



HOT BUTTERED SOMETHING

COLLECTED STORIES: VOLUME I

by Cheeseburger Brown

*For the star of my life,
for sweet understanding.*

HOT BUTTERED SOMETHING - COLLECTED STORIES: VOLUME I

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BAD TRAFFIC

Yves LeRoche captained a big truck.

His truck was a cell in the circulatory system of the nation, his cargo a dollop of the economy's lifeblood. Throughout his decades of service Yves prided himself on being as reliable a cell as he could be—punctual, accountable, steady—a bastion of competence and care that slipped along the highways without resistance like a pat of warm butter on a skillet.

"We're all in it together," he used to say when chatting up folks at diners or gas stations or when helping out with a breakdown at the side of the road. "Traffic is a social affair."

As a driver he was cautious and constant, and he thought of himself as a kind of father to the lesser vehicles of the road who rode in his long shadow, content to follow and be guided by his stalwart and considered progress. His truck was a buffer against the frenetic danger of snarled metropolitan traffic, an island of certainty and safety to whom others could magnetize to find their way through the flow.

Most of his fellow truckers called Yves "Papa Rock" although some of the old timers called him "Frenchy" because he had been born in Baton Rouge. His grandmother used to speak French to him as a boy but Yves could never make heads or tails of it. "It's all Greek to me," he liked to joke.

He could smell an accident from miles downroad, something in the air that troubled him several minutes before the first compression waves signaled by bursts of red braking lights began to ripple toward him from the horizon. His sensitivity to the patterns of locomotion seemed at times to border on precognition.

But the big accident—his final accident—Yves did not see coming.

Papa Rock LeRoche picked up the hitchhiker on the west side of the Oregon line.

A late afternoon thunderstorm was blowing out to the east leaving in its wake shiny roads and wet fields, and standing at the border of an example of each was a round-shouldered youth soaked to the bone, huddled against the spring breeze. By his feet was a sign that must have once advertised his destination but had now been reduced to an asymmetrical Rorschach.

"Where you headed?" called Yves.

"New York City," said the damp hitchhiker.

"Come on up," nodded Yves, leaning over to release the passenger door.

The boy climbed up onto the cab and slipped inside after shaking a flurry of spume from his jacket and knapsack. He looked startled when he saw Yves fixing him with a hard look. "You don't want to be leaving that sign there," said Yves. "It's a shame to litter America. We all have to live here together, right?"

Once that was taken care of Yves moved the rig into gear and nosed back out onto the freeway. As they jostled along he asked the boy's name.

"Joe," he said, his accent thick and sharp edged.

"Bullsquat," said Yves not unkindly. "You don't look like a Joe."

"It is my American name."

"What's your real name, son?"

"It is Alishaer, sir."

"Good to meet ya, Al. They call me Papa Rock but my name's Yves."

"Thank you very much for stopping, Mr. Yves."

They drove in silence a while until Yves noticed the youth shivering and pulled a rough woolen blanket out of the back of the cab with a grunt. Alishaer was grateful. He used it to dry his short black hair before wrapping it around his shoulders like a cocoon. He looked so skinny and small.

Yves sighed to himself. It wasn't the first time he'd picked up a hard luck case. In fact he was unlikely to stop for a hitchhiker who looked like they were on solid footing—Yves specialized in the downtrodden and lost. He was of the opinion that if he could supply them with an earful of common sense they just might find the gumption to pull themselves out of whatever pickle they were in, like the black fellow on the lam from North Carolina he'd convinced to turn himself in for his crimes, the street tough from New Jersey he'd turned on to Jesus, or the teenage girl from Alberta he'd found pitifully used and discarded by a motorcycle gang.

He remembered each of their names: Sammy Brown, Knife Gill, Daria Something. Sometimes he even looked them up years after the fact, to see whether or not they had straightened out. That was another reason they called him Papa Rock: because he cared.

This kid was maybe twenty-five. He had one bushy black eyebrow that ran across the bridge of his nose, like Burt on *Sesame Street*. Around his right wrist was a simple silver chain bearing a token inscribed with wiggly worm-writing.

"So, where're you coming from?" asked Yves.

"Portland, sir," said Alishaer.

"No, I mean originally. You got that funny writing on your bracelet there, like from Iraq or something."

"This is a medical notice," explained Alishaer. "It says I am an epileptic. I have the seizures once in a sometime."

"That's too bad."

"It does not trouble me much."

"So you're from Iraq, huh?"

"No sir, I am coming from Turkmenistan."

"Turkey?"

"No sir, *Turkmenistan*. In Asia."

"You don't look Chinese to me."

"No sir," agreed Alishaer with a little smile.

Yves grunted, checked his mirrors, changed lanes. "I can tell from your way of talking you haven't been here long, is that right?"

"I have been in this country for one week, sir."

"Fresh off the boat, huh? Heading to New York to find fame and fortune, are ya?"

Alishaer smiled self-effacingly. "I am hoping to find my cousin there. He is running a restaurant, where perhaps I can find an opportunity for working."

Yves nodded. "Good for you. Hard work is what makes America great."

"Yes sir," agreed Alishaer.

"I'm only going as far as Michigan, but that's a fair way along for you. Should shorten your trip a bit, huh?"

"I am grateful, Mr. Yves. I will be no trouble to you, I swear it."

Yves nodded. Perhaps the young man wasn't as wayward as he'd first appeared, rainsoaked and forlorn at the side of the road. He seemed to have a pretty good head on his shoulders, and had manners like his mother had raised him right. And helping a man on his way to an honest wage was something Yves could feel proud of—in his little way again contributing to the health of the economy, the free-flowing currents of people and money, sharing in making somebody's American dream come true.

"It's no trouble to me," said Yves amicably. But he was wrong.

Yves drove the night away, his companion twisting and sighing in the passenger seat under the thinnest veil of sleep. Yves turned up the Johnny Cash to drown out the troubled muttering, then carefully counted the hours ahead and methodically took the correct combination of pills to get him there.

In moments he felt sharp as a knife.

The road was empty. The truck felt still, the country moving around it. The album repeated. Yves had been letting it repeat for decades. His mind sank away into a driving place until the first blush of dawn coloured the way ahead.

"Where are we?" asked Alishaer groggily.

"Wyoming," said Yves. "Sleep okay?"

Alishaer shrugged. "I have some nightmare."

"Yeah, I figured," agreed Yves. "We're gonna stop for some chow in Cheyenne, then I'm going to catch a few zees and after that we'll get back on the road. Sound good?"

Alishaer nodded, rubbing his eyes. "This chow is food, yes?"

"Food yes," confirmed Yves.

