperscript{12} for hours at a time.

In any case, in Larry’s version of the story, Gottfried Vermaak’s habit had become a
potentially career-ending problem by 1998. As a last-ditch solution, he decided—through
eccentric tech-whiz reasoning more rooted in what Larry called “post-Crowleyan thaumaturgy”
than in conventional medical science—that the best way to curb the habit would be to surgically
implant the ribs Marilyn Manson had removed from his own body. It was intended as a
transference, a reciprocal exchange: Manson, the late 1990s’ self-styled Dionysian “God of
Fuck,”\textsuperscript{13} would inherit Vermaak’s debilitating affliction, and Vermaak would absorb Manson’s
unwanted bones in turn. The extra ribs, he hoped, would make him inflexible, or possibly even
induce a degree of permanent discomfort that could drive him to previously-unforeseen heights
of productive self-denial.

The surgery was a success, technically: the orthopedic surgeon managed to graft the two
extra pairs of ribs to Vermaak’s spinal column,\textsuperscript{14} which made his torso about four inches taller.
But it didn’t help him with his problem. He could still fellate himself with no real difficulty,
despite the extra height. He relapsed almost immediately after recovering from the surgery:
freakishly and disproportionately tall, uncommonly flexible, doomed to a tragic life of regular
and compulsive autofellatio. His firm started to suffer as shareholders grew frustrated with his

\textsuperscript{12} A turn of phrase of Larry’s that I didn’t get at the time, but in hindsight seems hopelessly corny and, well, masturbatory—but even so, oddly representative of what writing on the internet looked like in the late 90s and early 2000s.

\textsuperscript{13} A clumsily profane Manson lyric that prominently featured on an early tour t-shirt, which I would occasionally see older teens wearing the handful of times I went to \textit{Rocky Horror} in high school. Again, ungainly, insubstantial, probably trying far too hard to shock—but kids have to start somewhere, and suburbia’s cultural landscape was otherwise pretty barren in the late 90s.

\textsuperscript{14} Larry was happy to present photographic “evidence” of this procedure on his website, but the photos looked about as credible as one of those “Alien Autopsy” tapes that used to air on FOX late at night, or an outtake from a late-period \textit{Faces of Death} sequel produced years after they had stopped even trying to make the purported “snuff” footage look realistic. Even as a relatively naïve thirteen-year-old, the photos didn’t quite ring true to me.
erratic behavior, and eventually he was forced to retire for the company’s sake. If Gottfried Vermaak’s name sounds unfamiliar, the story goes, that’s why. His retirement was so thorough, so totally humiliating, that every trace of his career\(^\text{15}\) has been scrubbed from all but the deepest corners of the internet in the intervening years. That’s the version of the story I heard, at least.

Larry intended this story as a parable about the importance of self-restraint, I think, but I don’t know. It’s been nearly twenty years since the procedure supposedly took place—long enough for me to develop a degree of earnest nostalgia for Marilyn Manson,\(^\text{16}\) whether or not the story about his ribs was actually true.\(^\text{17}\) In those two decades, I have never, not once, even thought about trying to suck my own dick. The rich really are a different species, is all I can say.

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III. Boris Yeltsin, Failed Romantic Lead

My eighth grade history teacher, Ms. Farber, was exceptionally proud of having taught Julia Roberts in the 80s, with whom she still exchanged letters to keep in touch. She took every opportunity to mention it in class. It was a Georgia history class, specifically, which led to some puzzling angles on American history:

“I remember talking to Julia about this,” began our only lesson on the Union side of the Civil War. “General Sherman was not a very nice man,” ended our only lesson on the Union side of the Civil War.\(^\text{18}\)

One day, between lessons about the Dahlonega Gold Rush’s crucial role in the Trail of Tears,\(^\text{19}\) she gave us the inside scoop on the then-recent Julia Roberts/Richard Gere vehicle

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\(^\text{15}\) Including Larry’s, sadly.

\(^\text{16}\) In college, years after even my semi-goth friends like Markus had dismissed Manson as an uncool fraud, I first heard Antichrist Superstar and thought it sounded like Adam and the Ants to Nine Inch Nails’ Gary Numan and Ministry’s Sex Pistols—hardly an unforgivable mode of uncool fraudulence, I thought.

\(^\text{17}\) All “official” sources, including Manson’s own account, point to it being an urban legend. I’m inclined to believe them in this case, but it doesn’t hurt to keep an open mind.

\(^\text{18}\) To be fair, this was an institutional problem, not an individual one. I’m sure she was generally doing what she could with a broken history curriculum.
Runaway Bride, producer/director Garry Marshall’s attempt at recapturing the popular zeitgeist he had caught with Pretty Woman nearly a decade earlier: “Julia was working on Runaway Bride for a really long time, about three or four years, on and off. It wasn’t even supposed to have Richard Gere originally—y’all might even have heard about this, I don’t know what’s out there on the ‘web.’ It was supposed to be Julia playing opposite Boris Yeltsin.”

This was a surprise, in part because Runaway Bride was such a safe, conventional movie. Like most Garry Marshall movies, it was a mediocre romantic comedy: a big-budget sitcom with bad jokes and contrived emotional beats, buoyed only by a handful of charming performances. It wasn’t quite the success Pretty Woman had been, but it gave Marshall his first notable hit since the early 90s. The years between Pretty Woman and Runaway Bride had been rough for Marshall’s career, littered with bizarre flops. In 1994 he released Exit to Eden, a BDSM-themed Anne Rice adaptation starring Dan Aykroyd and Rosie O’Donnell. Earlier in 1999, the same year as Runaway Bride, he directed The Other Sister, a colossally misguided romantic comedy starring perennial overactors Giovanni Ribisi and Juliette Lewis as a young couple who work through their own mild mental disabilities to find true love with one another.

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99 “Was it justifiable? We could go back and forth on this all day, but I’ll let you decide.”
20 In form as well as content. Garry Marshall movies look like TV sitcoms, not movies: high-key lighting, inexpressive mid-range compositions, scenes edited to fit the punchlines rather than to tell a story and let the comedy emerge naturally.
21 Commercially and critically, at least. When I saw Pretty Woman on TV a few years later, I was a little confounded by the perception that it was a good romantic comedy. But then, I had never been in a romantic relationship at that point, which may have unfavorably colored my attitude toward the genre as a whole (though, of course, rom-coms bear about as strong a resemblance to real life as kung fu movies do).
22 It’s an exceedingly problematic movie for lots of reasons, including Lewis and Ribisi’s vaudevillian, tic-heavy performances as the disabled couple. It felt insulting to me at the time, largely because I had an uncle with Down’s Syndrome—and this was before I was diagnosed with a mild autism-related disorder later that year. Now, though, I find it fascinating as a once-in-a-lifetime collision of bad ideas executed by wealthy professionals who, by all accounts, should have known better.
Runaway Bride looked like a retreat to Marshall’s comfort zone as a filmmaker. He was shying away from any potentially alienating hot-button issues this time, and going back to the high-caliber movie stars whose chemistry had made Pretty Woman such a hit.

But according to Ms. Farber, Garry Marshall originally wanted Runaway Bride to feature “a different sort of May/December romance.” He knew he needed to play it somewhat safe to justify his recent string of commercial and critical failures, but he was still feeling creatively restless. He liked tinkering with the formula when he could, and felt that small variations like unconventional casting and controversial social commentary—however clumsily injected—could do a lot to enliven a genre that otherwise threatened to ossify into boring cliché. The idea came to him at a glitzy New Year’s Eve party in L.A. a few years earlier, where he met a couple of Russian oligarchs who assured him that Boris Yeltsin, the increasingly unpopular Russian president, was interested in pursuing a side career as an actor. This could be the destabilizing element he was looking for. Runaway Bride’s plot was as formulaic as any romcom, but if it also served as a Hollywood debut for Russia’s first post-Soviet leader, then Marshall could have had something exciting on his hands.

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Marshall started filming Runaway Bride in 1996, with Julia Roberts starring as the eponymous bride, an endearingly flighty young woman with a habit of leaving her fiancés at the altar, and President Boris Yeltsin as a no-nonsense reporter who, despite his commitment to journalistic ethics, finds himself falling in love with Roberts’s character. Marshall didn’t think the obvious age gap would be a major problem: yes, Yeltsin (born in 1931) was more than twice Roberts’s age (1967), but proportionally speaking, the age gap wasn’t that much bigger than the

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23 Ms. Farber said that Julia Roberts had described these oligarchs, who frequently visited the set of Runaway Bride in the early stages of its production, as “friendly, but a little distant—clearly new to the Hollywood thing.”
one between Roberts and Richard Gere (1949) had been when they starred together in *Pretty Woman*. “Besides,” Ms. Farber pointed out, “remember Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly in *High Noon*? That worked fine. They’re actors. They can do anything.” Nor did the language gap present any real problems: while Yeltsin wasn’t fluent in English, he was a quick study, progressing rapidly from memorizing his dialogue by rote to making his own suggestions for new lines. While Yeltsin wasn’t a trained actor, he was eager to learn the craft, willing to devote a surprising amount of time and effort to the movie.

The problem was a simple one. Boris Yeltsin and Julia Roberts had insufficient onscreen chemistry. Marshall watched the dailies every night, wondering how the warm off-camera rapport between the two stars could seem so flat on the monitor. Even watching them act together on-set was a radically different experience than watching footage after the fact. Ms. Farber said that “Julia” had chalked it up to Yeltsin’s background as a statesman. He was always acting, and even the most gaffe-prone politicians can’t get anywhere without *some* kind of live charisma. Yeltsin, despite his reputation for drunkenness and public malapropisms, was no exception—but he was playing everything too broadly for a screen performance. He lacked both subtlety and “photogénic,” the intangible cinematic quality that helps certain actors come alive on camera. No matter how good the project sounded on paper, it just wasn’t working.

After nearly a year of filming on and off, one unusable take after another—a time during which *Variety* had taken to calling the film “Marshall’s Folly” and “the *Heaven’s Gate* of Romantic Comedies”—Marshall realized he had to fire Yeltsin from the production. It was a

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24 None of us had seen *High Noon* yet. When I saw it in high school, I thought it was a very good movie, but I had to disagree with Ms. Farber about Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly’s plausibility as a married couple.

25 All of which Marshall politely considered, at least, before turning them down. “Boris had some good ideas, but—I say this with all due respect—he didn’t really get the genre. Not from a screenwriter’s perspective, at least.”

26 “Don’t you have a country to run?” Marshall would joke when Yeltsin came to him with suggestions about his character, to which Yeltsin would wave his hand and say, “Russia has plenty of leaders. It will do fine without me for today.”

27 Which Roberts said she had seen none of on-set: he was a consummate, sober professional on the set, at least.
shame, he thought: he didn’t want to have to fall back on casting Richard Gere, which the
executives had been begging him to do for months. Eventually he capitulated, took the most
commercially palatable route. The movie was a hit, and Garry Marshall spent the rest of his
career making aimiably formulaic romantic comedies, none of which have been worth watching.

Yeltsin returned to Moscow, drunk and unfathomably depressed, and almost immediately
needed to undergo heart surgery. It was a coincidence, most likely—he was a hard drinker in his
mid-60s—but it’s hard not to see some connection there. A few years later, he resigned in
ignominy, leaving the Presidency open to then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Now Yeltsin is
mostly remembered for overseeing post-Soviet Russia’s radical privatization throughout the 90s,
facilitating its descent into grossly unequal oligarchy and corruption.28 But if what Ms. Farber
told us was true, there was a frustrated actor in Boris Yeltsin, a guy who was looking to connect
with humanity on a level that was purer and more instinctive than politics allowed. I haven’t
heard anything about Yeltsin’s stymied acting ambitions since that history class, and I’ve come
to doubt that the story was true. I’m still not sure why she spent so much time telling us about
Runaway Bride’s troubled production, but I guess it was better than hearing more romantic
myths about the antebellum south.

IV. Blue’s Clues, Steve Two

I was in high school when Steve Burns, the host of Nick Jr.’s ubiquitous edutainment
juggernaut Blue’s Clues, left the show under mysterious circumstances. I didn’t even hear about
it at first; even my youngest brother was too old for Blue’s Clues by 2002. But I had friends with
younger siblings and cousins, and they were absolutely certain that Steve had died under some

28 Of course, as I would realize in college, post-Soviet Russia’s oligarchy was simply capitalism reaching its
apotheosis—something that would become much clearer in America after the turn of the century. In a way, Yeltsin
and his cronies understood the American system better than America did. Perhaps his legendarily stiff, unromantic
performance in Runaway Bride was a demonstration of similarly perverse insight into the Hollywood romantic
comedy.
kind of unpleasant circumstances. The rumors varied from the relatively tame\textsuperscript{29} to the unflattering,\textsuperscript{30} but eventually my high school class arrived upon a middle-ground consensus: Steve had died of a simple, straightforward heroin overdose. It was unsavory, sure, which resonated nicely with Steve’s friendly, dorky-older-brother screen persona.

When a children’s television star dies prematurely, teenaged logic dictates that the cause of death needs to be sufficiently ironic, to contradict the star’s image somehow. Steve had built a career on exaggerated curiosity, on politely breaking the fourth wall to ask the audience questions that might help Blue, his cartoon dog, solve puzzles, so it only made sense for his career to end under some kind of seedy circumstances. Still, there was a time-honored romance to the heroin overdose that didn’t apply to other drug-related deaths. Heroin was for jazz musicians and poets and rock stars. A heroin addiction was tragic in the best possible sense, freezing the victim’s legacy in amber: this tortured artist, this lost soul, was just too sensitive to handle a brutal and uncaring world.\textsuperscript{31} My friends felt like they were doing Steve a favor by remembering him as a tragic junkie, rather than the square nerd he had played on television.

I looked it up online, hoping to figure out what had actually happened to Steve Burns. \textit{Rolling Stone}, \textit{Entertainment Weekly}, and \textit{Spin} all confirmed that he was alive and well. He had left the show because he was getting self-conscious about his receding hairline, and was in the process of recording an album with a couple of the Flaming Lips. But nobody believed me when I brought it up: “Look, Steve died of a heroin overdose! That’s all there is to it.” He couldn’t have done anything else. If there wasn’t some seedy component to Steve leaving \textit{Blue’s Clues}, I

\begin{footnotes}
\item[29] E.g., he had been hit by a drunk driver veering onto an L.A. sidewalk, or contracted a potent flesh-eating bacteria while doing charity work overseas.
\item[30] E.g., he had overdosed on a speedball, he had driven his dirtbike off a cliff while high on angel dust, he had angered the Yakuza by flashing a confrontational gang sign on the show, he had overdosed on crack, etc.
\item[31] By now, having seen a couple of acquaintances struggle with heroin addiction in their early twenties—seeing them compulsively lie to everybody they know, steal their families’ valuables to pawn off for junk, systematically replace every facet of their own personalities with desperate craving—I find it hard to romanticize. I did my share of other drugs in college, and don’t regret most of it, but heroin is something that profoundly scares me.
\end{footnotes}
guess it would have been harder for a bunch of fifteen-year-olds to justify talking about it in the cafeteria.

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My friend J.D., a vaguely intimidating kid who always had at least one inexplicably huge knife in his backpack, insisted that he knew the real story went deeper than even our other friends could imagine. J.D. claimed to have ex-Sandinista cousins who were still on the run from the CIA, and he said Steve’s departure was a classic Black Ops situation.

“Look really closely at Steve’s left hand in the first season of Blue’s Clues,” he said, taking me aside while he snuck a cigarette between classes. “It clearly changes shape after the third episode. Bigger, a stronger grip. That’s the hand of a killer, man. Believe me. I’m telling you this because I trust you. You’re smart, which will pay off somewhere down the road, I know. You’ve just gotta start looking in the right places, is all.”

J.D. argued that I was half-right. Steve Burns had died of a tragic heroin overdose after filming the first three episodes of Blue’s Clues, but Nickelodeon, working in collaboration with the CIA—“or the FBI, or the NSA,” J.D. said, “one of those”—had replaced him with an uncannily accurate impersonator. So, yes, “Steve Burns” had just retired from the show, and was in the process of recording a psychedelic pop album with members of the Flaming Lips. But it wasn’t the real Steve Burns, it was a black ops agent working for the feds to infiltrate and reshape youth culture.

“You’ve got to get them while they’re young,” J.D. said. “I mean, shit, that’s why I smoke Camels, right? Joe Camel got to me when I was a kid, and now I can’t imagine smoking a different brand. It just makes sense. It’s real scary to see the government catching on like this, though.”

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32 It hasn’t yet, but I’m going to keep trying for J.D.’s sake, if not my own.
“How many times have you watched the first season of Blue’s Clues, anyway?”

“Hey, man,” he said. “This isn’t about me. This is about the future. Do you want to live in a world where the CIA can control what’s on Nick Jr?”