Yves pulled off at a signless joint he knew well on South Parsley, drawing the truck to shuddering but majestic halt in a row of similar rigs. The sudden cessation of motion caused Alishaer to feel as if he were drifting backward. With rubbery legs he descended from the cab and met Yves at the nose. He blinked at the wide expanse of sky, cloudless and deep blue even at the horizon.

The diner was quaint, with a chrome and flecked formica style that looked half a century old. There were just a few other customers, lone truckers reading the paper as they put away their food. A tinny radio discussed the weather. A bald man with a series of light scars criss-crossing his features stood in the open kitchen, hands on his hips, staring into space. He smiled distantly when he saw Yves, the sad lines around his eyes unmoving.

"Ed Hulver!" called Yves. "How the hell are ya?"

Ed wiped his fingers on his white undershirt and then shook Yves's beefy hand. "Hey, Frenchy. How's the road?"

"It's flowing," reported Yves. "This is Al."

"Goodmorning, sir," said Alishaer.

"Howdy."

They ate runny eggs floating in a pool of grease that tasted suspiciously like corned beef hash, washed down with bitter coffee whose cream was slightly curdled. Alishaer left his bacon, so Yves ate it, mopping up the flaky debris with an edge of yolk-soggy toast.

Yves lit up a Camel and brought out his billfold. Alishaer took his cue, bending down to his ankle and coming back up with a handful of crumpled, badly distressed low bills. "That's all you got, isn't it, partner?" said Yves.

Alishaer looked embarrassed. "It will not be enough?"

Yves tucked the cigarette into the far corner of his mouth and grunted. "It's enough, but forget it. You go on and keep your pocket money, Al. Breakfast is on me."

"You do not have to do this..." replied Alishaer awkwardly, smoothing out a couple of dollars carefully as if they were fine art.

Yves pushed the kid's hand back. "Don't make me offer twice, boy."

They held each other's eyes for a moment. Then Alishaer nodded and started putting away his cash. "Thank you very much, Mr. Yves."

"Yeah."

While he smoked Yves pulled a plastic pill organizer out of his jacket pocket and flipped open one of the little compartments. He checked his watch and then swallowed two small pills chased by a swig of coffee. He noticed Alishaer watching him. "You have a medical condition?" asked Alishaer.

"No Al, these here are my sleepers. Gotta crash for a bit before we hit the road again. You understand?"

"Yes sir."

On the way out Yves asked Ed who was awake in the Chicken Ranch and Ed told him Cheyenne was probably around. Yves and Alishaer walked around the back of the diner and Yves rapped on the door of a cream-coloured trailer sitting on cinderblocks. The hatch cracked and a girl with purple bags under her eyes stuck her head out. "Papa Rock!" she smiled.

"How the hell are ya, Chey?"

"Just gimme a sec to get my shit on. Be right out."

Yves crushed the end of his smoke under his boot and jammed his hands into his pockets, rocking on his heels nonchalantly as he scanned the cloudless sky. A moment later the girl called Chey stepped out of the trailer, her tired face painted and her unruly hair pulled into a loose ponytail. Her dress was short and either intricately patterned or dirty. "Who's your friend?" she asked.

"This is Al. He's riding with me today."

"Goodmorning, Miss," said Alishaer with a small bow.

"Al, this is Cheyenne."

"She is named Cheyenne and living in Cheyenne?" asked Alishaer, frowning his brow.

"Are you making fun of me?" Chey wanted to know.

Alishaer looked stricken. "No, no no!" he stammered.

Chey frowned. "He's like foreign or something, huh?"

"Yeah. But he's okay."

"Does he want?"

Yves shrugged. "You want a date after I'm done, buddy?"

Alishaer looked puzzled, then blushed and shook his head. He loitered around the parking lot while Yves and Chey spent some time in the cab of the truck, whose suspension creaked rhythmically to broadcast their sin. Afterward they smoked a couple of Camels together and then Chey went back to her trailer. Yves sat in the open door and smoked, barefoot. "What do you say, Al?"

"I am wondering a thing," said Alishaer.

"What's that?"

Alishaer gestured along the row of parked rigs—Wonderbread, Old South, McDonald's, Oscar Meyer. "Why is it each of these trucks have the big letters on their sides, but your truck is only white?"

"Not everything needs advertising, Al."

"So what is it that is carried inside, Mr. Yves?"

Yves scanned the sky again. "Doesn't matter what's inside. Doesn't have anything to do with my job. Whether it's Corn Flakes or mattresses or house paint, I just get it there." He tossed his cigarette butt away carelessly and stretched. "Forget about it. I'm gonna lay down a while. You good by yourself?"

"Do not worry about me, sir."

Alishaer was making rounds of the parking lot stepping on his own shadow when Yves waved for his attention, hanging off the side of his truck. Alishaer jogged over as Yves pulled on his jacket and turned on the motor. The truck chortled happily, brown rings of warm, greasy soot chuffing from its pipes.

"We are going now, Mr. Yves?"

Yves nodded. "We are going now."

There was patchy rain across Nebraska, the highway crossed by parades of fat clouds trailing veils of mist with lakes of sunshine in between. Traffic was light but restless, speed vipers struggling through parades of more cautious cars and then blazing on ahead once free. The impatient opportunists irritated Yves, who did his best to open up the way so they could sail past him right into the radar traps. He chuckled to himself moments later as they passed the speeders pulled over at the side of the highway, hemmed in by braces of patrol cars with winking bubble lights.

Yves also noticed the way Alishaer tensed and perspired whenever police vehicles were in view. He said, "Don't have your papers, huh?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You're an illegal. Don't bother to deny it. I wasn't born yesterday, pal."

Alishaer looked sheepish and nodded. "I will get my papers," he promised earnestly. "My cousin in New York will help me."

Yves shrugged. "Can't say as I blame you, Al. Everybody in the world wants to come to America. You know that song? *On the boats and on the planes, they're comin' to America; never looking back again, they're comin' to America—today?*"

"No sir."

"Well, Neil Diamond is crud anyway. No big loss." Yves paused and assumed a more serious look as his eyes remained pinned to the road. "Was it a tough time for you, getting over here?"

Alishaer's lips twitched. "There were some hardships for me."

"Like what?"

The boy said nothing for a moment. "It must suffice to say that...some people will do anything for hope of better life."

"Sure, but I mean like in general," persisted Yves. "Did you stow away on a

ship or what?”

Alishaer squirmed. “Please sir. It is not a subject I like to open, Mr. Yves—with the respect that is due.” He took a deep breath. “It is behind me now. You can understand this?”

Yves glanced over at his passenger. “I can respect that. Gotta keep your eye on the prize, huh?”

Alishaer nodded nervously. Yves turned back to the road. Alishaer’s discomfort give him the willies. He badly wanted to change the subject because the silence was too thick. After a few minutes he wondered aloud awkwardly whether Alishaer would like to listen to something other than Johnny Cash.

“You’re probably not up on our music, but we got a lot of it. I have some CDs. Anything you want, really: country, western, bluegrass...”

“In Turkmenistan we get often the music of Cherry Nuk-Nuk.”

“What the hell is that? Like Turkish folk music?”

“No sir, she is the world’s most spectacular Inuit pop singer.”

“From Alaska?”

“No sir, from Canada.”

“Canada, huh? Well.” Yves frowned. “I don’t really hold with foreign music.”

They listened to more Johnny Cash. The sun set behind them. Yves sank into driving space. After passing through the pulsing turnpikes of Omaha the traffic changed, a new mélange with a diminished western influence and a bewildering aftertaste of Jersey-style lane defense; at the core a steady thread of clockwork shipping fleets, lines of vessels manned by men Yves could give a friendly nod to.

The citizen band was quiet. Mumbles and squelches.

He glanced over at his passenger who was again sleeping fitfully, hugging himself tightly and rolling his head back and forth. Poor kid.

Before Des Moines Yves pulled into a Texaco to fuel up and grab some chow. Alishaer was preoccupied, quiet, eating mechanically. Yves felt bad. He knew he’d stirred up some mud by asking the kid about his ordeals. He wanted to make it up to him somehow. “Listen,” said Yves as he lit up a Camel; “you want to see something cool?”

Alishaer looked up. “Something that is cool?”

Yves nodded and paid the bill, then waved Alishaer after him as he strode out to the lot, glistening under the harsh fluorescents from the recent rain. Under such light everybody looked exhausted and jaundiced, a little bit like ghouls. Yves paused at the rear door of his rig’s long white trailer.

“Now,” he announced, “I’ve signed non-disclosures up the wazoo about this stuff, so you got to promise me this is just between us. Right?”

“Right,” said Alishaer, eyes glued to the steel doors.

“You know what gives America an edge over everybody else in the world?” he asked leadingly.

“Hard work?” guessed Alishaer.

“Well yeah,” admitted Yves, “but what does all that hard work lead to? I’ll tell ya: *technology*. America’s got the greatest technology anywhere. And, you know: the rest of the world don’t know the half of it.” He allowed himself a little smile. “I guarantee you ain’t never seen anything like *this*.”

Yves stepped up on the bumper and unlocked a small panel. It swung open to reveal a tiny keypad upon which he tapped a long code. From inside the trailer came the quadruple snap of heavy locks disengaging. “I’m only supposed to open her up for

inspections, but I'll fudge the log and say I had to check something."

"Okay," said Alishaer breathlessly.

Yves swung open one of the twin doors, then leaned down and offered his hand to help Alishaer up. The kid was surprisingly light. Alishaer blinked in the somber blue glow of the inspection lights, attempting to focus on the hazy forms arrayed beyond a taut wall of plastic sheeting.

Alishaer's eyes went wide. "Are they...?"

Yves nodded with a satisfied grunt. "That's right, Al," he said. "Robots."

Alishaer was transfixed by the rows of motionless shadows, his brow knitted. Upon those closest to the sheet the feeble blue inspection light revealed braided hair, tranquil faces, closed eyes, limp hands, legs locked like horses. "They are all women," he whispered.

Yves looked at his boots and cleared his throat. "Well, yeah son, these here speak to exactly what I was talking about. In America we got men so rich and so smart they don't have time for girls. But they're still men, and they've got needs. Needs nothing inflatable can fill, right?"

Alishaer smiled uncertainly, baffled but fascinated.

"They need something that really looks like a woman," said Yves, thumbs in his belt, "but something you can switch off when there's work needing doing."

"They are like dolls?"

Yves frowned. "Well, maybe. Dolls that dress themselves, and walk around, and even talk to you a little. Dolls with *the AI* in them. Dolls that'll run you about a quarter billion a piece."

"Amazing," admitted Alishaer.

The trucker grinned, then wiped it away with his knuckle. He unzipped a slit in the plastic and waved Alishaer closer. The air smelled like flowers. Each female form stood in a narrow cylinder with a modest collection of accessories bundled in plastic at their feet. "This batch looks all Asian," said Yves. He snorted. "Asians are real popular." He fished a keycard out of his jacket and flashed it through a slot on the base of the closest container.

A pink light winked on from above, and the woman opened her eyes.

Alishaer gasped. Yves chuckled. "No shit, huh?" he said, elbowing the boy in the ribs in a friendly way. "Pardon my language," he added.

"She is...not real?"

Yves shook his head. "Hell no, Al. That's what I'm saying. *This* is technology." He rapped suddenly on the side of the container, making Alishaer jump but causing no response in the woman. "See that, Al? She doesn't even flinch."

Alishaer touched his face nervously and backed against the plastic wall. "She blinks!" he whispered.

"Well *of course* she blinks," chortled Yves. "Like I said, they're supposed to look real. Realer than real. It's really something, huh?"

Alishaer was sweating. "I am needing some air, Mr. Yves, sir." He began to pat the sheet wall in search of the zippered opening. "I am dizzy, sir." He found the slit and fell over himself on the way out.

Yves shut everything up and then hopped to the pavement and swung closed the doors. Alishaer sat on a concrete parking buttress, hugging himself and staring at the stars forlornly. "I am sorry, Mr. Yves," he said quietly. "I did not mean to spoil the cool thing."

The trucker kicked a couple of stones around. "Forget about it. Some guys it

freaks out. I thought it was kind of creepy myself the first time I saw them, honestly. You know?”

Alishaer nodded.

“Like I said, forget about it. Don’t let it get to you. Eye on the prize, right?”

Alishaer nodded again.

“We should get back on the road,” said Yves.

Things went bad in Illinois.

The day was overcast. There wasn’t a lot of glare. The freeway was thick but constant, moving with purpose. The horizon was tinged with the rustier grey of Chicago’s roof of smog. They were passing through the outlying threads of the megalopolis.

State patrol cars herded the clots like sheep, quietening the fleeters. A long caterpillar of conservatives paraded behind “Papa Rock” Yves LeRoche’s trailer, sheltered from the automotive spume by his constancy.

Lightning flashed in the north.

Yves couldn’t figure out why he felt so groggy. He knuckled his eyes and frowned, pinched the bridge of his nose and bit the inside of his lip. It had been over an hour since he’d last dropped an upper, and he couldn’t explain why it hadn’t kicked in yet.

The Johnny Cash disc spun. Yves turned it up.

Alishaer, for his part, looked miserable. He was curled up in a ball against the passenger door, his face pressed into the glass, his eyes unfocused and dancing. His arms quivered and his teeth chattered but he was covered in an even glaze of perspiration.