When I watched the tapes he gave me, I had trouble seeing a major difference between the Steve of episodes one through three and the Steve of subsequent episodes. He did look a little more muscular, but that seemed easy enough to explain. He was a young actor working his first major TV job; it was entirely possible that he had been working out more than usual. But when I raised the issue to J.D., he scolded me for being such an easy mark for “fed propaganda.” Did I think it was a coincidence that the Steve-doppelganger left the show only a few months after 9/11?, J.D. asked. Did it seem unlikely or implausible that he had been called to some higher duty, destabilizing nation-states overseas or assassinating dissidents at home? Did “Joe,” Steve’s official replacement host, not seem like a spineless puppet?33

I didn’t actually want to get to the bottom of this alleged conspiracy. This wasn’t because I was scared—it all seemed a little ridiculous and paranoid to me34—but because, frankly, Blue’s Clues was incredibly irritating to watch. It was shrill and juvenile, a thin premise supported by cloying songs that were geared toward an audience a full decade younger than I was. I watched a few more episodes, though, and started to see something I related to in Steve’s eyes: a look of panic, of uncertainty, the look of a 25-year-old man who has finally found a solid, lucrative career, only to find that the job mostly entails walking around an empty green room talking to an

33 In disgusted tones, J.D. described Joe as “the Philippe Pétain of Nick Jr.” Steve Two had been an actual federal agent, according to J.D., which was horrifying, but—from his perspective—“less contemptible than being a puppet.” At least Steve Two had some agency in his own role as a propagandist. He believed in his own terrible ideology, whereas there was nothing but eager collaborationism behind Joe’s blank smile.

34 And, indeed, J.D. later got expelled for coming to school on LSD for what turned out to be the fourth time, cackling conspiratorially in the back of health class as Coach Spinelli was showing us an 80s after-school special about a suicide pact that somehow goes awry. I wouldn’t do acid until college, when I also found myself quietly laughing to myself in the middle of an astronomy lecture, so I can’t judge J.D.—but I didn’t get caught, at least.
imaginary dog for years. Or was it J.D.’s Steve Two, doing his mercenary best to imitate that frightened gaze? What kind of gears were turning behind those eyes?

It still seems ridiculous, but as I got older and read more about what the government had done to Allende, to Fred Hampton, to Phil Ochs, I couldn’t help but wonder. There’s not much I would put past certain government agencies, morally speaking, but I just couldn’t see any reason for it. But then, I realized the reason so many of these theories retroactively turn out to be true is that the FBI and the CIA are as inept as they are sinister: there’s no idea so stupid they aren’t willing to try it. These are the same people who spent 65 years failing to kill Castro. So, yes, since J.D. was so insistent: it does seem possible that they would have secretly turned Blue’s Clues into an organ for state propaganda since the fourth episode of season one. That doesn’t mean it worked. There is, I still hope, no scheme so manipulative and dishonest that they can’t fuck it up somehow. God, I hope I’m right.

V. Super Mario 64, Mario Vs Goldwater

In college, when I was finally playing Super Mario 64 all the way through for the first time, I spent a lot of time on online message boards. The message boards mostly focused on music and video games, but occasionally politics would come up. I was a regular user on Audiogalaxy’s Aphex Twin forum, where I met a user named “tetsuo_but_aging,” a noise guitarist who was probably about fifteen years older than me. He claimed to have been a high-ranking employee at Nintendo of America in the mid- to late-1990s. I asked him about Clean-Shaven Mode, and he was quick to deflect the question: “Did you try following the directions?” He wouldn’t even acknowledge any of my follow-up questions about it.

35 When the FBI periodically releases their previously sealed documents from decades earlier, in the process validating about 70% of absurd X-Files conspiracy theories about them, it’s not hard to find reasons to distrust them. 36 When somebody else on the board asked what he was referencing, he said “Either Tetsuo from Akira or the movie Tetsuo: The Iron Man or the movie Tetsuo II: Body Hammer or the movie Tetsuo: The Bullet Man. The important thing to remember, though, is that I AM aging.”
Eventually, we got to talking about the 2004 election, our shared disappointment over the results. I had trouble shaking the feeling that the country was just plunging further and further right, with no hope of ever coming back—that even the designated “liberal” party wasn’t doing nearly enough to stop the rightward drift. We became friends, at least to whatever degree strangers on the internet can be friends: talking on the Aphex Twin forum, but also following each other to LiveJournal for a few years after all the Audiogalaxy forums had dried up.

He said it had always kind of felt that way. He said the Faith/Void split LP was the only 80s hardcore record anybody would ever need, unless Flipper counted as hardcore, which he didn’t think they did. He said Halber Mensch was the best Einstürzende Neubauten album to start with, which I found helpful. He said he didn’t care about Aphex Twin or electronic music in general, but he liked the people on the forum enough to hang around. He said it was important to hold onto my political and moral principles even when faced with a world that constantly rejects those principles. He said the best Black Sabbath album was Vol. 4, which I doubted at the time but have subsequently come to accept. He said he liked Ozu more than Kurosawa, which I was far too young to understand when I was nineteen. He said Radiohead had sucked since 1996, which I still don’t agree with, even though now I can kind see why somebody might feel that way. He said that even though he knew his own private moral and political principles had little effect on the world around him, they had kept him sane through Reagan and Bush in the 80s, through Clinton’s rightward recalibration of the Democratic Party in the 90s, through the first term of Bush Jr’s administration. He said Super Mario 64 had originally been conceived as a game in which Super Mario heroically trounces Barry Goldwater in the 1964 election.

I asked him to clarify. Nintendo is a Japanese company, and even its American subsidiaries focus more on localizations, on translation and distribution, than on developing
software. Why would Shigeru Miyamoto’s team have designed a game in the 1990s about a failed American presidential campaign from 32 years earlier? Wasn’t the game called *Super Mario 64* because it was being released on the Nintendo 64, not for any thematic or narrative reasons?

He said Miyamoto was a mysterious guy—a genius, sure, but not somebody whose creative choices were always easy to understand. Miyamoto had supposedly been captivated and horrified by Lyndon Johnson’s famous “Daisy” ad when he watched it nearly a quarter-century after its original air date: such a simple, potent image, innocence demolished by nuclear war. Miyamoto always strove for a feeling of exuberant fun in his games; even the totalitarian villains in the *Super Mario* and *Legend of Zelda* series are eccentric cartoons, not scary in any real-world sense. But according to tetsuo_but_aging, the Daisy ad shook something loose inside of him.

Nintendo was a Japanese company, but Mario was an Italian-American character. Who better to retroactively celebrate Goldwater’s loss, and the (albeit temporary) defeat of the American right wing? There was even a relevant built-in opportunity for puns: one of the princesses in the *Mario* games was already named Daisy.

They started designing the game around that central conceit, Mario as an avatar of progressive idealism, a reptilian caricature of Barry Goldwater as the warmongering oppressor. In this game, Mario was not just going to beat Goldwater the way he usually beat villains. He was going to run against him in an election. By beating *Super Mario 64* as it was originally conceived, players would find themselves filled with pacifistic elation, the feeling that they had somehow not only averted nuclear apocalypse but ended all war forever. Then, incredibly,

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37 And I do agree with this position: if there is such a thing as a creative genius in the video game medium, Shigeru Miyamoto is one.

38 “He’s a plumber from New York, and an altruistic superhero!” tetsuo said. “What, you think he wouldn’t be a union organizer?”

39 By jumping on them, throwing fireballs, etc.
Nintendo developed the N64 console around that idea. Miyamoto needed to make a Mario game about the 64 election, so they were going to design a console with 64-bit processing power to complement the game’s title. The Nintendo 64, the most popular video game console of its generation, had emerged as part of a synergistic line to support a version of a game that, ultimately, they didn’t end up making.

“Would that game have been a little too simplistic?” I asked tetsuo but aging. After all, Goldwater had actually lost in 1964, and badly, but his campaign still paved the way for Nixon and Reagan and Bush. What would be the point of making a video game to celebrate a victory that, in hindsight, had been depressingly temporary?

“Well, yeah,” said tetsuo. “I mean, you’ve played Super Mario 64, and clearly it’s not that game. Somebody shot it down. Maybe Miyamoto decided it was a bad idea, or maybe it was the money people. But imagine beating up on Goldwater in the 90s, especially knowing about his legacy. And imagine the potential sequels! Mario 68, Mario 80, Mario 04. Man, when they canceled that project, I knew I wasn’t cut out for the games industry. But we still got a great console out of it, huh?”

That was true, I had to admit. Eventually we both stopped posting on Livejournal, and I’ve come to believe since then that there had never been a “Mario Vs. Goldwater” version of Super Mario 64. But even now, when I go back to replay that game, I imagine Mario as a liberator, an organizer, an agent of change. It’s a stretch, but it’s still easier than imagining him with no mustache.
Holly gets bored with T.V. infomercials after a few hours, so around ten o’clock we decide to go out to this hip new microwave café for dinner and drinks. We call a couple of our friends to see if they want to come—as it turns out, they’re already there.

Apparently the café is really swinging:

“You’ve got to check this place out. It’s a killer scene,” Jack insists, “but you’d better hurry. The tables are filling up like jelly doughnuts.”

“Like éclairs,” corrects Randy.

Holly and I agree that Randy’s analogy is the more interesting and exotic of the two, and even Jack concedes that it’s probably more accurate.

I check myself in the mirror before leaving. I can’t go out looking like this. Holly says I shouldn’t worry about it, but I can tell she’s just being polite. She’s got that flatness in her voice, that disaffected drone that occasionally happens when she’s trying to sound sincere. Besides, she and I both know how important it is to look at least decent in public places.

I shave oblong spirals into my hair and give my fingernails a good violent flossing. I don my velour kilt and snakeskin sunglasses.

Holly puts in her funhouse-mirror contacts. She polishes her ironic tooth piercings until her smile projects holographic kitsch in even the dimmest light.

In unison, we sing, “All set.”

We spend the cab ride feverishly anticipating the best microwavables money can buy.
We can tell when we’re getting close because there’s a big neon sign towering over the surrounding buildings. BLANK FRANK’S EXQUISITE MICROWAVE SHACK, it says, luminescent with the kinds of perfectly oversaturated colors usually found in Saturday morning cartoons and Silver Age comics: Mountain Dew yellow, atomic-waste green, shark-infested Ocean blue. Everything around the sign takes a turn for the kaleidoscopic. Even the shadows in the alleyways assume a cheery pop-art tint.

There’s a line developing outside, but it’s not long enough to discourage us. A guy up at the front is wearing a zebra-patterned neckerchief, maroon bike shorts, and a DayGlo green parka that sparkles in the neon light—last year’s ensemble all over. The clueless motherfucker’s giving the bouncer a hard time.

There’s something oddly familiar about him. It’s not him I recognize, but the way he carries himself, the manic desperation in his voice as he tries convincing the bouncer to let him in. His hands are trembling with barely restrained violence, like he wishes he had something to prove.

“There’s no way he’s getting in looking like that,” Holly says, and she’s right.

The bouncer picks him up off the ground and tosses him out into the street. I feel myself involuntarily cringing when he hits the ground, and glance at Holly to make sure she hasn’t noticed my reaction. She looks back with a diffident smile, and her eyes are radiating shark-infested ocean blue.

The bouncer lifts his arms up in triumph, and the line erupts with applause. The bouncer—with his studded leather vest, fishnet weight-lifting gloves, and greasy pompadour—bears a suspicious and unpleasant resemblance to Andrew Dice Clay. I suspect it might even be him, but I don’t say anything.
The marquee above the door says LIVE MUSIC 9:30 PM: THE “THAT GUY’S” (CHARACTER-ACTOR TRIBUTE BAND).


**On Food, and Its Ordering**

We meet Jack and Randy at a tiny circular table in the middle of the strobe-lit room. They’re looking classy in their matching pleather jumpsuits, both with the words SEXUALLY AVAILABLE written across their torsos in bronze sequins. They’ve got little downy tufts of peroxide chest hair poking out from their unzipped collars, and raw unfiltered machismo practically oozing from their perfectly rounded nostrils.

Along the back wall, there’s a smorgasbord of different name-brand microwave ovens to try. The servers are efficiently preparing people’s orders in them, moving from table to kitchen to microwave and back like dispassionate lurex-clad worker ants.

I order the special: a bowl of ramen prepared in Maytag’s new model, “The Annihilator,” with a cup of reheated day-old coffee to drink. I ask them to heat the living hell out of the ramen. I say that I’ve had ramen before and know full well what it tastes like, but that I’d love to try the essence of that microwave.

Holly orders a plate of mystery leftovers and a glass of instant apple cider, heated in the Whirlpool Mark II.

“The Mark II! Commendable choice,” says Randy.

“Oh, that’s a good vintage,” adds Jack.
They’re not just being flattering, either: Holly has good taste. The leftovers themselves present just enough of a risk to make the meal exciting, but everybody knows you can’t go wrong with the Mark II. I can only hope my meal is as good.

**On Disappointment, and Human Mating Rituals**

The “That Guy”s, true to Holly’s description, are laying down a sick version of “Harry Dean Stanton”: the upright bass player is especially vibrant, hopping up and down behind his instrument like a spring-loaded gremlin. The kids in front of the stage are really digging it, too, gyrating to the pounding rockabilly beat. They look like drunken marionettes attempting The Twist, gaping into each other’s eyes through the blissful haze of the band’s fog machine.

Our food comes out after about two minutes. Mine tastes like salted rubber and lazy steam, with the texture of a wet newspaper. The coffee tastes like finely aged pencil shavings.

“You can barely even tell it was ever food,” says Jack with delight.

“C’est magnifique,” says Randy. He kisses the air as he says it—a true gourmand, that Randy.

Holly isn’t happy with hers.

“This tastes fresh,” she pouts. “This tastes like they just now cooked it for the first time. Here, try it.”

I look at her plate and, sure enough, it’s a freshly stewed bouillabaisse, a whole extravagant spread of the stuff: a lobster, newly picked vegetables, a variety of just-caught fish. Dread overwhells me as Holly hands me a piece of rouille-covered bread. I taste it briefly, and only out of a sense of duty to Holly.
This stuff has a richness of flavor that I can’t help but find grotesque, even vulgar. The preponderance of garlic and saffron, the freshness of the seafood—it’s just tacky. Even worse, it clearly took hours to prepare: who’s got the time? The very idea is embarrassing to consider.

Still, I get a certain guilty pleasure from eating it, not that I would ever admit that to Holly. It’s almost voyeuristic, even. I can practically taste the chef’s human presence in this meal, which is thrilling and disgusting in equal measure.

It kicks in. I remember, suddenly, watching TV after school, eating Kraft macaroni-and-cheese my mom had made (prepared?) before a Homeowner’s Association board meeting. It was part of that whole post-Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles wave of anthropomorphic animal-warrior cartoons—a pretty short-lived one, Danger*Wasps. I momentarily drown in my friends’ judgment. Are my sunglasses the right shade? I didn’t pick up on it at the time, but in retrospect it seems like the show was doomed to failure by its weird, half-hearted attempts at parodying middle America. Is anybody else wearing velour? I heard at some point that some species of wasp can lay eggs inside other bugs, and then when the eggs hatch, the larvae have some kind of rudimentary mind control over the host creature. I remember that each anthropomorphic wasp in the cartoon, in addition to being a Muay Thai expert, had some prototypical upper-middle-class job: there was a lawyer, an insurance claims adjuster, two doctors. My esophagus heats up and everything vibrates at an unbearable pitch. I never got the cartoon’s “wasp”/“W.A.S.P.” pun until now, as gauche and heavy-handed as it sounds to me now. Randy is doing that weirdly flattering Jimmy Carter impression he busts out seemingly every time we hang out, and everybody at the table is laughing. It didn’t occur to me as a kid that there might be something odd about warrior wasp-people playing bocce and frequenting book clubs in their spare time. I’m sure the insect mind-control isn’t some kind of voodoo zombie thing—nothing as totalizing as that—but still:
some caterpillars and roaches have to worry about having their brains colonized by other bugs, their internal chemistry no longer really their own. I’m laughing, too, at the way Randy is so clearly actually doing Dan Aykroyd-as-Jimmy-Carter rather than the actual Carter, and at the way we can’t usually tell the difference. He’s even holding a finger across his upper lip, mimicking Aykroyd’s Carter-era mustache. The table is buzzing, or the room is, or I am. I feel like the chef is forcing me to listen to his darkest personal confessions and, for some reason beyond my comprehension, I’m almost enjoying it.

The band’s singer gets to Harry Dean Stanton’s money line from Repo Man—“I don’t want no Commies in my car! No Christians, either.”—and the kids erupt at the thrill.

**On Encounters**

Even after the unwanted charge subsides, I’m still shaken. There’s no way I’m eating more of that, at least not in public. I return to my trusty ramen until the waiter comes back, his silver lurex uniform shimmering distracting under the strobe lights.

“Hey, what’s with the stew?” I ask. I say it with a sort of feigned swagger, to maintain my own composure if nothing else.

“Is there something wrong with it?” says the waiter. There’s a blankness in his face that’s genuinely confounding. It’s like talking to a sea cucumber.

“Of course there is,” I say, but I don’t get a chance to make my case before Jack interrupts.

“It’s false advertising,” says Jack.

“Nefarious treason,” says Randy, without even looking up from his Kid Cuisine fish sticks dinner.

The waiter looks at the bouillabaisse, at the menu, and again at the bouillabaisse.
“Ah!” he says with the glint of revelation in his eyes. “You ordered the leftovers. This, on the other hand”—gesturing now at the stew—“is not leftovers.”

“Right,” I say, trying to sound as accusatory as I possibly can. “Isn’t this supposed to be a microwave café? Can you just bring her what she ordered?”