“You want a blanket or something?” grunted Yves.

Alishaer shook his head without turning. Yves sneered and accelerated a bit, opening up a gulf with his tail. He found himself sceptical that Alishaer had endured much in the way of hardship getting to America if he was fragile enough to go to pieces over seeing a load of sex robots. Yves’ contempt for the kid’s inability to shake it off was starting to get to him.

“Why don’t you take one of my sleepers?” prompted Yves. “It might take the edge off, right?”

“I do not think these pills work for me,” said Alishaer hollowly.

“Bullsquat,” sniffed Yves. “I don’t know what kind of crud you’ve got in Turkey, but American pills do what they say they do. These aren’t street drugs, Al—these are from a pharmacy. Trust me.”

Yves held out his pill organizer and pointed to the right compartment with his thumb while he kept his eyes on the road. Alishaer hesitated and then picked out a pill and swallowed it with a grimace.

“Besides,” added Yves dangerously, “these robots don’t hurt anybody. They don’t go crazy or anything, if that’s what you’re worried about. I know that’s what always happens in the movies. But they got top scientists making these things. They’re safer than safe.”

“I do not think of them as threatening,” said Alishaer.

“You’re thinking about what kind of a man would use such a thing, right? I’m not free to tell you specifics, but I happen to know some of the names of the guys who these things are going to. And, like I said, I can’t name names but these are *top guys*. Important people, you know? People who don’t have time to dick around with a

relationship.”

“I do not know what I think of such men.”

“You get over the creeps,” explained Yves. “I remember just about pissing myself one time when one of the techs at the load-up dialed in some code that made them all come at once—pardon my language. You know what I mean? Like all moaning and screaming with their lady orgasms, right? Like a kitty concert. It was too funny.”

Alishaer swallowed, running his shaking hands over one another. “But how do you know for sure?”

Yves knitted his brow. “What do you mean?”

“How do you *know* they are robots?”

“This again?” Yves snorted, rubbing his eyes. “Get over it, Al. I’ve seen those little dollies opened up for servicing—there’s nothing in there but plastic and metal doohickies and wires and tubes. Believe you me.” He chuckled and shook his head.

Suddenly Alishaer tensed. “Cinnamon!” he gasped.

Yves yawned, his eyes burning. “I just can’t reckon why I’m so bagged,” he muttered.

“Cinnamon!” repeated Alishaer, staring at the trucker intensely.

Yves frowned. “What?”

“I smell cinnamon,” he said, grabbing at the silver medical bracelet around his slender wrist. “It is a sign: an attack! Your pills are bringing me an attack!”

Traffic was buckling ahead, deforming around a fender bender in the inside lane. Yves switched smoothly into the outside and geared down as his tired eyes flickered over the mirrors.

“Oh shit,” he said. “You’re gonna have a seizure, Al? Oh shit. Okay, just calm down, right?”

“I should not have taken another pill,” moaned Alishaer.

“Another pill?” echoed Yves. “What are you talking about?”

“I took one of your pills, in the night, to help me sleep,” gushed Alishaer, holding his head and breathing quickly. “It made me feel crazy, like my blood is electricity.”

“Oh shit.”

The windshield speckled with rain. Brake lights fluttered on and off up and down the line.

With a sinking sensation Yves pulled out his plastic pill organizer and blindly pushed every compartment open with his thumb. He glanced away from the road, looked up again, and then returned to staring at the array of pills—mixed up, a random sampling of each kind inside every slot. “Everything’s all mixed up!” he bellowed. “What the fuck did you do, Al?”

“My hands are shaking when I take it,” moaned Alishaer.

“Oh shit, oh shit,” said Yves, rubbing his eyes hard and biting his lip. He realized that not only had the epileptic Alishaer taken uppers, but he himself was sitting in a soup of downers. “Oh *shit*.”

The world seemed to be moving in slow motion.

Alishaer stretched himself into a taut arc, his stomach thrust up off the seat, straining against the belt. His arms and legs pinwheeled and jerked violently, swatting through the air of the cabin viciously as his head reeled back, the veins on his neck pulsing.

Yves swung his view back to the road, his head feeling damp and heavy with an afterwave of ghosted motion. The outside lane ended due to construction. The

flashing orange lights of the construction barrier were like spikes in his eyes, throbs of pain. He checked the mirrors for a hole into the next lane, swift as the current was.

He cried out in surprise as one of Alishaer's errant limbs struck him in the shoulder, his racing heart skipping a beat and making his chest feel cold.

Yves began switching lanes, easing the rig over. A red Honda roared up out of nowhere and took his hole. Yves rocked the truck back away from the lane and engaged the engine brakes, the booming complaint echoing across the freeway.

Alishaer cried out in agony, foam flying from his lips.

"Jesus Christ, Al! Are you gonna make it?" he yelled, attempting to manoeuvre the truck with hands that felt numb, arms that felt like lead weights.

A curtain of rain washed over the road. Yves tried to check his mirrors but his head spun when he jerked his eyes. He wanted to scream. His body felt far away. With detached interest he saw the fingers of Chicago's tallest buildings crest the grey horizon between the windshield wipers' sweeps, and thereby recognized that he had somehow turned the wipers on.

He risked a glance over at Alishaer. He had dropped into his seat, his limbs making only tiny flutters of movement. His eyes were open, and he appeared to have wet his pants.

"Are you alive, kid?" Yves tried to cry.

Alishaer looked at him listlessly.

"You had me *scared*, Al."

Alishaer was looked toward the road. Yves traced his gaze. The concrete abutment was almost at his nose. With a grunt he willed his clumsy arms to wrench the wheel left, flinging the rig blindly into the middle lane. He immediately heard the bang as a car collided with the trailer, felt the rebellious shudder touch him through the wheel. "Oh shit!" said Yves, struggling to keep control.

"I hate cinnamon," murmured Alishaer.

Yves struck a green van from behind. The impact swung the trailer out like a whip, sending a silver sedan spinning into the rails. Yves tried to anticipate the whip of inertia and counter-steer, but he could not get his body to obey. His hands slipped on the wheel, weak and full of pins and needles. His vision faded at the edges.

Frenchy got butterflies in his tummy.

The truck turned over. The wheels left the ground. The engine raced loudly, a plaintive groan. Some of the windows went out and Yves watched the rooster-tailed clouds of cubed glass sparkle through the cabin. Yves and Alishaer thumped around back and forth like ragdolls, held fast to their chairs.

They hit passenger side down and skidded across the pavement, pebbles from the road bouncing against their faces. Yves had just enough together to realize it was a good crash: the cabin was uncompressed, they hadn't jumped the median. They would live.

The rig ground to a halt, and in the moment of comparative silence that followed Yves detected the whine of strained metal that told him the trailer had not yet stopped moving. He saw it swing into view in front before it spun the cabin around, and then felt the crash as it was bisected by a speeding SUV skating sideways across the rain-slick asphalt.

Metal tore, tires screeched.

And the forms of four dozen nude women tumbled out of the eviscerated trailer with all the momentum of several tons of speeding truck. They struck the pavement and bounced, skittered, rolled. Yves waited to see them splinter apart into

cogs and tubes and shattered circuit boards, and it took him a long moment to appreciate how this was not, in fact, what was happening.

Their screams were not at all like the kitty concert.

“My God,” he said, bile rising in his suddenly constricted throat. “Jesus Christ my God—they’re *women*.”

Alishaer nodded, lazily wiping a rivulet of blood from his temple. “I told you, Mr. Yves,” he breathed raggedly; “some people will do anything for hope of better life.”



VICTOR'S MOM'S CAR

In Pauly's basement the plan was hatched, and they were titillated.

The air was blue with smoke—tobacco, marijuana, incense—and the three teenagers giggled and sermonized. Pauly said that goodness was dead in the world, and so he would choose between dying with it or defying the stifling order, a hedged bet brokered by dangerous action. "It's about freedom," promised Pauly.

"Shit yeah," said Victor. He was not as sure as he sounded, but he loved Pauly and would not speak against the plan.

Victor found it both harder and easier to be more earnest once Dalia chimed in. It was harder because he worried that the way his face flushed and his hands sweated threatened to betray his dignity and secrets, and easier because it was inconceivable to Victor to watch Dalia's lippgloss shiny lips chewing over her stale, smoked gum and disagree. She was too pretty to disagree with.

If he raised his gaze to hers he would freeze like roadkill, so Victor just nodded at her gum-snapping mouth. "Dalia's right," he said, his voice quavering over her name. Victor released a breath he hadn't remembered he'd been holding and his penis made a brief, involuntary shudder from resting against his right thigh to his left.

"Shit yeah," nodded Dalia. "I'm always right. Right, Pauly?"

"Fuckin' A."

Victor envied their easy banter.

The weapons had already been secured: Victor's little brother Todd had been playing in the dumpster behind Venetti's Bakery when he found two dented Glock 19s and a 9mm Magnum Baby Eagle with sticky brown specks on the grip. They were wrapped in paper that smelled like old pork.

"What about ammo?" asked Dalia, twirling one of the Glocks on her finger and bouncing one leg against the opposite knee carelessly.

Victor was transfixed by the undulating seams of her jeans. "Huh?"

"We don't need no fuckin' ammo," snorted Pauly. "You don't think Old Chinkers will shit himself just having a gun pointed at his head? You think we'll need to actually fuckin' *shoot* him?"

Dalia shrugged. "Just feels kinda half-assed to have unloaded guns, like wearing a stuffed bra."

Victor adjusted himself and guffawed unconvincingly.

"Fuck," commented Pauly with a wry smile; "are you saying you stuff, Dalia?"

Let me see.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m fuckin’ checking you, girl.”

Pauly and Dalia wrestled on the couch. They snorted and snickered. Victor didn’t know what to do with himself. Pauly clutched Dalia’s bosom through her T-shirt and squished at it clinically, nodding to himself. Dalia kicked him in the chest and Pauly dropped heavily to the floor, spilling a bowl of stale potato chips.

Everyone laughed. Victor fought to regain his breath. So did the wrestlers.

The next item of business was to draw a map of Old Chinkers’ store in order to plot their positions. The job of drawing the map fell to Victor on account of his wearing glasses, which Pauly had always claimed made Victor smart. Victor was usually pleased to maintain this fiction in order to have something to claim for his own—it had always been Pauly cornering the market on handsome, on strong, on suave, on funny.

Victor was content to let people think he was smart just because he looked like a librarian if it made him second fiddle rather than totally irrelevant.

He hunched over the pad and sketched out the shop based on his notes. Dalia flopped over the low table and hunched over with him. Victor called on a supernatural reserve of will in order to avoid glancing down the front of her hanging shirt. Dalia watched him trying not to look.

“Damn Vic,” drawled Dalia, “I should see if I can drum up an ugly girl to touch your junk. Aren’t ugly girls smart?”

“You’re not ugly,” squeaked Victor.

“Yeah, but she’s not smart either,” commented Pauly.

“Fuck you, dick-cheese.”

“Put your money where your mouth is, dick-tease.” Pauly laughed and clapped Victor on the back. “Besides,” he said, “Vic’s not ugly. He’s just earnest.”

“Same thing,” said Dalia. “Honest, ugly, sensitive—all just different ways of saying too much of a pussy to be an asshole.”

“Not honest, *earnest*,” groaned Pauly.

“Why would I want to be an asshole?” asked Victor.

Dalia lit up a cigarette and let the first drag vent languorously from her perfect nostrils. “So I’d fuck you, is why,” she replied. She tapped her ash on the corner of Victor’s picture and closed her eyes to smoke.

Pauly snorted. They went over the plan again, with Victor drawing little dotted paths on the map like football plays to support Pauly’s overview. When they all heard Pauly’s older brother home from school, walking around upstairs, they doused themselves and the furniture in an air freshener that they agreed was best described as smelling like lemon-dipped assberries.

They were still giggling about this when Pauly’s older brother Andrew came downstairs and started waving his hand around in front of his nose. “What the fuck, Paul?” he greeted them. “Are you smoking in our parents’ goddamn *house*?”

“No,” said Pauly.

“That is so motherfucking disrespectful,” said Andrew. Then he punched Pauly in the side, and Pauly folded like a blanket. This was by design: when Andrew was hitting his brother in front of an audience he always made sure to aim for the badly mended secret fracture in Pauly’s lowest rib on the left side, where Andrew had cracked him one with a ball-peen hammer when the boys were younger. The skin around this area was perennially discoloured and soft from frequent attention, and it was the first thing Pauly thought about whenever he found himself in a circumstance where he might

have to take off his shirt with other people around.

Andrew called it his “button” because he could work Pauly like a marionette with it.

Andrew was a football player. He was the apple of his father’s eye. When he was twelve years old he had a wet dream in which he was aroused by the sweetly smooth coffee skin of his younger brother’s chest. Confused and upset by his feelings, Andrew sought revenge on Pauly by hurting him a lot.

After Andrew went back upstairs Pauly lit a cigarette and wouldn’t look anyone in the eye. Victor tried to comfort him by reviewing the plan, but Pauly said he wasn’t interested in the plan anymore. “Fuck it,” he said.

Dalia knew the adventure was losing its juice. With Pauly defeated they would never maintain the energy required for liftoff. Boys were delicate. She needed to act quickly to rescue the momentum and reinflate Pauly, so she went over to have a quiet word with him and then touched his junk.