“Look,” says the waiter. Then, after a brief pause, he adds, “I’ll be right back.”

He skitters over to the swinging kitchen door, just between the microwave stacks on the back wall. The giant stacks make the door look miniscule, almost unnoticeable, by comparison. The size disparity only enhances the waiting staff’s resemblance to a colony of insects, all streaming, payload in hand, from a tiny hole in the wall.

**On Minor Revelations, or the Lack Thereof**

Within moments, an older man has emerged from the kitchen. It’s easy to tell he isn’t just part of the waiting staff. He glides to our table with a stage magician’s sense of drama, all hand flourishes and insinuating eyebrows. With his graying van dyke, thin-rimmed glasses, and black velvet cape and fedora, he looks professorial and distinguished, but he carries himself with an actor’s flamboyance. Watching him move is jarring, like watching Roger Corman’s oeuvre recast with Leon Trotsky playing all the Vincent Price roles.

“My name is Blank Frank,” he says, “but just ‘Frank’ will suffice. How can I help you?”

His eyebrows are waggling back and forth like something rendered by an overeager stop-motion animator. There’s no way those things aren’t prosthetic. If they’re natural, Frank has some enviable genes for sure.

“We were just wondering,” I say, pointing at myself and Holly, “why you served this when she clearly ordered the leftovers. What kind of establishment are you running here?”
“Ah! The bouillabaisse,” he says. He pronounces it “BOOL-yuh-bez,” milking each syllable for maximum Francophonic flavor. “You don’t like it?”

“No,” I say, “and that’s beside the point. She ordered the leftovers.”

“It’s an old recipe,” he says. “Been in my family for generations—leftover recipe, n’est-ce pas?”

Now I realize who Frank really resembles, more than Trotsky or Price or some amalgam of the two. He’s actually closer to the way Orson Welles looked and acted in his late career, during his legendary tenure as a pitchman for Californian champagne and frozen peas. Clearly I’ve been off my game since eating the bouillabaisse. Welles is the patron saint of the celebrity infomercial, one of the shining examples of a great artist debasing himself in his own time so my generation could appreciate him in a different light. As a teenager, I had all the bootleg tapes—Welles embarrassingly drunk on the wine he was supposed to be advertising, Welles eviscerating the clunky lines he had to read shilling Findus brand frozen peas. The guy’s an icon. Even a less accurate facsimile than Frank would be intimidating.

“Wait—that’s really your explanation? That’s ridiculous,” I say, hoping that I’m only imagining the cracks in my voice. “Are you running some kind of flimflam game?”

“I can’t say I really understand your complaint here,” Frank starts to say before Holly, leaning over to me, whispers that I’m starting to make a scene. The kids in front of the stage are staring at us.

“Jesus, Holly, you should at least be able to get what you ordered,” I say, before noticing that my hands are twitching uncontrollably.

“Nah, let’s get out of here,” she says with a shrug. “This place just isn’t what I was hoping for.”
Holograms of Hanna-Barbera cartoon characters dance reassuringly in the air in front of her face.

**On Coping**

“Anyway,” Jack says as we’re leaving our table, “we know this great Hostess dessert bar just down the block. Anybody in the mood for some CupCakes™?”

“their Devil Dogs are to die for,” adds Randy. “I think they get their supplies from a warehouse that’s officially been closed for something like twenty years. Plus: go-go dancers!”

He and Jack both pantomime go-go dancing.

“Let’s go get our male gaze on!” they yell.

Holly and I glance at each other as the beautifully emotive strains of the band’s radically reinterpreted “Tom Noonan” swell in the background. My warped reflection stares back at me from her eyes. Unless her contacts are deceiving me, the spirals in my hair aren’t quite as oblong as I thought.

“Nah,” Holly says. “It’s getting kind of late, and I think there was an infomercial coming on in a little bit that we wanted to see. The one with Mr. T, you know?”

“I’m aware of it,” says Jack, his upper lip curling with slight but unconcealed disdain.

Holly and I call a cab. We’ve already seen the infomercial she was talking about at least half a dozen times, and know all the dialogue beats by rote. As we’re rounding the corner, we can still see Jack and Randy, confidently go-go dancing their way to the next hot spot.
9 Purely Transactional Cephalopod Frottage

I’m almost done with the last of my Friday errands, arranging a last-minute exorcism to cleanse one of our stars’ hotel rooms at about 11:00 p.m., when I get a call from Brendan. When the phone goes off, Padre Joe Wyngarde-Smythe—the only twenty-four-hour exorcist in Atlanta, at least within our studio’s budget—sighs loudly.

“This should be just a second, sorry,” I tell him, and he immediately starts mumbling something about the myriad clients for whom he could be dispelling bad energies tonight without having to deal with petulant kids wasting his goddamned time. I apologize again before switching lines. On the other line, Brendan sounds frantic, with what sounds like some kind of Ibiza house remix of “Pancho and Lefty” blaring in the background.

“Oh, Christine, thank god you’re up,” he says. “I need you to come pick me up at L’Truckstop Érotique. Bring forty-seven dollars.”

“L’Truckstop—wait, where is that? Is that a strip club or something?”

“Kind of. Almost,” he says. “Somewhere between Macon and Valdosta. Near Tifton, I think. Use your GPS, follow the billboards, it’s tough to miss going down 75. Just hurry. I lost my wallet and now I’m having bouncer troubles, real heavy Dixie Mafioso types. Confederate tattoos and shit.”

“Brendan,” I say. “That’s, like, three hours away.”

“What, like you have to work in the morning?”

I don’t, not exactly—tomorrow’s ostensibly my day off—but I still need to be on call. The life of a production assistant, the lowest you can possibly find yourself on the film-industry totem pole while getting paid in anything more material than college credits, is pretty much exactly as glamorous and stress-free as you might expect. Which is to say that
it’s neither one of those things, unless you find deep reserves of glamour and inner peace in driving all over Atlanta trying, usually in vain, to satisfy the mysterious whims of Hollywood figures whose star status rarely exceeds the kilowatt range.

Hence Padre Joe. Hence the four gallons of pink Tibetan sea-salt—an item I’m still not sure is possible, given Tibet’s altitude—I needed to have delivered to our emerging starlet’s hotel tonight. Hence the *Keystone Kops* laserdisc set and accompanying laserdisc player I needed to track down at roughly the same time as said Tibetan sea-salt. This is all for the same actress, not even counting the cast and crew I need to deal with throughout the week.

It’s a stressful job, is what I’m saying.

Still, there’s a real frightened quaver in Brendan’s voice, like something serious is up. I’ve only seen Brendan a handful of times in the last year or so, but he’s never seemed as panicked as this. I’m tired, but I figure something caffeinated might give me the heroic resolve I need to make it.

I switch to the other line to make sure Padre Joe has his end under control, and he curses an affirmation back.

“All right, all right,” I say. “But you owe me a drink.”

*And an explanation before that,* I almost say, but he’s already muttered a quick “thanks” and hung up before I get the chance.

I get a pot of coffee going and put on some jeans and sneakers and fill up a giant novelty travel mug that my bosses gave me at orientation. The mug says “Emerald Dream Factory: We Gestate America’s Cinematic Fantasies,” below a half-naked cartoon baby with a camera in one hand, a celluloid reel—basically obsolete these days, as far as our digital-
only studio is concerned—in the other, and a disingenuous, almost lawyerly grin on its face. I get into my sixteen-year-old Corolla and head toward 75 South.

* * * * *

As Brendan promised, L’Tuckstop Érotique is pretty easy to find, with big billboards lining 75 for thirty miles or so along the way. Granted, there are billboards all over the highway—some advertising pralines and boiled peanuts, some hotels and gas stations, some shouting incendiary political slogans in imposing red letters—but it’s easy to tell the difference, because L’Tuckstop’s signs all glow in the dark and say things like TOYS TOYS TOYS and DARN RIGHT OUR EPIDERMIS IS SHOWING and QUALITY BREAKFAST 24/7. I drained my travel mug about an hour ago, and I’m starting to feel a little delirious. The cartoon baby’s grin seems to have shifted from overconfident smarm to inverted despair, distress rendered as hollowed-out false elation, like it’s thinking, “Oh, I didn’t want us to make it through the night anyway. If you fall asleep and wrap the car around a tree, that’s just swell by me. I’m an inanimate object, and honestly a little uncomfortable with the way you’re putting words in my equally inanimate mouth.”

“Right,” I say. Eyes on the road. I turn up the stereo. Parallel Lines just started its second play-through—“Hanging on the Telephone” is cresting, all crash cymbals and surging guitar. It works, at least for now. I pull off at the exit and park in the first open spot I find, next to a rotting oak that looks like it must have fallen at least two or three weeks ago without anybody bothering to clean it up.

I get out of the car, as much to stretch my legs as to go find Brendan. L’Tuckstop is lit right up, easily the brightest thing in sight despite its surprisingly shack-like stature, and its front door is surrounded by about half a dozen dudes, mostly middle-aged but a little too
clean-shaven and upright to really fit the trucker profile, all radiating basically the same aura of—well, not sexual gratification, exactly, but some temporary illusion of the same. Cockiness stemming from the hollow certainty that they are both immeasurably virile and constantly taking the fullest possible advantage of that virility.

And I realize as I get closer that right there among them standing under the green aluminum awning is Brendan, he of lost wallet and bouncer troubles with the alleged Dixie mafia and fourteen years of occasionally testy friendship with myself, laughing and high-fiving and doing the whole fake-extrovert pantomime I’ve seen him unveil at dozens of parties over the years. I catch his eye as I get close enough to hear more than just the 4/4 bass thud and shrieking siren of whatever song is blaring inside the shack.

“Hey,” he says, elated.

My phone goes off. It’s Emmy Chamberfeld, who’s playing Rosalind Franklin in Deadly Helix, the Watson and Crick biopic we’re working on at E.D.F. The official line on Deadly Helix is that it’s a “reconstructionist biopic,” but from what I can tell it’s really more of a hagiopic: in this version of events, the pioneering geneticists James Watson and Francis Crick, both of whom are played by critical favorite and rumored Oscar front-runner Zackton Hofstaedler, heroically discover the double-helix model of human DNA despite the shrewish machinations of a devious femme fatale named Rosalind Franklin. Honestly, it’s a horrible, degrading interpretation of scientific history, but they weren’t exactly looking for my creative input when they hired me.

Emmy’s a big up-and-comer with plenty of People Magazine clout, and ranks highly on Roderick’s—my immediate boss, the impossibly patient and focused and prematurely bald guy in charge of corraling the PAs, pointing our assistantly talents in the right
directions—Not-To-Piss-Off-Under-Any-Circumstances List. This basically means that if she calls at three in the morning, it is in the entire production’s best interest for me to address her needs promptly and with an audible beaming smile, no matter how inane her reasons for calling may be, or how pissy and cruel her delivery.

I hold up a hand and yell something about how hey Brendan I’ve just got to take this and jesus it is actually a quarter past three in the morning, and Brendan nods eagerly.

“That exorcist you sent was woefully inadequate,” she says. “I mean, like, my hotel feels much more stable now—spiritually, I mean—which is good, so I can use my sea salt in peace, but he was very rude. Very shouty. Horribly insensitive, to both myself and the abyssal presence that had been haunting the balcony. Now it’ll be hours before I get over the emotional distress, and it’s all because of your lousy taste.”

Okay, first of all: I’m pretty sure there was no abyssal presence haunting her balcony in the first place, although the actors I’ve worked so far with have seemed unusually sensitive to things like that, so who knows? Second: I’m pleasantly surprised that she even acknowledged the sea salt delivery. Usually she only mentions my alleged fuck-ups. Third: is there a polite way for exorcists to do their job, even leaving aside my doubts about the field’s legitimacy in the first place? Third: a burly, shirtless man wearing a burgundy-stained wooden mask—looks like some kind of Germanic pagan design, maybe Norse?—is approaching Brendan with a scary mix of delicate balletic grace and violent determination.

I decide that for now my best option would be to redirect the conversation, hoping to end it on a decent note so I can get on with my night: “So, did those Keystone Kops laserdiscs come in okay? I got them from the best laserdisc guy in the southeast—he guaranteed that the quality was as pristine as it gets.”
“Yes,” she says, “but that’s not the point.”

“You like that vaudeville stuff, huh? If I could get you a copy of the Mack Sennett
Deep Cuts set—also laserdisc, also guaranteed top-quality—within the next couple of hours, would that help?”

There’s a second of humming room tone on the other end.

“You insufferable bitch,” she responds, relieved. I’ll text one of my people in a few minutes, once I’ve figured out Mask Guy’s deal.

“Christine,” Brendan says, and suddenly feints forward into a spin as the guy with the mask approaches. Brendan’s evidently mastered some kind of pothead quasi-capoeira, moving with surprising grace into the body language of Keanuesque pleasant surprise when he sees the guy.

“Oh, hey,” he says to the guy with the mask, and turning to me he adds, “Christine, this is Oxmaster Dave. Oxmaster Dave, Christine.”

Oxmaster Dave shrugs and bashfully waves. He seems friendly—not a Confederate tattoo in sight, though now that he’s closer I can see tattooed bull horns along the sides of his shaved head. The effect is a little unnerving.

Brendan leans up to me and whispers something about needing to get out of here please now please and then he starts bee-lining over toward my car.

I grab his arm and say, “Did you still need those forty-seven dollars?”

“Oh, haha, yeah, no,” he says. “It turned out my wallet was in my other pocket the whole time. We found it, like, two minutes after we got off the phone, come to think of it. Isn’t that right, Oxmaster Dave?”
Dave gives a big thumbs-up with a shockingly clean—like totally antiseptic, borderline artificial-looking in its cleanliness—thumb. This guy’s playing to the cheap seats. I guess he has to, since his mask’s permanent grimace prevents any facial expression. As we pull away, I notice that he’s nowhere in sight, but the afterimage of his huge shiny thumb is still lingering in the air above the parking lot, like some kind of lighthouse beacon.

* * * * *

“Okay,” I say once we’re nearing the highway. “What.”

“Hm?”

“I get down here from Atlanta at fucking three in the morning, and you weren’t even in trouble?”

“I, look,” he says. “I just wasn’t comfortable and I wanted out. Never go inside that place, promise me. I was mostly in the Elbow Chamber the whole time, but trust me: from what I can tell, the rest of that place makes *120 Days of Sodom* look like, umm, *119 Days of Sodom*.”

“‘Elbow Chamber’? Brendan, that place was like the size of a Burger King.”

“Above ground it is, yeah,” he says. His eyes widen and I notice that they’re near-totally ravaged, shot through with pale red, with crow’s-feet emerging from the sides like he’s markedly older than his twenty-six years.

“Underground is a different story, though,” he continues. “It’s a giant compound down there. There are probably people doing horrible things to each other directly below us as we speak. The owner, Baron Zebulus, he’s like Caligula reincarnated as Boss Hogg. All those people, they’re really friendly at first but you can just tell they’ve got all kinds of
sinister shit going on underneath. That’s even before they start wheeling the cuttlefish tank into the Elbow Chamber.”

He reaches to turn up the stereo and starts singing along with “Heart of Glass”—not with Debbie Harry, but with the syncopated riff, making onomatopoeic guitar sounds—before I turn it back down.

“A: cuttlefish? B: So why were you there?”

“Look,” he says, reluctantly pulling two, three, four rolled-up Ziploc bags out of his pocket, filled with substances I mostly don’t recognize. “Purely transactional. I wouldn’t have gone if it wasn’t worth it—what, you think I’m some kind of depraved freak?”

He holds up his right arm, shows me the inner elbow. It’s covered in circular abrasions, sucker-shaped.

“Cuttlefish,” he says ruefully. “I don’t even remember how I got there, honestly.”

“So you’re, what? Smuggling drugs now?”

“Guess so,” he says. “You know how we—at the bar, I mean—have kind of a coke bar reputation?”

I didn’t know that, but I figure it’s safe to take his word for it.

“I guess they, or we, decided maybe we could become more of an anything-you-want type of establishment. Differentiate ourselves from the EAV competition a little.” He giggles for a second and adds, “‘Druggling.’”

I reach over and punch him in the shoulder.

“Look, man,” I say. “It’s bad enough that you’re bringing god knows what kinds of controlled substances into my car, especially with me tired and undercaffeinated and frankly
already pretty stressed. But the minute you start slinging embarrassing portmanteaux like that, you’re pretty much begging to get thrown out.”

He nods, turns the music back up, and looks out his window, ashamed. We pass two billboards saying, seemingly in conversation with one another, JESUS and WHERE’S THE BIRTH CERTIFICATE? As far I can see, miles and miles and miles to the horizon, my car is the only thing on the interstate aside from trucks and barely sufficient light.

* * * * *

The last few times I saw Brendan, he seemed a little more grounded. It’s always been at mutual friends’ house parties, those weird semiannual gatherings where we all check in with each other to confirm that, yes, exactly half of us have changed significantly since high school, and then, as if to deny those years of change, we all end up drunk (on more expensive liquor than we could afford ten years ago) and in a swimming pool whether or not we brought swimwear, and some people who never see each other anymore outside of these parties inevitably find themselves retreating in tandem to unoccupied bedrooms for either Serious Heart-To-Heart Conversations or something a little more physically involved.

We’re not in the last category, and never have been. We always end up sitting on somebody’s screen porch with the smokers. I don’t smoke, but that’s usually where the best conversations happen—fewer people dancing badly than in the living room, fewer people awkwardly making out while leaning against countertops than in the kitchen. Last time we talked, I guess six months ago, he had gotten a raise at the East Atlanta bar where he had been working for a while, which I took to be a good sign—after spending half his twenties in jail or probation for one stupid mistake after another, any kind of steady employment seemed
like a step in the right direction. I was only a few months into the Emerald Dream Factory job myself, and everything was bright and thrilling for everybody.

* * * *

Now, as we approach Macon, we’re listening to the radio. I love Blondie, but two consecutive listens is enough for one road trip. Some blustery chump is spouting paranoiac nonsense about “the enemies of pleasure” and their simultaneous “vicious guerilla” campaigns against cigarettes and traditional masculinity.

“They will stop at nothing, the enemies of pleasure, to destroy any and all things you and I hold dear in this world. Gentlemen, hold me to this promise: I am a soldier of Eros, of Bacchus, a defender of the cause. I will die before I allow myself, or you fine listeners, to be savagely misandristed and trod upon. I will die with cigar in hand, with a proper suit and tie, with the sweat well-preserved on my brow.’’

“Brendan, are you hearing this?’’

“What, you don’t usually listen to A.M. radio this late at night?’’ he says. “Something like 78% of it is this guy. I don’t think he even has a name. He might not even be a person—just some weird fluke of the radio, like they’re picking up all the dumb vague paranoia floating around and turning it into transmittable soundwaves. It’s cool, though, because the other 22% is Coast to Coast, which is usually both fun and informative.’’

We pass a sign that says DUANE ALLMAN MEMORIAL NEXT EXIT.

“Oh, man, can we stop there?’’ says Brendan.

“Dude, middle of the night.’’

“Okay,’’ he concedes. “You know, when I was a kid I thought they were called the ‘Almond Brothers Band’? I thought they were actual humanoid almonds, like the California
Raisins, like some almond scientists had engineered nuts to sing and play guitar. When my
dad told me Duane Almond had died in a motorcycle accident in the 70s, it was like a serious
dawning realization about the moral limits of science. If you teach an almond to play
guitar—not just play guitar, but play guitar at crazy virtuoso levels—maybe it’ll end up
having trouble resisting the allure of cocaine and motorcycles and other basic human vices
too. You know. Icarus flying too close to the sun. Frankenstein’s monster. Things like that.”

I look at him and almost laugh, but he’s totally stone-faced.

“I think that was really when I first started developing my code of ethics,” he says,
and starts humming “Ramblin Man.”

The travel mug is still right there, and still empty. The baby’s grin looks outright
malicious now, actively conspiring against me.

“You know what?” I say. “I need to refuel.”

“Okay,” he says, and goes back to humming.
Jesus. Brendan’s looking at me all confused. I’m suddenly remembering what Roderick told me before Zackton’s first day on set: “He’s a disarmingly sweet guy, his intelligence is well above average for a Hollywood actor, and you’ve seen his work—the guy’s got incredible devotion to his craft, and plenty of awards to show for it—but he goes into these strange fugue states on occasion, and has absolutely no idea of his own strength.”

I had assumed he was joking, but I should have realized in the intervening weeks that Roderick is basically never joking, even when it’s nearly impossible to think of another reason for him to be saying the things he says.

“Okay, I need you to stay calm. Was it a cat? A rabbit?”

“A guinea pig,” he says. “It was so nice and fuzzy and I just wanted to pet it.”

Okay. Rodents, we can keep under wraps. I’m not sure if the movie would be able to withstand a cat scandal, even with the actor widely regarded as his generation’s Daniel Day-Lewis, but a guinea pig is probably manageable. I’ll have to call Roderick right at eight o’clock, the earliest we’re allowed to bother him on Saturdays.

“Are you in your hotel?”

“Yes.”

“Zackton, what I need you to do is stay in your room until you hear from either me or Roderick. It should only be a few hours. Whatever you do, do not leave and do not contact anybody else. Please. Please.”

He hangs up without saying anything.

“Work stuff?” says Brendan.

“Yeah,” I say. “I work with some pretty strange people.”

“Tell me about it.”
A little north of Macon, I notice a pair of headlights approaching behind us, the first non-semi I’ve seen on the highway in hours. My rear window starts flashing red and blue. Sirens overtake the sound of George Noory on *Coast to Coast* interviewing somebody who claims to have encountered a were-lamprey in the wild.

“I’m going the speed limit, I think,” I say. “Is it 65 out here?”

Brendan shrugs. “I haven’t driven in years. Never bothered getting my license renewed after they suspended it, remember?”

“Right.”

I pull over and roll down the window, and there’s a sudden blinding flashlight shining into the car.

“Hello, officer,” I say, though I can’t see an officer—just light. Everything outside the car is light.

“Hello, ma’am,” says a voice coming from the light. It sounds like a cop, at least. “You’ve been driving erratically these last couple of miles, and, well—I just wanted to make sure you hadn’t been drinking or anything.”

“No, officer. Just coffee, I’m afraid,” I say. I try to laugh, like maybe that’ll ease his mind or something, but nothing’s coming. This cop is full of it—he hasn’t even been following me for the last couple of miles, and I’m 90% sure I haven’t been driving erratically.

“I understand,” he says, creepily benevolent. “It’s pretty late. Maybe your boyfriend should take the wheel for a stretch.”
The light shines directly onto Brendan, and I swear the capillaries in his eyes go luminescent red, like they’re pumping lava. Brendan twitches and says, “Yes, officer. In fact, I’ve got a mantelpiece loaded with driver trophies.”

“Impressive,” says the patrolman. I can’t tell if he’s being sincere. Brendan reaches for the door handle like he’s ready to get out of the car, presumably with several Ziploc bags full of drugs still stuffed into his jeans. I look at Brendan, trying to get a read on what he’s thinking. He looks resigned somehow, but I’m not sure what exactly he’s resigning himself to.

A car rumbles past at what seems like eighty-plus miles an hour. The cop suddenly turns and the first thing I notice is relief at the fact that there’s no longer a flashlight shining right into my car. As the car passes, I notice it’s a burgundy pickup truck with horn-shaped patches where the paint’s been peeled off, and a fluorescent vanity plate that says “EBN OXN.”

“I, well,” says the officer, who, now that I can actually see him clearly, seems to be in his early twenties, and basically clueless. “Some duties have to take precedence, you know. Be careful out there, kids.”

He ambles back to his car. The car lights up and goes bolting down the highway after the pickup.

“I’m pretty sure that was Oxmaster Dave’s truck,” says Brendan. “He might have some errands of his own to run in Atlanta, or further north. Or maybe he and his brothers are just out for a joyride. It’s pretty hard to figure out a guy who never talks, you know?”

Before we get back on the road, he fumbles around the glove compartment for a different CD to play. He pulls out the Descendents’ skate-punk classic _Milo Goes to College_
and says, “Remember when we used to pile, like, seven people into my Eclipse and do donuts in the bowling alley parking lot while listening to this album?”

I do, but only barely, like I’m listening to a sun-bleached audiocassette of the memory: there are missing details, names, even feelings. How can I know at twenty-seven what it felt like to be seventeen? Does my brain even still have the parts it would need to fully process that stuff?

* * * * *

“You want to hear about a dream I’ve been having?” Brendan says after a few miles.

I don’t, really, and I say so, but he persists:

“So I’m riding my bike back from work, back to the house where I’ve been crashing lately. You know, it’s the same one I told you about before, when we were at Mary’s party a few months back. I’m not like officially a resident or anything, but they usually have a couch for me. Not a stable home situation, but it works for now.

“Anyway, so I’m at an intersection—it looks kind of like Flat Shoals and Glenwood, but you know dreams, certain details are a little hazy—and I get the left green arrow indicating that I have right of way. I pedal forward into the intersection, and a huge yellow Hummer goes to make a right turn on red just as I’m entering his path. Again, I have right of way. He’s the asshole in this scenario, easy. But his car is much bigger than my bike, so I go kind of careening over into the left lane and fall, basically, right on my ass.

“I look up, and the Hummer is more than a Hummer. It’s growing. It’s gleaming, monolithic, its color isn’t yellow so much as yellow’s essence. Even the logo keeps increasing: Hummer, H2, H3, H4, et cetera. And as this giant car towers over me, a smirking face peers out from the driver’s window, and the face is the face of Noam Chomsky.
Specifically, it’s the face he’s always making on book jackets and stuff—those spoken word records he put out on Alternative Tentacles, you know—that assurance that he knows more than you do. And he wags his finger at me, like, ‘Know your place, kid,’ and drives off chuckling to himself.”

“Yeah,” I say, yawning. “That’s pretty weird all right.”

It’s not really his fault, at least not entirely. I’m just tired. The road ahead is completely empty, just darkness and a vague awareness that Atlanta is somewhere over the horizon.

“That’s not the weird part, though,” he adds. “The weird part is that the next day, when I’m fully awake, I look on the kitchen counter. There’s a big manila envelope addressed to me, though I’m not sure how anybody aside from my roommates figured out where I live—even my W-2 at work has an old address, has for a year or two now. Anyway, so I open up the envelope, and there’s an autographed headshot of Noam Chomsky himself, making exactly that same smirking expression he made when he ran me off the road in my dream. Wagging his finger.

“The headshot says, ‘Soon,’ right above his signed initials, ‘NC.’ That’s all. ‘Soon.’ And I’ve been having this dream, and receiving these headshots, for a couple of months now. I don’t know what to make of it.”

“Are you serious?” I say.

“I think so,” he says. “I think you might be the only person I can trust with this information. I’ve got probably eight or nine headshots of Noam Chomsky, or some kind of sinister nightmare facsimile, sitting in a folder under my friend’s couch. I could show you if you want, but I understand if you don’t want to get involved.”
“Christine, you’re the only person I trust,” he repeats. “Seriously.”

I look at him and it seems obvious that he at least thinks he’s telling the truth. The Descendents are playing “Jean Is Dead” over my car’s tinny speakers, which is probably the best way to listen to them anyway. Brendan says something, just barely at the edge of coherence, about pretty much constantly listening to this album when I went out of state for college and he stayed in town, like somehow it was a necessary salve to a wound I didn’t realize he had, like somehow the distance between Atlanta and Chapel Hill was impossibly huge.

“What?” I say, and suddenly remember a party at a slightly older friend’s apartment right before I left for college, or rather, a moment after the party had mostly dispersed, probably at about 5 a.m. or so. Brendan and I were watching some old Simpsons rerun, still drunk—still learning how to handle being drunk, really, refilling one glass after another with near-translucent tap water to fend off the hangover. I’ve forgotten the name of the friend whose apartment this was. Geoff or Dan or something like that. Some of our friends had passed out on the floor, one on the armchair. We both had our shoes propped on the coffee-table, right next to the mostly empty plastic bottle of bourbon Brendan had managed to find before the party. We weren’t, you know, involved or anything like that, even then. It was just time to fall asleep, and Geoff or Dan had a very comfortable couch. That’s all I remember from before I fell asleep: two pairs of Chucks suspended in front of us, with Homer Simpson talking about his union’s dental plan just out of focus in the background. It’s just an image, and one that hasn’t come to mind in years, its context mostly evaporated over time.

I look out at the sun just barely emerging through the approaching Atlanta skyline, and then at Brendan, who seems like he’s trying to plan his next words very carefully. I wonder if
he's thinking about the same thing, and, if he is, what those two pairs of Chucks mean to him now. I reach over, switch on the radio. We should be home soon enough.
When the air conditioning unit in his residence canister woke him with a start at 4:30 in the morning, Stephen found himself lying on the floor of the canister’s tiny foyer, his feet pressed against the wall a few feet up, his whole body approaching the shape of a defective pretzel. His eyes itched, and when he stood up he noticed his vision slowly oscillating between clarity and haze, like a camera in a constant state of movement and refocus, movement and refocus. Rubbing his eyes, he lurched his way past the roaring air vent toward the bathing stall, and the cold hit him with the force of a frozen clothesline to the chest, nearly knocking him over.

The A.C. had been like this for a while, abruptly roaring to a start whenever the temperature veered above the 68 °F required throughout the Arcology’s lower levels by Fenrir Ltd. corporate mandate. Stephen didn’t usually have trouble sleeping through it, even though the unit’s grinding racket ranged from 85 to 93 decibels when it was straining to keep the space cool, because the bed units on this level piped in a soothing high-volume medley of white noise and inspirational slogans to lull Residents to sleep: “The Game Isn’t Over Until YOU Say So,” “A Cleanly Slate Is a Godly Slate,” and Stephen’s least favorite, the auctioneer-pattered “SLEEP SLEEP SLEEP SLEEP SLEEP SLEEP SLEEP.” Tonight, though, he couldn’t remember making it to the bed unit in the first place, and the blast of cold felt shocking, assaultive. He pressed his left arm across his chest in what he knew was a half-hearted gesture toward keeping warm, while holding his right against the wall to prop himself up on the way to the bathing stall.

And there were his eyes, smearing a wall of distortion onto the efficiently packed space. Holding his face up to the wall-spanning mirror—slightly concave, but only to the degree that it needed to be to properly fit the bathing stall’s wall, stretching from floor to ceiling—he noticed,
surrounded by irritated reddening capillaries, transparent oval discs stuck to his eyes. Contact lenses.

He didn’t wear contacts. Very few people did inside the Arcology. Discounted ocular surgery was among the considerable perks of living here, even for mere Residents, and Stephen had been a Resident for three years now. He would proudly tout his Resident status to any outsiders, though he wasn’t yet a Citizen or Executive, and still had years of Aspiration and Achievement laid out in front of him.

He couldn’t remember what he had done after work last night; he hadn’t had anything to drink since he lived on the outside, and didn’t want to consider the possibility that he might have slipped over something as small as—did anything even happen yesterday to warrant any kind of excess, let alone a return to old habits? He didn’t think so.

After several minutes of trying, rubbing his eyes until he worried that he was crushing his retinae inward, he managed to extract the lenses. He looked at them closely, like a hunter examining his slain quarry. Powerful stuff—designed for extreme myopia, with an astigmatic left eye to top it off. If Stephen had put these in himself, there must have been a serious relapse involved. Drink after drink, fraternizing with strange people from the outside, people whose eyeballs were still misshapen despite the boundless opportunities to remold them into something better. He considered the possibility for a moment, and rejected it. He had made too much progress during his time inside.

The one-way ceiling intercom clicked on and a voice, Scandinavian-accented and stern but otherwise unidentifiable—probably digitally modified—emerged into the Residence Canister.
“Ha-hey Stephen,” the voice said, the sound so high-definition that it took on an almost physical sharpness, scraping the walls upon impact, acutely painful to hear.

“SEE anything interesting lately? Be sure to keep your EYES peeled,” the voice continued, and right before the intercom clicked off, Stephen was pretty sure he could hear peals of adolescent laughter, the voices ascending octaves within microseconds. They sounded stoned, he thought. Recreational chemicals were explicitly Not Encouraged in the Arcology’s Tome of Guidelines and Recommendations, but, kids being kids and Executives being Executives and Executive kids being both of those things, Stephen always figured it must be a pretty hard guideline to Enforce or even to Encourage. Fenrir Ltd.’s Departments of Guideline Enforcement and Recommendation Encouragement both had plenty of other more pressing matters to deal with, he figured.

He carefully placed the contacts, already drying, on the edge of the stall’s sink and crawled into his bed unit. He turned on the noise generator, realizing as it bellowed, “The Secret to a Better You Is a Better You,” that his ears would probably sting from the intercom for at least another day or two. As he fell asleep, his heart swelled with pride at the quality of his intercom.

* * * *

He still occasionally thought about life on the outside, but most of those memories were tainted by regret or misplaced yearning, which he knew was unhealthy. Per the Tome:

“Yearnings from the past are always misplaced. We Encourage you to yearn for the present’s future, not to dwell upon the past’s. We Encourage your tense to remain future rather than future perfect: ‘I will,’ not ‘I would have.’” Stephen was still working on it, especially the last part. He wanted a clean break, the kind of rebirth the Tome described as a “baptism in the peroxide stream of Tomorrow’s Future.”
He was less reluctant to remember watching the Fenrir Arcology in its early days, glittering in the Atlanta sun, a vast pyramid of reflective glass and beams of titanium alloy. Fenrir Ltd—a subsidiary of Angrboða International, a conglomerate originally based in Oslo—had announced a collaborative deal with the local government to turn the whole of Atlanta’s West Midtown into a self-sufficient high-rise luxury community, with bleeding-edge nanotechnology. Fenrir had paved the way for their Arcology program with a series of innovative mixed-use developments around the world: in San Francisco, in Dubai, at the Vanaheimr Moon Colony, in Kuala Lumpur, in Atlantic City.

The Arcology program was the next logical step: what if a mixed-use development was so advanced, so thoroughly developed, that it could stand entirely on its own, independent from the city surrounding it? With the Arcology project, Fenrir Ltd. were offering complete liberation: the slogan, when they originally unveiled the project, was “Deshackle [sic] Yourself from Society’s Gaze.” Now, finally, sufficiently driven individuals could reach their fullest potential, unburdened by stifling social mores. Atlanta’s was the fourth such arcology, after successful launches in London, Reykjavík, and Montreal. It was going to be a place devoted to “Making Scarcity a Rarity, and Making Rarities Commonplace,” as the enormous signal projected into the sky above the IKEA’s former location had announced to anybody within the metro area.