Later, the teenagers rode Victor’s mom’s car out of Witterson and into town. Victor drove. His balls hurt. His hands were greasy. Pauly unpacked and prepared the gear in the passenger seat: guns, masques, gloves, bags. Dalia was in the back, visible to Victor in the rearview, her eyeliner-raccoon eyes swaying in time to the loud, loud music.

They all smoked cigarettes. Even Victor, even though it made him feel even more like throwing up.

Pauly was juiced. Pauly was pumped. Pauly felt at the top of his savage game. In a matter of minutes he would shit on the face of civility and make off with a fat sack of free money, whistling like a canary and then laughing until he couldn’t breathe. It was obvious to him that Dalia was wrapped around his finger, so he would get laid. And the whole experience was bound to impart Victor with some balls, too.

He felt like Santa Claus.

Lost in the drive, they were startled to arrive at Old Chinkers’ “LIQ OR STO E.” It was almost two o’clock and the shadows were short. There was one other car in the parking lot—a corroded blue Saab with tinted windows. Pauly wordlessly handed out the masques and gloves. They helped themselves to guns, Victor pinioning his arm against the cupholder to hide his trembling. Dalia smiled at him sympathetically and then pushed her face against his.

“Impress me out there, Vic,” she whispered and then kissed him.

Victor felt her tongue dart through his mouth and he gasped. The kiss broke and she let her fingers linger on his cheek for a second before turning around to kiss Pauly slowly, wanton and wet. Victor looked away.

Everybody’s hearts were beating fast.

“Go,” declared Pauly.

Victor lost a moment in the first rush of adrenaline—he had no memory of getting out of the car. He found himself walking across the parking lot, flecks in the asphalt scintillating in the sun, his shadow wheeling around his ankles as he turned. The air was hot and his breath tasted like tobacco and girl-tongue. He was dizzy but felt steadier when he focused on the store’s delivery door, which seemed reassuringly distant.

He blinked and found himself upon it: green paint peeled from rust, letters illegible. He threw the door open with unintentional force and it smacked the side of the cinderblock alcove with a loud bang. Victor knew it would open. Dalia had promised she’d take care of it at the end of her shift, early that morning.

Peering through the aperture Victor saw Pauly pass through the store's front entrance. It was time.

He glanced over his shoulder at Dalia. She nodded at him from the driver's seat of Victor's mom's car. The car was the same colour as the asphalt. The air over the hood shimmered.

In his next breath Victor decided that he truly loved Dalia and that he believed he could save her from herself. It took him several seconds after that to recognize that the car was moving. He was able to briefly posit that she was moving the car closer to the front entrance, but forced to draw a more sober conclusion when his mom's car accelerated hard, sparks flying off the bumper as Dalia jumped it over the curb and hit Midland Boulevard with a screech.

"Holy shit," wheezed Victor. And then, "Holy *shit!*"

He drew his gun and leveled it at the speeding car before he remembered it wasn't loaded. Then he remembered Pauly inside the store. They had to abort the plan. With no getaway they were screwed. Pauly had to be warned. Victor bolted through the delivery door and inside the store.

Victor stopped short when he saw Old Chinkers pointing a rifle at Pauly. Pauly's hands were in the air. His weapon was on the floor. He had wet his pants. A plump, middle-aged woman was cowering behind the fortified wine stand. She was crying, but she looked up as Victor burst in.

Old Chinkers, whose actual name was Guillaume Raoul Zhang because he was the bastard of a Frenchman his Mandarin mother had always carried a torch for, swiveled his head neatly and nailed Victor with his eyes. Victor realized he was brandishing a gun and his bowels creaked ominously.

Guillaume acted quickly, but incompletely.

Because he was staring at Victor part of his mind was satisfied that the more threatening target was in aim, so he squeezed the trigger on the rifle. The rifle, however, was still fixed on Pauly.

A small, wet piece of Pauly's throat struck the wall behind him, tarnishing a poster of a smiling pirate holding up a bottle of rum.

Pauly began to whistle involuntarily. He dropped to his knees and clutched at his bloody neck. He began to choke in a series of staccato spasms that sounded suspiciously like snickering. His eyes were wide and full of animal panic. He kicked over a display advertising pre-mixed cocktails and the middle-aged woman cowering in the next aisle screamed.

Victor dropped his gun. He ran to Pauly's side. Guillaume seemed stunned and he used the rifle to prop himself up as he stumbled against the counter. He was muttering things in Mandarin.

Victor cradled Pauly's head in his lap, his pants quickly soaking through with Pauly's unfortunate leakage. Pauly stiffened and his eyes rolled back into his head. He farted, then relaxed. Victor suspected that his friend was dead. His heart rolled. For reasons he did not fully understand he kissed Pauly on the lips.

Pauly's breath smelled like Dalia.

Victor scooped up his gun and stood. It was his vague intention to make Dalia pay for Pauly. He wiped the blood off his lips with the back of his gloved hand. He swiveled neatly and leveled his unloaded Glock at Old Chinkers. "Give me your car keys," he demanded.

Instead of handing over car keys Guillaume grabbed his left arm as a puzzled expression cascaded across his features. He pinched his mouth and cocked one

eyebrow. He slumped against the counter and oozed down onto the floor beside the mop and bucket. He mentally chastised Dalia for forgetting to put the mop away at the end of her shift, and then thought about how much he had loved his mother as his heart stopped.

He had been taking blood pressure medication sold to him at a steep discount by the protection racket that controlled the neighbourhood, a group of motorcycle enthusiasts who called themselves The Brigade. The medication was stolen from hospitals and Indian Reserves by people on the inside indebted in one way or another to The Brigade.

Guillaume did not know that for months Dalia had been swapping his black market blood pressure medication for mints of roughly the same shape and colour. Guillaume did not notice the change in flavour as he was such a heavy smoker that he could not by means of taste discern shit from shinola, a fact verified experimentally by his wife. Dalia sold Guillaume's actual medication as dance party drugs to grade school kids as for ten bucks a pop. She had repeat customers. They always assured her they had gotten very high, and were interested in more of the same.

Guillaume died on the floor of his store, clutching at his front shirt pocket, fishing for a tin of Altoids.

"Shit," said Victor. And then, "*Shit!*"

Police sirens moaned in the distance. The hairs on the back of Victor's neck stood on end. He looked at the middle-aged woman crouching next to the fallen cocktail mix display, "Is that your Saab?" he asked.

The woman simultaneously voided her bladder and handed over the keys.