The local papers and alt-weeklies had criticized Fenrir Ltd. throughout the initial stages of the Arcology’s construction. It was a corruption of Atlanta’s character, said one Creative Loufing op-ed. It was a “Metal Monstrosity…an architectural fiasco…rooted as much in 70s New Age kitsch as it is in clueless Silicon Valley myopia.” His friends had laughed about it. Sure, Fenrir had already built three of these in other cities, but in Atlanta? It wouldn’t last. One
of his nerdier friends had called it “a Heinlein-era idea in a post-China Miéville world,” which
struck Stephen as pointlessly snobby. Who cared if it wasn’t a new idea? It was new to him.

Stephen used to watch the enormous panes of glass as they were hoisted into the sky. If
he caught the construction at the right time of day, when the glass was suspended high enough in
the air, he could see Atlanta’s image reflected down toward him. It looked cleaner. It looked like
a moving postcard. This was the world he wanted to live in. This was controlled, polished; it may
have been imperfect, but at least it was aiming for perfection. Stephen thought about the
wreckage of his twenties, most of which he had wasted pursuing a career that had turned out to
be a hopeless dead end.

When they finished constructing the Arcology, he decided it was time for a change. He
emptied out his meager savings account to enroll for Residency, and they gave him new eyes, a
shovel, and an extensive digital Tome of Guidelines and Recommendations, which he devoured
over the month-long orientation process.

Now, when he consulted the Tome on the railcar home from work, Stephen noticed that it
had neither Guidelines nor Recommendations related to contact lenses. It also lacked any
information about what he should do if he suspected that unruly teenaged Executives might be
drugging his nighttime rations and putting strange contacts into his eyes while he was knocked
out before dropping him on the floor of his own Residence Canister. He considered writing a
Q&A Request to the Tome Revision Committee, or possibly even filing a complaint with his
level’s Department of Recommendation Encouragement, but reconsidered after a moment. They
were overworked as it was. They deserved his sympathy, his patience. He could cope with it for
now.

* * * *
Stephen shoveled rust. That was his current job. Each morning he took a railcar, usually alone, to the Arcology’s subbasement, and opened his designated locker and pulled out his shovel and put on his goggles and hazmat suit and marched out to the pile in the corner and shoveled until it was time to clock out.

When he started working this job two years ago, the subbasement was an unkempt cavern, the floor entirely coated in about eight inches of the stuff. Excess oxidation was an inevitable byproduct of the post-scarcity process Fenrir Ltd.’s nanoculturists had devised, the specifics of which Stephen still found almost completely baffling and occult (though he hoped he might understand them as his mind grew more Efficient). At first, the room had resembled a pool of rust occasionally transformed into a raging torrent by the erratic A.C., Stephen ending up with a thin coat of it caked to his hazmat suit.

In those days, work made Stephen feel like an old Italian sculpture, one of those weird bronze things, looking like either (optimistically) the pure metalized distillation of motion and labor or (more cynically) a melting Little League trophy. Cynicism was only a hindrance here—as neatly summarized by the bed-unit slogan, “Cynicism Is Only a Hindrance, Cynics Are Flightless Birds,” which Stephen could only assume had lost some of its poetry in translation from the original Norwegian to English—so he opted for the former reading. In those days, he had felt truly Efficient, like his Achievement was tantalizingly close to lining up perfectly with his Aspiration. He had been, proudly, a model worker: Shoveler of the Year, though the competition was pretty light. As far as he could tell, the subbasement didn’t have any need for other shovelers.

Now, though, the subbasement floor was bare, even sterile, aside from the pile of rust. Every day, Stephen’s project was to move the pile from one corner of the subbasement to the
other. He wasn’t sure why, but his supervisor, Frida Hilmarsson, assured him that the project was building toward some essential purpose, something necessary for the Arcology’s maintenance and evolution.

“Look, Stephen,” Frida would say, “today we need the pile over here. We’ll see what’s needed tomorrow—it could be something new, could be nothing at all—but for now the northwest corner of the subbasement is where we need it to be.”

Stephen was almost starting to find the work circuitous and empty, a futile exercise in willful in-Efficiency, but he needed to take Frida’s word for it. She was a full-fledged Citizen who had already scraped away a substantial amount of her mind’s in-Efficient ballast—cynicism, unproductive memories, any Aspirations beyond his potential Achievement—so she almost certainly had a clearer sense of the big picture than Stephen did. Like many other Citizens and all the Executives, Frida had reached an Efficiency singularity, the point at which a Citizen or Executive became so Efficient that actual labor on their part was unnecessary and wasteful. These were the most valuable members of the Arcology’s population, per the Tome of Guidelines and Recommendations: their mere existence ensured that Achievements took place. Stephen had always struggled to figure out the math on how this Efficiency singularity was to work, but he knew he would get there eventually.

When he asked Frida how he could eventually afford to become as Efficient as she was, when he essentially worked for food and shelter and a minor bonus at the end of good weeks—and when he was concerned about watching his own Efficiency dwindle due to sleep deprivation and mysterious harassment episodes in the middle of the night—she reassuringly patted him on the back and said,

“Hey, you got this, buddy.”
So Stephen took his shovel and scooped a scoop of rust from the pile and, carefully
avoiding the air vent, walked it over to the northwest corner and deposited it neatly on the floor,
dismantling the pile only to rebuild it in a slightly different location, again and again.

* * * * *

When Stephen lost his last real pre-Arcology job, it took him two pay cycles to realize he
had been fired. He had been working at Gandr Industries’ Atlanta office for about five years, first
as an unpaid intern, then as a data entry clerk, then as a sales associate, then, for six glorious
months, as an assistant office manager. He had liked his job, and even now, living in the
Arcology, he was convinced that he had been good at it. He had liked applying his hard-
earned sales expertise, the people skills he had spent years honing, in a managerial capacity: he liked
offering guidance to the lower-ranking sales associates, helping them to satisfy their customers
as well as they could. He excelled at conflict resolution. It felt good, somehow. These people
weren’t his friends, and the increasingly demanding job made it nearly impossible to see his
actual friends as often as he would have liked. But he liked helping customers, and he liked
helping his staff help customers even more.

He did miss his friends, though, and when he could meet them for drinks he had a slight
tendency to go overboard, to indulge beyond what he would now refer to as his Efficiency
Threshold. (Per the Tome: “Each Resident and Citizen has an Efficiency Threshold that, once
crossed, will begin to diminish their ability to contribute. Of course, some have higher
Thresholds than others. Please consult your Overseer for a current Efficiency reading, if you
have concerns that you may be approaching your threshold.”) He was past that now. He didn’t
think about it very often. But he still remembered losing his job.
Three years ago, he returned home late on a Saturday night to find a postcard inelegantly taped to the door of his Midtown apartment. The front side featured what looked like a stock photo of a young woman windsurfing in the Pacific—Hawaii, he assumed, given the volcanoes outlining the horizon far behind the surfer. On the back, there was a message written in light blue ink, in what seemed like uncannily precise handwriting:

“Dearest Stephen,” it said. “Your future, it seems to us, is a minefield of opportunity. We envy you. We are positively overflowing with envy. We cannot contain ourselves. That is how confident we are in your future. You are on the verge of a great transformation, a ceaseless journey of self-discovery. We wish we were accompanying you in this transformation. Oh God, how we envy you. You are growing wings—vast, powerful condor wings. [NOTE.: we mean this metaphorically]. Let those wings carry you to the Mountains of Opportunity. Your brain is glowing with potential. Let that potential radiate through your skull and reconstruct this whole doomed world anew.

Your future is a series of tidal waves, constantly growing, coursing forward toward a beautiful shore. “Surf’s up!,” as we have always liked to say! Would that we could surf as well as you! 😎

Sincerely,

—GANDR INDUSTRIES (An Angrboða Company)"
Drunk and exhausted, he didn’t know what to make of the postcard. He stuck it to the fridge with a photo-magnet of the Hale-Bopp Comet, thinking he would give it another look in the morning. He poured himself a glass of water and stumbled over to the living room. Within half an hour, he had passed out on the couch watching *Frasier* reruns, leaving the glass untouched on his coffee table, the condensation pooling around it. The next morning, he was more concerned with his hangover than with whatever the postcard had been going on about.

The next six weeks were normal: Stephen continued to excel at conflict resolution. He assuaged one customer’s concerns after another’s. He worked to preserve staff morale by laughing at the sales associates’ jokes. He was so Efficient—though it would only later occur to him to describe himself in those terms—that he never needed to consult Rick Lees, his immediate higher-up, for instructions on how to best handle any potential crises.

Only later did he realize how strange it was that Rick hadn’t emerged from his office at any point in those six weeks. Still, he thought now, was Rick’s absence that strange or untoward? What duty did a Citizen—as Rick would no doubt have been if the office had had the Arcology’s social hierarchy—have toward a mere Resident, except to prevent the Residents from making permanently destructive mistakes?

He was baffled when there was no paycheck at the end of the next month. It was the first time a direct deposit had failed to go through in the years he had worked for Gandr, so he assumed it was just a clerical error. When he went to Rick’s office to ask about the discrepancy, Rick greeted him with a confused look.

“Hhhhey, Steve,” he said. “It’s been a while. What brings you to the office?”
“Oh, how’s it going, I just, I, ah, I thought, I was wondering, has Payroll figured out what’s wrong with last month’s deposits? I assume I’m not the only one who hasn’t gotten paid yet, right?”

Rick paused for a moment, then said, “Oh, Jesus. Did you not get the postcard?”

“Oh, yeah.” He remembered reading it, but had forgotten to even think about it after the cursory initial reading. “What was the deal with that postcard, anyway? Advance notice from payroll? Are they upgrading their system or something?”

“See,” said Rick, “This kind of thing, this is exactly the problem.”

* * * * *

Stephen liked spending Saturdays in the Arboretum. To access the middle levels, he had to buy a guest pass with the bonus Sköllbucks he received for his exemplary shoveling at the end of each week. It was worth it, though, for the open space, for the A.C. that actually tried to approximate the feeling of a natural breeze. He sat under a mangrove tree, watching the dozens of tiny nanorobotic crabs scurrying around its roots. He knew from reading the *Tome* that they weren’t real crabs: a constant retinue of nanobots supplied the trees in the Arboretum with the moisture and nutrients they needed to survive, in this case injecting saline water into the soil below and eating away at excess moss. In the mangrove section, they moved in clusters resembling the crabs that would have occurred in the tree’s natural habitat. They looked frantic, even playful, weaving in and out from the roots in an unending pattern of unpredictable rapid motion—like they were following paths that only they could predict, that were several orders of complexity beyond anything that Stephen could wrap his head around. It just looked like swarming chaos to him, but, he reminded himself, the chaos was being deployed for a constructive end.
Einar Aarseth, Stephen and Frida’s overseer and an Executive since before the Arcology had even opened, was tending to a nearby patch of goliath bonsai trees. He seemed to be pruning them into something approximating Fenrir Ltd.’s logo: the life tree Yggdrasil, with the company’s eponymous mythic wolf standing, miraculously, astride the branches. Aarseth turned off his electronic clippers and walked over to the mangrove’s shade.

“It’s interesting how even practical tools take on aesthetic properties when you stare at them long enough,” he said, gesturing toward the cast of mechanized crabs.

“Sure,” said Stephen, but he didn’t understand what he meant.

“The beauty doesn’t just lie in beauty,” Aarseth said, “It’s in the work being done, in its Efficiency.”

“Right,” said Stephen. The Aesthetic life-phase was reserved for Citizens and above. He could see the crabs’ utilitarian value, and he could see their aesthetic appeal. But he didn’t understand how the latter had anything to do with the former. “I figure I might have a better handle on what you mean when my brain gets more Efficient.”

“Probably,” said Aarseth, a little sheepishly, like he had said something inappropriate in a child’s presence. “You’ll get here, though. When you’re up here, everything is Aesthetic. Even Labor is Aesthetic. What you do in the subbasement? I know it might seem like the work is beneath you, but it is important to us.”

Stephen would occasionally tiptoe up to the point of almost considering his work beneath him, but Frida almost always managed to talk him back from the edge.

“I think I’m getting closer,” said Stephen, “but is there any way I can progress faster? I don’t mean to be impatient, you know, but—look, I keep waking up wearing other people’s contacts, I keep getting prank messages on my intercom, these puns that even I think are
moronic. I don’t know how much longer I can handle the Residence Canister. Even a relocation to a different Canister would probably be fine. Maybe. I think.”

Aarseth gave a smile that was almost grandfatherly, though he couldn’t have been more than a decade older than Stephen.

“I can deal with it for now—really, I can—but the stress doesn’t really help my chances of Self-Embetterment, does it?”

“Self-Embetterment” was another term from the Tome that Stephen figured had its origins in flawed translation, though he was glad to use it all the same, and felt that it deserved a place within the English lexicon.

“Let me show you something,” Aarseth said, and started walking across the Arboretum. Stephen followed him. A flock of shifting nanorobotic birds formed overhead, changing from birds-of-paradise to ravens to one enormous condor, then liquefying and falling onto a miniature rainforest about thirty yards to the east. Aarseth stopped in a patch of tubers, knelted on the dewy grass, and pulled one from the earth.


Stephen looked at it, reaching out but not touching it.

“What,” he said, “it’s like a sweet potato?”

“You could say that,” said Aarseth. “Just cut it up and eat it in slices instead of your rations. Raw is fine. It will help you mentally prepare for Ascension. This is a major opportunity for you, Stephen. I don’t offer this to Residents very often, but you’re a good shoveler, verging on true Efficiency, and you deserve it.”
Stephen took it, and Aarseth’s smile opened up into a toothy grin.

“The next Ascension ceremony is at the Vanahemr Moon Colony in three weeks. A trip to the Moon, sonic recitations by some of our own finest Aesthetes, and even a musical performance by—”

Aarseth paused and held up his hand, and it started teeming with nanobots, as if they were emerging from the follicles on the back of his wrist. After a moment of blurred writhing motion, they settled into place, appearing as a vaguely runic cipher tattooed on the back of his hand. He took a split second to examine the cipher, then said,

“—Ah! And a musical performance by dreamy rocker Johnny Rzeznik. And, of course, you get to become a Citizen. How does that sound?”

“Wait,” Stephen said. “The guy from the Goo Goo Dolls?”

“Nn—” said Aarseth, before looking back at his hand. For a split second, Stephen thought he could see a grimace on Aarseth’s face before he corrected himself. “—Yes! The very same. It will be a real celebration to remember.”

Stephen had wanted to become a Citizen since he first entered the Arcology—and, he supposed, he was curious to see what it was like on the Moon. That was, of course, secondary to his citizenship. But it was still enticing.

* * * *

That night, Stephen lay awake on the floor of his Residence Canister, A.C. blasting, holding his tuber, not yet ready to go to bed. He was thinking about it. He figured it could wait another night, at least. He heard the whisperings of Nordic teenagers outside his sliding door, and remembered his own teenage years with an almost unprecedented fondness.
He was playing bass in a pop-punk band at sixteen with borrowed gear that didn’t survive the first gig. He was sipping bottom-shelf peach schnapps out of a classmate’s Dasani bottle in homeroom during sophomore year. He was dropping advanced-placement classes to take on-level, mumbling something stupid like, “Hey, no hard feelings,” to the AP teacher on the way out of a tense one-on-one conference. He was not sneaking into anybody’s bedroom to put the wrong prescription of contacts into their eyes as they slept. He was going to college and mostly hating it, but now finding a kind of security in that loathing. These were bad memories, he thought, or at least tainted by unbridgeable gaps between aspiration and achievement. But he felt guiltily attached to them.

He put the tuber in his foot locker and climbed into the bed unit for the night. He turned up the speakers, which bellowed “Keep the Eye of the Tiger in Your Sights” amid a tornadic burst of noise. He would have to go back outside before making his decision.

* * * *

Occasionally, Aarseth would authorize temporary Jaunts outside the Arcology. They were expensive—about a month’s worth of Stephen’s bonus Sköllbucks—so Stephen hadn’t taken the opportunity very many times, but he liked knowing it was available. Any Residents could spend up to a weekend outside at a time, if they were accompanied by a Citizen, and they both agreed to spend part of the time outside proselytizing to the people of Atlanta. This would be his third weekend Jaunt, he and Frida spent about six hours on a street corner near Georgia Tech on a Friday afternoon, eagerly handing out pamphlets to the students.

“How badly do you want to discover the secret to a better you?” he would ask, reciting the slogans Aarseth had prepared for him. “Are you willing to take the great dive forward into Tomorrow’s Future?”
Most of the students ignored him, but about one in every four students would accept pamphlets. Granted, almost none of them said anything while they were taking the pamphlets, and 75% of those students immediately threw their pamphlets away into the nearest trash can as they walked away. Stephen came very close to feeling angry when he saw them throwing the pamphlets away: the least they could do was wait until they rounded the corner, to make their disinterest less obvious. And he didn’t even want to think about the ones who mumbled insults: “freaks,” “idiots,” “cultists,” “dorks.”

Still, as Frida pointed out, they were only depriving themselves of the opportunity for a better life. Stephen realized she was right. He had embarked upon a glorious journey, but to most non-residents it probably seemed daunting or alien. He was still only beginning his dive forward into Tomorrow’s Future, but the excitement was already almost more than he could handle. He couldn’t imagine how strange and overwhelming it must have sounded to outsiders. They would come around eventually. The whole world would understand the Fenrir way of life someday, hopefully soon.

At around midafternoon, a bearded man with wireframe glasses, probably around thirty, approached Stephen and Frida. He squinted for a few seconds, then reeled back, almost hitting an oncoming student with his messenger bag.

“Stephen?” he said. “What have you been up to? We’ve been worried.”

Stephen had to take a moment to process the face, see what information he could filter through the beard and glasses. The glasses were the most confusing part. He had nearly forgotten how many people on the outside were still walking around with defective eyes, somehow making their way through life without the clarity Stephen now took for granted.
“Jason!” said the bearded man. “Remember? You used to hang out at my house back in college? With Dave and Blaine and all of them? A bunch of us went to that Deerhunter show at 529 that one time. Somebody knocked me over onto the stage during the Barracudas’ opening set, and I got thrown out even though it totally wasn’t my fault what had happened?”

“Jason,” said Stephen. He was starting to remember. “Oh! Molly’s boyfriend?”

“Well, I used to be. But we’re still friends,” he said. He paused, then added, “Now we are, I mean.”

Jason had recently started adjuncting at Georgia Tech, teaching two sections of Intro to Sociology and three of Intro to Critical Thinking, for what didn’t sound like much money. He liked the work, sometimes. He didn’t especially like the pay or benefits. He liked working with students—again, sometimes: “Some of them I have trouble connecting with, honestly. I know a lot of them have their hearts set on working for Gandr or Gylfi or over at your place, even. At Fenrir. That careerism sets in early these days, man. And I say that remembering the kind of guy I was at their age.”

Stephen could barely remember what Jason had been like when they were younger, but he instinctively flinched at the mention of Fenrir. He knew the Arcology seemed strange to people on the outside, especially people who had never visited, but the implied slander nonetheless stung. What was wrong with aspiring to work for an Angrboða subsidiary? They were good companies. Jason had consigned himself to a life in academia, but at least his students sounded open-minded enough.

“I’m sure we could arrange a tour for your class, if you’re interested,” said Stephen. “Or for any of your students. Or for you, if you’re looking for a change.”
“No, I’m—seriously, I’m good.” Jason was smiling a little too widely, his face pulled taut.

“How’s your ocular health?”

“What?”

“You have glasses,” he said. “You didn’t always have glasses, right? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I probably should have been wearing them for years. I used to get these headaches whenever I tried to read, which—I mean, I have to do a lot of that here.”

Stephen saw an opportunity: “Do you ever miss not wearing glasses? Isn’t it a pain, having to remember to put them on and take them off every day?”

Jason started laughing. “It’s automatic by now. I barely notice I’m wearing them. I can’t imagine ever being able to afford LASIK or anything like that.” To Stephen, his apathy was not only incomprehensible but almost offensive. Why should he deny the opportunity to better himself? Did he think any less of Stephen for taking the necessary measures to improve his own life? Did he think Stephen was a loser, a freak, for joining the Arcology?

Fuck this, he thought. Immediately he chastised himself for ceding mental space to cynicism. He remembered the Tome’s words: Cynicism is only a hindrance. Cynics are flightless birds. Cynics are flightless birds.

“Jason,” he said. “It’s been great catching up, but I think—ahh, heck. Frida, didn’t we need to head back soon? It’s almost”—he looked at his watch—“3:18 p.m.”

“Oh,” said Jason, looking confused. “Well, I was going to meet a few of the others for drinks tomorrow, if you’re free then. I don’t know what your schedule is like over there, if you’re allowed to come out with us or what. I’m sure they’d love to see you.”
Stephen remembered the *Tome*'s description of Jaunts as “flowerbeds of temptation” that Residents might need a Citizen’s help to resist. He looked to Frida for help. Frida nodded and said apologetically, “I’m so sorry, but alcohol is Not Encouraged. You know how that goes, I assume. It was very nice to meet you.”

Stephen unclenched his fists, which he hadn’t even realized were balled up in the first place.

* * * * *

After that last Jaunt, a memory started fighting its way back to the surface of Stephen’s mind, clear in a way few of his memories had been since entering the Fenrir Arcology.

In his early twenties, he had spent a lot of time in East Atlanta with his college friends. Despite his best efforts, he remembered one pub crawl celebrating his new job at Gandr. Jason and Molly’s dynamic was more contentious than usual: Jason was still in the middle of his early-twenties libertarian phase, and Molly had recently started dabbling in communism.

“I’m extremely worried, people,” Molly said. “This whole block, I swear within a few years it’ll just be one huge Taco Mac. Just watch. A single bar stretching all the way from Metropolitan to Glenwood. A different imported beer for every imaginable customer. Only fourteen dollars a pint.”

“That wouldn’t be so bad,” said Jason. “Variety is good. Options are good.”

“Fourteen dollars. Fourteen, *minimum*. Like, for the *cheapest* options.”

“Hey,” said Jason, adopting his “calm” voice, which invariably struck everybody else as patronizing. “If people don’t want to spend at least twelve dollars on a beer, nobody’s making them come to your weird future East Atlanta.”
“Sorry, guys,” said Blaine. “I kind of tuned out these last couple of minutes. They’re raising prices? Is that what we’re talking about?”

“If we’re not careful,” said Molly. “That’s all I mean.”

Stephen looked at his pint, which had cost four dollars. He eyed the men’s room for the eighth time in the last ten minutes. His bladder had been aching since he finished his second pint, and this was his fourth. He couldn’t figure out if he would be more comfortable waiting at the table, or in the serpentine queue that extended out the men’s room door, winding its way around the bar—over a dozen guys sweating through their button-up shirts, most of them in the middle of intense one-way spiels.

“Oh, God. That is brilliant,” he heard one of them say, clearly not even looking at the guy he was talking to. “You’ve really touched upon a new step in the paradigm here, a new evolution of the spectrum of change.”

“What do you think, Stephen?” said Molly. “Fourteen dollars: way too much for a beer, right?”

“Oh, definitely,” he said, fidgeting in his seat. Then, in an instinctive blurt that still haunted him, he added, “God I have to pee.”

“Ugh,” said Molly, looking at the line. “Cocaine is such a shitty drug. It’s a pox on the scene, really.”

Jason laughed. “I’ve seen you do coke, Molly. We’ve done lines together. Recently.”

“It sucks. It’s a drug for aspiring social climbers. It’s for people who want to sweat a lot and stand two inches in front of somebody else’s face and make plans for collaborative projects that they have no intention of following through on. It’s a drug for people who want to collect strangers’ business cards.”
“What’s wrong with that?” said Jason.

“And,” she continued, “the sweat smells weirder than regular sweat. No fun. And poor Stephen—our Stephen, the very Stephen we are celebrating tonight!—has to pee, but these latent yuppies are letting their bad habit monopolize the men’s room.”

“Here’s what I think,” said Jason. “I think coke is fine. Successful people do coke, as is their sovereign right. Psychedelics, on the other hand, those are for dilettantes. Nobody with a real job has the time for acid.”

Molly slammed her drink on the table, pulled a cigarette out of the pack, and marched outside. Jason laughed. “You know I’m right,” he said.

None of them even had a real job, Stephen thought, which made Jason’s line of argument sound a little flimsy. He was working for a real company—realer than the cafes and pizzerias where his friends were still working—but the job still felt insignificant, perfunctory. It would continue to feel that way until his next promotion, which at that point was still two years away.

Blaine shrugged. “I like both. Not together, I mean, but, you know. I’m easy.”

It was becoming obvious that the line for the men’s room wasn’t getting any smaller, so Stephen stood up to wait. Stephen didn’t have a strong opinion about the relative merits of either drug. He had tried coke once in college, and didn’t think the euphoria justified the expense; acid had always sounded too stressful. He was tired of waiting in line, though. He had no interest in cocaine, he thought, but what if he was an aspiring social climber? Would that have been unconscionable? Was there even another way to live?

Communism had never seemed like a real possibility, no matter how enthusiastically Molly had evangelized about its virtues. Stephen had been to school. He had taken Econ classes. He tried envisioning a chart in his head: the limited supply of stalls in the men’s room, the
seemingly endless demand for stalls. The demand shifted from one time of day to the next, he
assumed, and it depended on other variables. How many people were in the bar? How many
drinks had they consumed, on average? How steady was the supply of cocaine to this bar’s target
demographic? If they raised the price of stall access from zero to, say, 50 cents, that would
decrease the demand, thus making the line shorter, thus decreasing the number of other guys
with chafed nostrils angrily staring at him as he stood in front of the urinal, thus making his
experience right now a lot easier.

(Demand? Or was he thinking about quantity demanded? He couldn’t remember.)

By the time he made it back to their table, the bartender had put on a different album—
something a little moodier, more complicated, nocturnal. Molly and Jason were leaning up
against the bar, aggressively making out. Blaine was tapping out a martial beat on the table,
crooning out of tune: “And the Mersey seed is wading / and ow my head’s been birding.” That
sounded off to Stephen, but he didn’t know the song. His beer was empty.

“Ah,” said Blaine, whose beer was also empty. “Sorry, man. I got them mixed up.”

Stephen sat down and held the empty glass, waiting for something to happen.

Now, years later, Stephen knew that there was a way to live outside the social-climbing
paradigm. As the Tome of Guidelines and Recommendations had made clear to him during his
orientation, the Arcology’s process of Ascension wasn’t social climbing. It was about reaching
and transcending his own limitations. It was about maximizing his own potential, Achieving
anything he Aspired toward. Society had nothing to do with it.

* * * * *

On the shuttle to the Vanaheimr Moon Colony, Stephen cradled the nanobot-infused
tuber, trying to keep it from. Rationally, he knew he was going to eat the tuber before the
ceremony, to let Fenrir’s army of impossibly sophisticated robots defragment his nervous system. He knew it was going to work. But the less Efficient parts of his brain were still reluctant. For the most part it looked like a normal sweet potato, but at certain angles it shimmered in the shuttle’s dim fluorescent light. He knew a prism would have been the sensible analogy for the tuber’s shimmering appearance, but his first thought was that it resembled an oil slick—like they had found a tuber while cleaning up after the Exxon Valdez. He knew this was insensible and pointlessly negative, and decided not to give it any further thought. He put the tuber back in its pouch.

* * * * *

After disembarking at the Moon Colony, the first thing Stephen saw was a pretzel stand attendant swatting away three green parakeets. He had known to expect parakeets at Vanaheimr, but he was still somewhat surprised to see them so early. One of Angrboða’s first colonists at the mixed-use development had violated company regulations by bringing his half-dozen parakeets with him from Earth. The colony’s hypersaturated oxygen had had an unpredictable aphrodisiac effect on the parakeets. They began to reproduce at a wildly accelerated rate, and became uncommonly aggressive. The parakeet had become the Moon’s first invasive species, in a sense; by now there were dozens of them. Thankfully, as a manmade colony, Vanaheimr’s ecosystem was sufficiently self-contained that the colonists could keep the parakeets under control, to a degree. As long as the Vanaheimr Colony managers kept the birds adequately fed, they only occasionally invaded the food court looking for treats.

By now, Angrboða International had managed to turn the parakeet into an unofficial mascot for the Colony: “Oh, the parakeets are delightful!” Frida had told him when she heard about his upcoming Ascension. “It’s a trip to the Moon and to an exotic rainforest, both at once.”
Then, after Stephen laid down the shovelful of rust he had been carrying, she added, “But also, do be careful, seriously. The Moon Parakeet is like its own species, something unique and beautiful, but also very excitable.”

The attendant drew a spray bottle from beneath the stand and sprayed the parakeets with it, one huge spreading arc of foaming liquid. It looked like water at first, but started to froth as it hit the parakeets, and Stephen noticed a vaguely citric odor as the parakeets flew away, screeching.

“Sorry about that!” said the pretzel stand attendant. “This doesn’t happen very often, I swear. A couple times a week. Three or four. Or once a day, maybe. I lose track sometimes. But I guess that’s, ha, not the best first impression.” She held out a big pretzel. “Here you go. One Moon Pretzel, on the house. We pride ourselves on our customer service here at Vanaheimr. I assume you’re here for the Ascension ceremony?”

Stephen looked over his shoulder. No parakeets in sight. He nodded and accepted the pretzel.

“Ah, wow. That’s a real honor, huh? I mean, we get to live on the Moon, which is really something. But to be a Citizen in an Arcology, that’s really—with the post-scarcity and everything? Jeez.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I’m excited, too.”

He had a couple of hours before the ceremony: leisure time in a spacious, unfamiliar location! Citizenship was already bearing serious rewards, and he hadn’t even finalized his Ascension yet. He took a bite of his Moon Pretzel. There was something intangibly thrilling about the pretzel’s taste. In concrete terms, it tasted like a normal mall pretzel: soft, buttery, even a little bland aside from the coarse balls of salt. But he was eating this pretzel on the Moon. That
made an incalculable difference. It tasted more lunar, he thought, though he couldn’t think of an
apt analogy, sensible or otherwise, to express what that meant.

“So,” he said, “Obviously, I’m new around here. Is there anyplace in particular I should
check out while I’m here?”

“There’s a Macy’s,” said the pretzel stand attendant. “There’s a Forever XXI. There’s a
Hot Topic, and—hmm. I know there was an F.Y.E. last time I went to the Northwest Quadrant,
but it’s been a couple of years. There are some nice windows around the perimeter, where you
can look outside if you want.”

He decided to go for a walk, heading nowhere in particular. This decision ran counter to
the instincts he had developed since joining the Arcology: it seemed in-Efficient. Where was he
going? What was he accomplishing? But he was about to become a Citizen. He dreamed of
reaching his own Efficiency Singularity, of becoming an Aesthete. He took another bite of his
pretzel and started heading east. He let the chunk of dough sit in his mouth for longer than the
last bite, trying to pick up some more of that irresistible lunar quality. He didn’t notice it quite as
strongly this time.

He walked east for twenty minutes before reaching a window. During that time, he hadn’t
seen anybody else: no tourists, no shoppers, no Residents. Angrboða had everything under
control, of course. For the first five, ten, fifteen years, the Colony might appear to be
floundering. But Aarseth had assured Stephen that once things started to fall into place—
populating the Colony with Residents, terraforming the lunar surface, introducing staple crops—
the money would undoubtedly start to roll in. The Colony had only been here for seven years.
They were still working out some of the kinks. But the sparseness still vexed him.
Outside the window, nearly everything was bright gray, nearly blinding, the pockmarked surface standing out against the endless expanse of black. There were a handful of dead parakeets lying on the ground outside the nearest airlock. There were a couple of enormous bulldozers off in the distance, presumably playing some essential role in the terraforming process. (Per the Tome’s chapter “Mystery Uncovered!: Understanding the Vanaheimr Moon Colony,” the bulldozers were preparing the surface for terraforming by carrying giant piles of rust, an unfortunate byproduct of the Colony’s oxygenation process, from one part of the lunar surface to another, then back again. The Tome gave Stephen no indication about how this was going to help make the lunar surface inhabitable, but Angrboða had the best scientists in the world on their staff.)

The Moon looked the way he had always expected the Moon to look, which surprised him. He had expected it to be more unexpected. Maybe that was the point, he thought. Everybody knew what the Moon looked like. Everybody had seen it from a distance, and everybody had seen photographs and footage from the surface. He chose not to be disappointed, tempted though he was. It was comforting, this lack of surprise.

A Scandinavian-accented voice came over the intercom, announcing that the Ascension Ceremony would begin in ninety minutes, and that the Aesthetes would begin their preliminary recitations shortly. He pulled the tuber out of his bag. He broke off a chunk from the end and stuck it on his tongue. It tasted bitter, but not inedible. There was a slight metallic aftertaste, he thought, though that may have been psychosomatic. Even knowing he shouldn’t have been thinking about the nanorobots coursing through the tuber’s insides, he supposed it was nearly unavoidable that he would expect—and consequently experience—a slight metallic aftertaste.
He looked around at the mall behind him. The Hot Topic was open, but they didn’t seem to have any customers. Next to it was a shuttered storefront. The paint above the door had a discoloration pattern shaped like the word “Waldenbooks.” Next to that, a closed EB Games.

He found himself remembering the Blockbuster that had been across the street from his high school in Kennesaw, which had closed shortly after he went off to college. The lot had remained unoccupied for the subsequent decade, somehow. He never understood why. It had always seemed like a fine location. That store had been one of the pillars of his suburb when he was growing up, a place where he and his friends used to waste time after school. He remembered going in there with a couple of other kids from the yearbook staff during senior year, meticulously counting the DVD copies of the 2003 Harrison Ford action-comedy *Hollywood Homicide* on the New Release wall. There were 64 boxes, eight on each row. 57 had copies of the movie stocked behind them. For a few weeks after that, Stephen and his friends always made a point of asking the cashier, a former classmate who had dropped out a year earlier, if the store had *Hollywood Homicide* in stock, to which the cashier always replied, “I’m at work, guys.”