Her name was Sarah and she was in the midst of slowly murdering her eldest sister, Myrna, whom she tended. Myrna had lost her legs in a childhood sled tragedy, which meant she was considered brave. Her husband had been tremendously wealthy, and Myrna contributed regularly to his most cherished charities after his death, which meant she was considered generous. She was beyond reproach. Everyone in the family and the community thought that Myrna was wonderful. Only Sarah knew what a terrifying bitch she really was.

For twelve years Sarah had been watching for opportunities to help her sister meet her end without implicating herself. Every coughing fit was a lottery, a rollercoaster of emotion for Sarah. She only ever engaged the wheelchair's brakes halfway, and usually stopped it where it was likely to be nudged by passersby. She greased the sides of the bathtub. She moved familiar objects out of place in order to encourage Myrna to lean and possibly totter.

Sarah was fighting for her life. She knew Myrna was the only one who could possibly have put broken glass in Sarah's toothpaste or peed in her shampoo bottles. Myrna whispered terrible things to Sarah through the wall at night while Sarah pretended to be asleep. On these occasions Myrna used a deep, masculine voice and described unspeakable things to Sarah involving genital torture and the decorative branding of infants.

Lately, Sarah had been parking Myrna in the Saab with all the windows up during the hottest part of the day. She had read in The Sun that dogs died this way. Sarah would go shopping, and buy herself ice cream. She lolligaged. She felt giddy as she walked back to the car, always hoping today could be the day.

She often stopped at the cheap Chinese liquor store between chores in order to pick up a little sherry, which she hid inside the toilet tank so that Myrna wouldn't find it and use it to set Sarah's bed on fire.

Sarah was not sure how to feel as she watched the teenager with the black ski masque run across the parking lot to her Saab. She bit her lip. The lottery was on! “Mr. Zhang?” she called.

The Saab chirped as Victor approached. He swung into the driver’s seat and jammed in the key, twisting. He put it in gear and accelerated hard, bumping up over the edge of the lot and tearing up a swath of yellow grass on the boulevard. Victor twirled the wheel and sent the car speeding the wrong way up a one way street.

Victor believed that Dalia was going to Edmonton. She had talked about it before. There was only one highway out of town. He knew he could beat her there. Justice would come to Dalia, he swore. His hands were no longer shaking. He was resolute, and in control of at least this splinter of the day.

His eyes flicked to the rearview mirror where he beheld the startling apparition of a white-haired woman with no legs clutching her skeletal hands over her own mouth as her eyes bulged and twitched.

Victor screamed and involuntarily dragged the Saab along the side of a Murano van in which the children were watching a movie about a high speed car chase. Their mother dropped her muffin and steered the van into a small park, scattering picnickers and knocking over a pile of feather-weight boxes that were in the process of being unloaded from a logoless truck.

The boxes contained kite kits for kids, part of a community event in the park sponsored by Myrna in the name of her late husband, Anthony. Anthony had adored kites, and had been killed while hang-gliding. Myrna had never fully forgiven him that folly, which is why when she masturbated in the bath she never imagined Anthony but rather their old gardener, Felix, instead. Felix himself had died in the arms of a beloved prostitute, an idea which repelled and titillated Myrna in equal measure.

Victor decided he was hallucinating. He risked a glance over his shoulder to confirm this appraisal only to come face to face with Myrna again. She released her hands from her face and offered up a stream of milky vomit. Victor ducked. He caught most of it on his hair.

He swung back around to face the windshield in time to manoeuvre around a streetlamp and fly through an intersection, somehow finding the narrow and shifting way through the melee of opposing traffic. Horns bleated, Dopplering away behind.

“Who are you?” gasped Myrna. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Fuck you, lady,” said Victor.

“How dare you?”

“Sit back and shut up or I’ll shoot you in the face.”

Myrna was not used to being addressed in such a fashion. She simply did not tolerate it. Her ineffectual fusspot of a sister Sarah had once tried to aggrandize herself by criticizing Myrna’s hat at a wedding, and what had that earned her? Broken glass in her toothpaste, that’s what. Nobody messed with Myrna.

She attacked Victor from behind, using her long, exquisitely cared for nails to claw away his glasses and stab at his eyes and trachea. Her unusually strong arms wedged her against the back of his seat, the doiled stumps of her thighs flailing free. She howled like a banshee into his ear, and then bit off the lobe.

The blue Saab weaved across the lanes.

Victor was smacking over his shoulder with the Glock. He made a solid connection and heard the crone whimper. He grinned to himself and then peeled across another intersection at high speed, colliding with a brown F1 pickup in such a way that both vehicles were thrown upward into the air. They crashed down as a unified form

and then shattered into dozens of pieces which bounced and slid away to cause secondary accidents.

Neither Victor nor Myrna had been wearing seatbelts. Their corpses were desecrated by inertia.

The man driving the F1 pickup had been wearing his seatbelt, but he was mashed into a space too unfortunately small for his body to retain its coherence when the Saab's engine block entered the cab at high velocity. The pulverized man's name was Cecil Traag, and he was a science teacher at Witterson Elementary. His last thought was, "I forgot to buy butter."

Cecil was a passionate teacher who gave of his own time to impart the excitement of science to his students. Students he took an especial shine to were invited to come out for wee hour astronomy sessions, looking through Mr. Traag's formidable lens. "That's Ursa Major," he would say.

Sometimes it could be very chilly, so Cecil encouraged the boys to bring hot chocolate in a thermos. When the hot chocolate ran out he sometimes mentioned that the body loses a considerable proportion of heat through the genital area, and would go on to suggest he put his hands down the boy's pants and cup their junk.

Later, if Cecil himself felt chilled, he might ask the boy to cup his junk in turn.

Some thirty percent of Cecil Traag was reduced to a fine red mist within the first second of the collision. His brain was ultimately found roped in his intestines, themselves packed into a neat gelatin-mould the inverse shape of the F1's transmission shifter. Some of the flying splinters of Cecil's bones were sufficiently accelerated as to penetrate the accorded dashboard and end up in the glove compartment. One fragment pushed through half of the driver's manual, its journey taking it as deep as page 268, "Emergency Braking Procedures."

The first boy whose junk Cecil Traag had ever cupped on a chilly star-spangled morning was Andrew, Pauly's older brother. At Cecil's funeral Andrew would take the podium and call the deceased a "brainsick childfucking faggot monster." It would ultimately take all six of the mortuary's security staff to get Andrew under control. Three of them were sent home with minor injuries. No criminal charges were laid, but Andrew and Pauly's parents were asked to chip in for the salad bar Andrew destroyed during his rampage.

The salad bar had been set up by the Alberta's Finest Catering Equipment Company out on the highway, which at that moment Dalia was passing on her way out of town. She pushed Victor's mom's car hard and the steering wheel began to wobble. She slowed down for Hornsby's regular speed-trap and then floored it again on the other side.