When the Blockbuster closed, Stephen thought, his hometown lost its essence. It wasn’t that Kennesaw’s unique character was wrapped up in the Blockbuster. It wasn’t as simple as that. He knew it was a corporate chain, that nearly every town in America had a Blockbuster, that nearly every Blockbuster was identical. But this Blockbuster was the clearest route he could find to remembering what it had felt like to grow up in Kennesaw. When he drove past his high school shortly after graduating college, he barely recognized the area, even though in every other respect it had barely changed since he had lived there. But the Blockbuster felt like an anchor pinning his memories to a specific place and time, a gravitational center without which he had
trouble orienting himself in his hometown. He wondered if the Waldenbooks or EB Games had played a similar role for any of the colonists at Vanaheimr. Was there anybody wandering around the lunar base right now, complaining about how the moon colony had seemed strange and unfamiliar since the Waldenbooks had closed?

Surely it was insensible, though, to think an out-of-business video store was analogous to what he saw here at Vanaheimr. It was not only insensible; it was borderline cynical. Yes, *superficially* the moon colony may have seemed chintzy and hollow, a shopping mall with few businesses and fewer customers. Even now, he was fighting off another wave of something that felt like disappointment. But he knew that Vanaheimr was a testament to human achievement. It was on the Moon, for one thing.

It occurred to him that the Arcology could play a Blockbusterean anchor role for modern Atlantans. It was becoming a defining landmark, he hoped. He knew some of the outsiders still resisted the idea, but he was sure they would come around eventually. It was only the fourth such Arcology in the world! Why wouldn’t Atlanta be proud to have it? Even New York didn’t have one; not yet, at least.

“The Ascension Ceremony will begin in half an hour,” said the voice on the intercom. “Please note that, due to unforeseen circumstances, Johnny Rzeznik will not be performing at the Ceremony. We assure you that Mr. Rzeznik has sincerely apologized for any inconvenience, and that after much consideration, we have decided to accept Mr. Rzeznik’s apology. We hope that you will extend the same generosity.”

He had to start heading over soon, but he sat and watched the moon’s surface for a few more minutes. He took another bite of the tuber. The metallic taste was a little stronger this time,
unpleasantly so. It was like eating tin foil, almost, though the texture was much smoother, thankfully.

The stillness outside the window was starting to make him nervous, especially when the bulldozers moved off in the distance. It almost felt like looking at a photorealist painting, but those bulldozers kept putting dents in the illusion. They weren’t enough to break the illusion altogether. The motion seemed almost peripheral, like it wasn’t happening within the scope of the image—like floaters in his eye, corrupting the view.

A parakeet landed a couple of yards to his left, eyeing his Moon Pretzel. It looked curious, but not threatening. He didn’t see any others, and he figured he could fend off one parakeet if he needed to. He broke off a piece of the giant pretzel, keeping an eye on the parakeet. It took a tentative step closer. He wrapped the piece of pretzel around his next bite of tuber. The parakeet tilted its head. He stood up and waved his free hand around, thinking that, while he didn’t know much about parakeets, this was the easiest way he could imagine to scare it away. The parakeet squawked, then flew west toward of the pretzel stand. A miniature flock—a raiding party, Stephen thought—emerged from the abandoned EB Games to join the solitary bird in its quest.

Stephen started walking further east, in the direction of the nearest elevator. He was ready for his Ascension, he thought. He put the piece of pretzel-wrapped tuber into his mouth, and started chewing. He wasn’t feeling any changes yet, but it tasted better this way.
11  JOEL, ET AL, VS THE CONSTANTLY MUTATING VISAGE OF HISTORY

By the time the Guild of Anachronistic Creatives stormed the gates at the Blue Ridge Mountains Renaissance Festival, the Legion of Creative Anachronism had already been there taunting the Society for Creative Anachronism’s relatively quaint efforts at early-modern revival for an hour or two, and Joel and his friends were already sick of being there. At four in the afternoon, the troupe of disgruntled actors came streaming in, actively disrupting the proceedings: a Thomas Nast impersonator scrawling didactic political cartoons on a brand new iPad as he walked, Stockhausen claiming to have invented ragtime, Virginia Woolf humming ad-libbed melodies that gradually turned into OutKast hooks.

It was bad enough that the joust had turned out to be such a dud, Joel thought, but this ruined even this bottom-rung festival’s meager ambiance. These festivals always took some suspension of disbelief. It was no small feat to make it possible for customers to convince themselves that this smallish patch of land outside of Hiawassee bore even a superficial resemblance to medieval and post-medieval Europe, especially when the festivals’ various ideas about medieval and post-medieval Europe were often historically and geographically incompatible to begin with: the Sheriff of Nottingham dancing an Irish jig with Torquemada, Joan of Arc running a kissing booth.

It wouldn’t have taken much to destroy the already-dubious illusion. Maybe that was their intent. Joel still thought it was a lousy move: would it have been that hard for all the actors to find their own stage rather than crashing somebody else’s?

* * * * *

Joel and his friends should have guessed that the Blue Ridge Mountains Renaissance Festival was going to be a disappointment when, at 11:30 a.m., the announcement made the
rounds that the day’s first scheduled joust had been indefinitely postponed so the performers could deal with some “unforeseen equine stage fright.” They assumed it was exactly what the town crier had told them, a postponement—that they would still be able to catch a joust later in the day—but it was disappointing all the same.

Before they started walking toward the nearest beer tent, Catherine swore that she could see one of the horses peering out from behind the fake castle wall on the opposite side of the disappointingly small jousting ring. Joel looked again just to check, but he didn’t see anything.

“It was waggling its eyelashes,” she said. “Kind of coquetishly, you know?”

“‘Coquetishly,’ though?” he said.

“I mean, for a horse, sure,” she said, shrugging. He didn’t want to try figuring out what that could have looked like, so he didn’t.

The attendant at the beer tent, a loud middle-aged guy for whom this was clearly a hobby more than it was a job—he shared that sense of hobbyist’s enthusiasm with most of the employees at the festival, but in appearance and demeanor he was nearly indistinguishable from the attendants at the other two beer tents we had already visited—asked if the group wanted to replenish yon flagons with the finest draughts in the land.

“I would absolutely love to replenish my yon flagon with the finest draughts in the land,” said Richard, and the rest of them nodded in agreement. They all paid and handed the attendant their clear disposable plastic cups. He refilled them with Miller Lite, with little clumps of frozen condensation floating on top like arctic ice floes, before giving a big theatrical wink and wishing them, especially “the miladies,” a resplendent sojourn through the village.

* * * * *
They had mostly gone on a whim. Erin’s parents owned a cabin in the mountains, just outside of Blairsville, so the four of them—Erin, Richard, Catherine, and Joel—decided to go up for a long weekend after their spring semester had ended. They didn’t even know there was a Renaissance Festival in the area until shortly after they had arrived at the house. It was already dark when they made it to the mountains because Richard, the only one whose car they trusted to handle the mountains, was working until late in the afternoon. The air smelled like burning leaves when they got out of Richard’s car, but Erin said not to worry about it, that it always smelled that way up there. She wasn’t sure if people elsewhere on the mountain were just constantly burning leaves, or what.

Erin’s parents kept a basket full of brochures on the cabin’s kitchen counter, all advertising local attractions, restaurants, and so on. Joel wasn’t sure why the Renaissance Festival was the one they had settled on. It was an unseasonably chilly weekend, so they ruled out a day on the nearby lake. They had just driven a few hours from Atlanta, so the idea of driving a few more in the morning to visit one of the vineyards in North Georgia didn’t appeal to them at the time, though in hindsight it would have felt less like a waste of a Saturday.

Joel couldn’t speak to the others’ motives, aside from maybe Catherine, who had always had theater-kid proclivities, and would probably have been attending a midnight Rocky Horror showing on Friday if she had stayed in Atlanta. For Joel’s part, he had always liked this stuff, even when it might have been embarrassing: Tolkien, Zeppelin, Zeppelin singing about Tolkien, all of it. It was a little corny, he knew, but he had mostly come to terms with that, reasoning that nobody ever gets to decide what they’re going to find interesting. Besides, he figured, better this than that Doctor Who stuff Richard and Erin were so into.

* * * *
The Festival didn’t really kick into high gear until the Southeastern Legion of Creative Anachronism stormed the gates at about 2:00, by which point Joel was at least moderately drunk on overpriced American lager and almost ready to leave. “Stormed the gates” might not be a fully accurate way of putting it. It was more that they all came trudging in, dressed as historical figures from decidedly non-Renaissance eras, casting condescending glares at the kings and squires, at the artisanal glassblowers and kissing booth attendants. They were all wearing the festival’s bright yellow wristbands, so Joel could only assume they had paid to get in like anybody else.

But there was something troubling about their posture, the way the historical figures—including, he noticed, Mansa Musa, a young Marlon Brando, and a jarringly svelte William Howard Taft—all slouched inward, like coiled snakes. It was almost immediately clear that this was a hostile invasion, even if the hostility was still largely unspoken.

When it happened, the friends were all sitting around a table in one of the few available patches of shade, idly watching a Maypole dance that was starting to coalesce about twenty feet away. Some RenFest employees with fabric fairy wings affixed to their dresses were trying to persuade Erin and Catherine to join in the dance.

“Isn’t that like a druidic fertility rite or something?” said Erin. “I’ve seen The Wicker Man. I know this stuff.”

The lead fairy sighed, like this was a routine she was all too familiar with.

“Man,” said Richard, “and they have what, half a dozen of these dances every day? These mountains must be fertile as hell by now.”

“Like the Tigris-Euphrates,” said Catherine, feigned wonder resounding in her voice.
The fairy waved her wand around, carving a pattern into the air that looked like some kind of sigil of ironic derision—like the magic wand equivalent of a raised middle finger—before dancing off to another group who, with their frilly quasi-medieval shirts and latex Vulcan ears, seemed readier to play along. They all lined up in a circle around the Maypole, each member taking hold of a brightly colored ribbon. A lanky kid with studs on his right ear, probably still in high school, started beating a slow waltzing rhythm on one of those big Celtic drums, and a burly, unkempt older guy started playing a lilting dulcimer melody. The lead fairy started chirping some rhyming lyrics about the haunted mists of Avalon, and soon enough everybody in the circle was skipping around the pole, all of them grinning and sort of lazily bobbing their heads back and forth.

“I’m telling you,” whispered Erin, “fertility rite. These festivals are notorious for the massive polyamorous slumber parties they have in the tents after everything’s closed down for the night.”

“You mean orgies?” said Richard, probably louder than he meant to. He sounded intrigued, if only in an academic sense: he was a sociology major. The guy playing the dulcimer shot him a dirty look.

“Sure,” said Erin. “I mean, if you want to be crude about it.”

It was then that the Legion for Creative Anachronism’s first wave came down the hill on the western horizon: Musa, Brando, and Taft, yes, but also Simone de Beauvoir—whom Joel admittedly only recognized because, like most of them, she was wearing a badge clearly stating her name and era—and Alec Eiffel all marched down toward the Maypole. Without saying a word, De Beauvoir and Taft shoved two of the Vulcan-eared civilians away from the pole, took
hold of the ribbons they had been holding, and stood perfectly still, letting the dancers crash into them mid fertility rite, all while Musa and Brando handed out business cards:

“We are the Legion for Creative Anachronism, Jamming the Space-Time Continuum Since 2037,” said the card, in what looked like bold Futura typeface. To clarify: the italics in the word “Creative” were right there on the card. The emphasis was theirs. In hindsight, and even at the time, Joel didn’t think their exercise in anachronism was necessarily all that creative, even compared to the—to put it honestly—rote medievalism that was otherwise on display.

“So-called ‘Societies for Creative Anachronism’ are erroneously selling the idea that there is only one valid strain of anachronistic behavior, and that strain is an idealized version of medieval England. Under the leadership of The Great Future-Lord Xorflon, the Legion vows to put an end to these practices, replacing them with a more liberated variation on anachronistic creativity.”

In tiny print beneath the mini-manifesto, the card said (ALTERNATIVE STAGE ACTORS GUILD OF NORTH GEORGIA).

Joel was a little skeptical, and still is.

“The Future-Lord Xorflon?” he asked Brando. “2037?”

Brando replied with a few of his greatest hits.

“What’d’ya got?” he said. “I coulda been a contender,” he said.

“All right,” said Catherine, giving him a thumbs-up.

Those are good lines, Joel thought. They’re good movies, and his Brando impression was impeccable. Even so, the quotes alone wouldn’t have been enough to quell his doubts.
“Hey, man,” Richard said to Mansa Musa, “Do you know any good Adlai Stevenson impersonators? It’s just that my niece’s seventh birthday party is coming up, and it would really—really—mean the world to her.”

The guy paused for a second and, producing a pen from his shirt pocket, reluctantly wrote a phone number on a business card for Richard.

* * * * *

The festival had had its own problems to contend with already. At 11:00, shortly after their arrival, a swordsmith’s teenaged apprentice, in what Joel could only assume was a misguided attempt at playful character work, used an antiquated and inaccurate racial descriptor to refer to Richard, who was third-generation Japanese-American. There was no reason to think the apprentice knew what the word meant, really, not that that would have excused him. Joel was trying to politely decline his offer to spend $600 on an “authentic handmade claymore sword,” when the apprentice said, gesturing toward Richard:

“Well, then, how about you, my Moorish friend?”

“Jesus,” said Erin.

“Oh, come on, man,” said Richard, shaking his head.

“Try to be better at words,” said Catherine.

As we walked away, the swordsmith looked intently at his apprentice, like he was about to give him a lecture he had given him before. Maybe something about cultural sensitivity and context awareness, or at least the possibility that he needed to give Othello a more careful reading before throwing around Shakespeare’s language indiscriminately. Or, more likely, about keeping his mouth shut from time to time. Either option would have been fine, really.
“Is this just, like, a thing with theater people?” Richard said. “That, like, intense commitment to character even when the character you have in mind doesn’t make sense?”

“Sometimes,” said Catherine. “I don’t know, really. Everything’s a ‘bit’ for some people, I guess. Just doing bits all the time,” and things about Catherine started to make a bit more sense to Joel: her habit of using the word “methinks” in mundane conversation, for instance, or that time she brought absinthe to their high school graduation party.

“I guess there’s a reason I quit the drama club freshman year, huh,” said Richard.

“See,” said Joel, “I thought you quit because you were tired of being stuck in rooms full of people bursting into impromptu Rent singalongs.”

Joel was joking, at least in part, but that was what Richard had told him when they were sixteen.

“Oh, yeah, ha,” he said. “What was that song? ‘Five Hundred, Six Hundred, Seven Hundred, Eight Hundred Days a Week’?”

“‘Of Love,’” Erin said, correcting him. “It’s called ‘Five Hundred, Six Hundred, Seven Hundred, Eight Hundred Days a Week of Love.’”

They looked over to Catherine, who was furiously lighting a cigarette, pretending not to hear the conversation. In retrospect, smoking probably wasn’t permitted on festival grounds, but nobody said anything about it.

* * * * *

At about 2:30, Joel and his friends were by the auditorium, sitting on an inexplicably damp yellow wooden bench, waiting for the scheduled joust to start. In the absence of any word to the contrary, they had assumed it would actually be happening this time. Anachronistic figures were milling about, distributing business cards to civilians, starting arguments with employees—
Vaclav Havel haggling over the price of wyvern-shaped pewter figurines, Sun Yat-Sen interrupting madrigals. They were insistent, pushy, but weirdly civil about it, Joel thought. He wondered how many of the actors in the LCA were normally friends with the Festival’s employees. The Blue Ridge area couldn’t have had that many actors, after all; maybe they had been in plays together at some point. Theater people, he assumed, needed to stick together somehow.

At 2:37, seven minutes late, two men entered the arena in tarnished plate mail—one of them was middle-aged and burly, with a shaved head and graying red goatee, and the other appeared to be in his mid-twenties, with light brown hair that struck Joel as impractically long for jousting purposes.

“Greetings, fine fellows, maidens, maidenettes” said the younger knight. “It is with deep regret that we must announce that neither—neighhh-ther!—of our horses is feeling up to the jousting task this fine spring afternoon.”

“The show must go on, however,” said the older knight, “And this young sproutling and I are both able-bodied warriors, ready for a competition.”

They shook hands gravely and marched to opposite ends of the arena, putting on their clunky, dull silver helmets. Another performer, a big guy wearing a sash that said “MAYOR OF RENAISSANCE TOWNE,” made his way to the front of the crowd and yelled, “I hereby declare that this joust may begin.” A preteen kid next to the Mayor played a tepid “Reveille” on his bugle. The two knights, on foot, unarmed, started charging toward one another. Each one stuck his arm out as they passed one another, and just barely missed. The crowd gasped, awestruck.

Joel was unimpressed. This was supposed to be the medieval fantasist’s equivalent of professional wrestling: bluster, testosterone, violence, horses, the whole thing. But these two
guys were content to run back and forth in circles, just barely avoiding any physical contact, until the crowd stopped paying attention—and for now, the crowd was eating it up. After a third lap, the older knight opened up his visor and taunted the younger one:

“Oh, you like that, do you? They'll be scraping your entrails off the ground for days to come.”

But the joust itself didn’t get any more heated. Dash, swing, breathe, taunt, breathe, dash, swing, breathe, taunt, breathe. After six or seven repetitions, Joel looked at his friends, who seemed pretty into it.

“I’m going to go get some air,” he said.

“We’re outside,” said Erin.

“Yeah, yeah.”

He stood up and ambled over to the nearest clearing, and took a seat on the ground, not really caring if his jeans got dirty. He looked up at the sky. It was one of those overcast days wherein the clouds do very little to get in the way of the sunlight, the sky an huge lumply sheet of pale gray, like somebody had made it out of luminescent dryer lint. He lay back on the ground, listening to the periodic grunts and hollow threats coming from the arena, the erratic ringing bells coming from all corners of the festival. The air smelled like grass, sweat, smoked turkey legs. Richard had told him earlier in the day that the turkey legs were actually “emu, or ostrich, or one of those, cassowary, maybe,” but Joel doubted it. Unless there was a nearby source of emu meat, why would they bother—especially if they were just going to pretend it was ordinary turkey?

Joel sat up. A man, probably around fifty, was meandering down the hill wearing a shiny insulation-foil suit, like something out of a 60s Star Trek episode, followed by three younger people, each wearing a different mismatched historical costume. As the group got closer, Joel
noticed that he had a badge on his chest that said THE FUTURE-LORD XORFLON (C.E. 2037), and the general demeanor of a high-school drama teacher who would have rather been playing Marlon Brando, given the choice—a kind of flamboyance muted by disappointment. Even for the group’s ostensible leader, the LCA was clearly just a mid-tier gig. Experimental theater for a crowd who didn’t really want it.

Joel also noticed that the younger trio didn’t seem to be affiliated with Xorflon or the LCA: they had nametags that said “Guild of Anachronistic Creatives,” each referencing a different transhistorical pastiche: “Late-1990s Virginia Woolf,” “Karlheinz Stockhausen circa 1892,” and “Thomas Nast, 2015.” Another, perhaps more obvious sign of the disconnect between the two groups was that Woolf, whistling “Ms. Jackson,” was repeatedly poking Xorflon with a stick as the other two giggled incessantly. Xorflon looked annoyed, but not fully angry. He looked like he had already tried as hard as he was willing to try to get her to stop poking him, and, weighing his options, realized that getting poked with a stick is ultimately less stressful than getting poked with a stick while constantly asking the person doing the poking to knock it off.

A roar of applause came from the arena. Joel could hear the Mayor’s voice booming across the field, announcing the verdict.

“You’re both winners,” yelled the Mayor. “A victory for both knights, and for all of us! We shall all remember this day, I am sure of it. A fight unlike any other.”

“Could I ask you something?” said Joel.

Nast nodded.

“What are you getting out of this?” he said. “Do you have an endgame in mind here?” He had read about things that seemed vaguely in line with this, about the sixties—the Situationists,
the Yippies, things like that—but this project, if “project” was the right word for it, still struck him as idiotic.

Nast smiled, held up his iPad, and opened up a political cartoon, a fairly detailed black and white drawing of a late-1800s Irish stereotype riding a tiger in front of the U.S. Capitol. A caption at the bottom said “Progress??” Both the Irishman and the tiger were wearing sashes, and the former was holding a giant barrel that said WHISKEY on it. Nast tapped the iPad screen, and words appeared on each sash.

IT’S FUN, said the Irishman’s sash. FUCK YOU, said the tiger’s sash.

“Symbolism, right?” said Nast.

“Don’t bother trying to figure it out,” said Xorflon. “These idiots have been hounding me for months.”

Woolf poked him again with a stick. Joel decided to go find his friends. Maybe they would be ready to leave by now. Maybe the clouds would clear up tonight, and they could sit out on Erin’s parents’ back porch at night, looking at the sky, knowing each star was an afterimage from a different era, from millions, tens of millions of years ago, that some of those stars had died during the European Renaissance, if not earlier. Or possibly, depending on the weather and the group’s overall disposition they would just drink, and talk, and wonder what was going on back in Atlanta.
12 IN A HOUSE WITH MISSING WINDOWS

So I’m sitting here in the living room watching some superhero cartoon at about one in the morning when Dave’s door swings open at the top of the stairs and an immense fractal plume of smoke curls into the hall. A vaguely familiar bass line explodes before crawling its way down the stairs, but I’m too busy trying to piece together the show’s continuity to place it. From what I can tell, the cartoon is about a guy with stretchy arms repeatedly punching an anthropomorphic killer whale wielding a Tommy gun.

Dave steps into the hallway hurriedly putting on his jacket, both sleeves at once, all in one awkward shuddering motion. Some odd, dated laser sound effects stack on top of the bass line and Dave vaults down the half-flight of stairs into the living room. The bass line follows Dave across the room, carrying the laser sound effects on its head and crashing apologetically into the walls along the way. They both run through the kitchen to the house’s side door and Dave announces in that earnest tremulous quake of his:

“Sandinista! is easily the Clash’s greatest album and all you London Calling motherfuckers are living a god damned lie.”

—before stepping outside to go buy a new pack of cigarettes.

“Okay,” I say.

* * * * *

We’re all drinking drinks in the carport, and Michelle is telling us about her summer abroad.

“On the Continent,” she tells us, “everything smells of sandalwood and nobody’s even heard of Taco Bell.”
That’s not how I remember it, but I haven’t been since fifth grade. She sounds pretty sure of herself, besides.

* * * * *

A subpar X-Files rerun just ended. I think it was about the internet being haunted. I could be wrong. It was something like that, anyway.

“Man,” says Sean. “Can you believe William Gibson wrote that piece of shit? Like, the guy who wrote *Neuromancer* and coined the term ‘cyberspace’ and totally rewired my whole friggin nervous system when I first read his stuff in junior year of high school? William Gibson, oracular prophet of the cyberpunk era? Can you believe it?”

“Sure I can,” I say, shrugging. “I mean, his name’s right there on the screen.”

* * * * *

“*En Italia,*” Michelle says, “they all worship at the altar of *la bicicletta*. In fact, you know the Tower of Pisa?*

“No,” says Dave. “What’s that?”

“God, Dave, I wish I could be as witty as you,” says Michelle. Dave looks at the ground, pretending to ash his cigarette, and the conversation pauses for a good few seconds while everybody else looks around, like we’re waiting for the studio audience to chime in. My eyes briefly sync up with Erica’s and then immediately roll up and away. I can’t tell what caused them to roll away, Michelle’s ridiculous spiel or the eye contact itself.

“But anyway, the Tower is actually *made* of bicycles,” Michelle says, “All carefully interlocking like Legos, or Jenga pieces. It’s hard to tell from looking at photographs, but when you get close enough it’s pretty hard to believe the thing is still standing at all. In fact, in the late 90s they re-imagined the great neorealist film *The Bicycle Thieves* as sort of a slapstick disaster
movie about a group of master thieves stealing one of the key pieces from the Tower of Pisa, and
the Tower collapsing as a result. It’s kind of like *The Towering Inferno*, only instead of a
towering inferno there’s a torrent of renegade bicycles chasing Roberto Benigni down the street.”

“Sorry,” says Erica, “did you just use the phrase ‘the great neorealist film’ in
conversation?”

* * * * *

I’m on the roof trying to get some studying done for tomorrow’s astronomy exam, but I
keep getting distracted by these old Jack Kirby comics I accidentally brought up here with me.
OMAC, the super-strong, mohawked “One-Man Army Corps,” is pummeling his way through a
city of sinister corporate rent-a-cops, working his way to the center of Pseudo-People Inc.’s
dystopian Build-A-Friend factory. He’s narrating his own actions out loud, like he needs to
remind himself who he is, what he’s trying to do. I like the way the scene is drawn, with OMAC
punching henchmen clear off the page, their mouths opened wide like there’s some feeling of
urgency or terror or divine purpose that their bodies can’t quite contain. I imagine the henchmen
tumbling down the rooftop and off toward the back patio, crashing into the rungs of our old,
creaky ladder along the way.

“How did he—” one of them says.

“STOP HIM,” says another. “STOP HIM.”

I take a sip of beer and glance back at my astronomy textbook, which isn’t exactly doing
much to reel me back in. I forget what kind of beer this is. I tore off the condensation-soaked
label out of fidgety boredom when I was still inside. It tastes like beer, though, sure enough.

I look up and notice our neighbor Jonathan sitting on his roof across the street. I can’t tell
if he’s looking at me, or what. He might be. He’s just sitting there facing straight ahead, and I
don’t know why. I’m pretty sure he’s in his thirties, with a job and everything. What could drive a guy like that to sit on top of his own house in the middle of a weekday afternoon?

I get nervous and grab the stack of comics and stick it in the middle of my astronomy book. I hold the book up so Jonathan or any other observers will see the bulky academic-press hardcover, with its photorealistic black hole image on the cover, instead of Kirby illustrations of men punching monsters.

“Ah, the Kuiper Belt,” I say. “Hmm, the Crab Nebula!”

I hope it’s loud enough for the neighbors to hear. I don’t want them to think I’m some sort of malingering layabout. I look over the corner of the book, but I can’t gauge Jonathan’s reaction from my side of the street.

* * * *

Mario moved out without warning a couple of weeks ago and took his bedroom window with him. When I texted him to ask about it, he said he “need[ed] it 4 a conceptu[a]l art project,” and I haven’t heard from him since. We’ve got a wad of towels at the foot of the door to limit the draft until we can figure out something more long-term. Right now Sean is standing outside the room, testily asking the tribe of vagrant owls that recently took roost in there to quiet down so he can get his sociology paper finished before tonight’s dose of Adderall wears off.

“Oh God oh man,” he yells over a volley of ecstatic hoots. “Is there really no way we can get Stephen to deal with these owls?”

“Look, I understand that it’s frustrating,” I say, “but you know as well as I do that Stephen is completely impossible to get in touch with until we hear otherwise.”
Stephen the Landlord is off in Bangkok or Kingston or someplace “waiting until the scene cools off” in Atlanta. We would buy a new window ourselves, but sometimes it’s just the principle of the thing.

Sean stands there pounding on the door and grinding his molars to dust in sociology’s name, and five to eleven owls—it’s hard to tell, but somewhere in that range—hoot back. They sound like a pack of friendly teakettles going through a manic phase. Like they’re saying that they can empathize with Sean’s situation, but nonetheless aren’t about to call off a party they’ve been planning for months on some stranger’s account.

* * * * *

It’s becoming increasingly clear that a strange and eerie transformation has taken hold of Michelle. Her language is evolving or devolving or otherwise laterally changing into an incomprehensible pan-European pidgin tongue. What started as an affectation—a “ciao” here, a “mon ami” there, and a smug predilection for lukewarm beer—has turned into a mild, hopefully harmless psychosis.

“Och, das Louvre ist maaaas bueno, towarzysze,” she says, conducting the mild September breeze with her unfiltered Gauloise.

Dave and Erica and Sean and Adam and Seth and Other Mario all nod their heads sagely. After a few months of sentimental talk about The Old Country this and The Motherland that, it’s hard to blame Michelle for wanting to climb right back into a womb of History and Tradition. I would probably do the same, see if I was born differently the second time.

* * * * *

Dave gets home late from work with a pizza in tow. Resting it on the grimy stovetop, he says, “Fair game if anybody wants some.”
“What’s on it?” says Sean, eyeing it suspiciously.

“Well,” says Dave. “Looks like—hmmm—cheese and sauce on some kind of crust.”

Sean wrinkles up his nose and pours himself a Big Gulp of tap water. Dave leans back against the counter and looks wistfully at the empty, tarnished metal jar on the kitchen table.

“You guys seen Scotty lately?” he says.

“Yes, he came by earlier,” I say, “but he forgot to bring his scale so we didn’t get anything.”

“Shit, man,” he says. “You should’ve waited until I got home.”

“When did you get a scale?” says Sean, already refilling his cup and gnawing his left thumbnail.

“I don’t, but I’ve got synaesthesia and perfect pitch. An eighth in my hand sounds like a—sort of a distorted E mixolydian progression, like the opening riff from ‘War Pigs.’ Actually, yeah, come to think of it, it is the opening riff from ‘War Pigs,’” Dave says, outlining one perfectly logical reason why we didn’t need to get anything while Scotty was here. He flashes a beatific smile and starts whistling Sabbath.

* * * * *

Adam heaves himself up over the edge of the rooftop and says the guys are almost here.

“Who?” I say.

“Oh, you know,” he says. He shrugs his left shoulder, like he can’t even commit to a full-bodied shrug. “Whoever, I guess.”

“Okay.” I look at the comics, still wedged between pages of writing about the curvature of light passing through planets’ gravitational spheres. OMAC is yelling at nobody in particular, staring, aghast, at a Build-A-Friend machine. The machine is full of dissembled limbs in a pool
of blue electricity with a disembodied head floating in the middle, asking about emotional needs that need to be fulfilled. The evil Pseudo-People, Inc., builds these phony friend-things to keep their underlings content, each one specifically tailored to keep an unsuspecting subject from questioning the company’s dominance. I look up at Adam, wincing at the late-afternoon sunlight poking through the trees next door. He’s hunched over a few feet to my left, trying to light a cigarette, but his matches keep blowing out.

“What?” he says, and without saying anything, I put the book down, accidentally knocking the bottle of unlabeled beer over. It rolls off the roof and shatters on the concrete patio. I crawl back to the ladder, and when I’m back on the ground I look at the glittering brown glass, the smallish pool of beer already drying up in the sun. The air around it takes on a sickly bittersweet fragrance, and ants are lining up a few feet away, ready to drown themselves in what’s left if it means finding some trace of sustenance.

I head back inside. I’ll clean it up later.

* * * * *

Everybody else is hanging out in the basement, but Erica and I are waiting for this dumb movie to finish before going to join them. During a lull, her head idly falls against mine. I don’t know how to react—was it intentional? Does it mean anything? Panicked, I look to the movie for advice. Ernest Borgnine is flying a garish red helicopter and cackling at the camera with glee, which I find un-useful in most of the ways that count. I look at her and she’s momentarily looking back and we both look away and everything’s kind of weird. Does Ernest have any ideas? No, he does not. But maybe he will soon? I keep looking at the TV for what feels like ten straight minutes of cackling and discomfort.
Fuck it: “So um should we maybe like maybe make out or something this movie’s pretty boring am I right?”

She looks at me, this time holding eye contact for as long as I can reciprocate.

“That wasn’t—wait, what’s your major, again?” she says.

“Right now it’s History,” I say, “but I figure I can change it one or two more times before I finish if I’m not feeling it. Why?”

“Ah, damn,” she says. “I was hoping you’d say ‘Marketing’ so I could say, ‘That wasn’t much of a sales pitch. You might want to consider changing your major to something else. Take History, for instance.’ It would’ve been hilarious, trust me, but now I can’t do it. I hope you’re pleased with yourself.”

“Hm,” I say. “You could just recommend that I stick with History? Like a ‘don’t quit your day job’ kind of approach?”

“Look, kid,” she says, quickly sitting up maybe an inch and a half, “that’s not nearly as funny.”

* * * * *

We’re downstairs with everybody else. The futon and beanbags are all taken, so I end up leaning up against the washing machine, next to the cinderblock that holds the lid shut. A bowl is working its way from person to person. Michelle is having an oddly lucid moment, talking in broken French-inflected English about more of the cultural differences she’s been noticing.

“Is it not incredibly backward the way American culture compels you to conceal your sexuality and lock it up in a jewelry box and swallow the key and bury the box in a plot of desert where nobody can find it and then throw that plot of desert to the bottom of the ocean just to be safe and then you get thrown in the stocks for public shaming if you even try to snorkel in the
same ocean where you have thrown the plot of desert containing the locked jewelry box containing your sexuality?” she says. “Is it not just absolutely unbearable in its backwardness?”

We all nod, a little more absently this time. Sean is flipping through the enormous stack of Magic: the Gathering cards we inexplicably have in the basement. Nobody knows where they came from and none of us play the game, so did they come with the house? Is Stephen in a hostel in Bangkok or Kingston or someplace, wondering where his Magic: the Gathering collection is? Adam is in the corner playing his didgeridoo, the pride of his life since he got it from a craft fair at Stone Mountain over the summer. The room swells with the instrument’s drone.

“Hey,” Dave says to me. “Hey. Do you want some?”

I realize as I shake my head that I’m staring armor-piercing bullets at Adam and his didgeridoo. I quickly re-anchor my gaze upon the life-sized Jean-Paul Belmondo cutout looming in the far corner of the basement, but still wonder how a guy who smokes as much as Adam could have mastered the art of circular breathing that quickly. Seth and Caitlin and Other Mario and Erica and Conrad and Michelle and Ryan and Benji and Jimbus and Li'l Owsley and Candy-O and Blaine and a couple of other people whose names I don’t remember and probably also those damned owls upstairs start to hum along, producing a wordless, glottal chord. Somebody starts haphazardly thwacking a djembe with a tympani mallet. The whole house at once becomes a vessel for loud aimless dumbly echoing sound, and somewhere in it I swear I hear somebody singing an airy power-pop tune about whoa-oh-oh the irrepressible joy of youthful libertinism and hey-la hey can it possibly ever get any better.
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