"I'm fucking *free*," she breathed with relief, letting herself smile.

She lit a cigarette and cranked up the squelchy radio.

Dalia fought frequently with her mother. They fought about anything, but a notable favourite topic was how much they resembled one another, how much they were hypocrites, and how much they could or couldn't read each other's minds. They fought about money and rules. They fought about grades and necklines.

Two days earlier while they had been fighting Dalia clocked her mother with the charging base for a portable telephone, knocking out three of her teeth and bursting open a slit on her tongue. The telephone was undamaged, however, and Dalia's mother used it to call the police. "I'm pein annack!" she blubbered through her swollen mouth before Dalia smashed the handset.

"Diel!" Dalia urged her mother, and then broke down sobbing.

Dalia's mother held Dalia to her tightly, humming and rocking back and forth. She cried, too. "Whad habben noo us, papy?" she cooed. "We use a pe pest friens."

When the police arrived Dalia's mother denied that it had been Dalia who hit her, which made Dalia feel a way she couldn't describe. The police thought it possible that Dalia's mother's boyfriend, Peck, had hit her. Peck had had trouble with the law before, and had twice been jailed for being drunk and disorderly. "Peg never dutch me," Dalia's mother insisted.

Never the less, the police decided to swing by Peck's garage to ask him a few questions. Peck was drunk when they got there, and by all reports he reacted in a fairly disorderly manner. "Those lying bitches!" was his refrain according to one of the grease-monkeys. "I'll kill them both."

That was Monday. Dalia knew she had best be scarce by Wednesday. She had crossed Peck before and regretted it. She was interested in any ticket out of town. She had friends in Edmonton. One of them said he would set her up to deal lysergic acid and ecstasy. She could squat, or sleep on the street until winter. All she needed was a ride.

Now she rode.

She had intended to fulfill her part in the plan faithfully. She thought having some start up money would be good. But once she found herself sitting in Victor's mom's car it seemed pointless to expose herself to the risk of whatever was going on inside Old Chinkers' store. "Fuck it," she said to herself. "Choosing is life."

Surely Victor and Pauly would chicken out once they'd seen she had ditched them. She gave neither of them another thought.

The radio played a righteous tune and Dalia experienced the best moment of her life. The sun was burning low and turning orange, the sky a cloudless vault of graduating colour. She breathed deeply and laughed without reserve.

When the moment faded she lit another cigarette and drove faster. The next song sucked.

Dalia was inexperienced with the reading of gauges and thus was surprised and confused when Victor's mom's car ran out of gas. She coasted it to the side of the road and then swore for a while. She punched the passenger seat, which was made of leather. It squeaked. "Fucktruck," she said.

It was dark out. The aurora was a vague green blur in the north, Edmonton a vague orange blur to the south. Dalia shivered and walked, pissed off.

The Keeler Trail Motel wasn't far away. A group of four men were sitting outside in the parking lot, drinking rye as they discussed their motorcycles. "Oh, please give me a hit of *that*," said Dalia. She played cute. She explained her situation, and her new friends agreed to give her a ride back to the car and lend her some gas. After a few more belts from the bottle she warmed to the idea of waiting until morning to deal with it.

"This is my motel," said her new friend Benny. "I'll comp you a room tonight. A sort of damsel in distress discount. You know?"

"You're so sweet, Benny. I love you," said Dalia.

"Have another drink, honey. Everything's going to be fine."

It wasn't, though.

Dalia eventually came to live at a private halfway house called Sarah's Farm. Sarah had been deeply involved in the rehabilitation of wayward young people ever since her dear sister Myrna had been killed in a car-crash after being taken hostage by a teenage robber nearly two years earlier. The house was an old Calgary colonial with

white gables and shutters around the dormers. There were three gardens—two vegetable, one exclusively floral—and a peach tree in the front yard. The tranquility of the house was only seldom broken by angry shouts from inside or by neighbourhood protesters waving placards and chanting by the curb. “Not in my backyard!” they cried.

Sarah seemed to have a source of infinite patience when it came to the young people. She did not rage or deflate whenever they stole from her or kicked holes in the walls. She did not lose hope when one of her charges disappeared in the night and turned up dead in Vancouver months later. She could absorb even the most vitriolic abuse without awakening her ire. She had heard it all.

“You’re an evil cunt,” Dalia told her. “Fuck your house.”

“I’ve made you some toast, dear,” said Sarah, carrying a plastic tray. “Do you like jam?”

“Eat shit.”

It took Sarah a long time to bring Dalia around, but Sarah was patient. In time, Dalia began to help out with the other girls at the house. After taking a shift on suicide watch over a cutter named Lillian Dalia told Sarah she was ready to talk about her experiences. Over a cup of hot tea she wove a fractured and nonlinear tale about being introduced to a new and previously inconceived level of subjugation at the hands of Benny and his pals from The Brigade, by whom she was towed around as chattel for a long year: tattooed, used, traded, berated. After she escaped she worked as a prostitute in Vancouver which was relative bliss, though nothing compared to the paradise that was prison. “Three squares a day and no cocks,” explained Dalia. “Like Eden never ended.”

Feeling that a bridge had finally been forged between them, Sarah for her part unburdened herself to Dalia: she had cancer, and there was no one she trusted to understand the plight of her girls well enough to take over the management of Sarah’s Farm. “I keep a little plastic bag in my purse for throwing up into,” said Sarah.

Friendship bloomed, and then a kind of love.

“You’re the only person I ever met who isn’t out for nobody but themselves,” said Dalia. “And you’re not even into Jesus.”

As time went by Sarah was less and less involved in the day to day operations of the halfway house. She was always tired. Dalia became more and more involved, and cradled the head of a burn-scarred Ethiopian illegal alien as she died from a heroin overdose on the front porch one night. Somebody had told her she could find hope at Sarah’s Farm. “Maybe she thought they fugging said *dope*,” joked a hard-faced girl named Margarita.

Dalia pierced her with a withering look, and Margarita softened. “I’m fugging sorry,” she mumbled. “Shit.”

Dalia and Margarita eventually became lovers. They took the master bedroom once Sarah was moved to the first floor because she couldn’t handle the trip up the stairs. They talked about adopting a little Ethiopian girl and naming her Hope.

Margarita procrastinated about moving the adoption forward, because she was HIV positive and didn’t want the child to see a parent die. She would not tell Dalia about her condition for several years—not until just six months before she was struck down by double pneumonia. Dalia’s own bloodwork would come back positive, at which point she would forge a relationship with Christ.

Sarah, once plump and meek and now thin and determined, had to be moved to the hospital before her own end came. Once there she faded quickly, her spirits turning to dust. Her last lease on life had been calculating her daily puzzle of how to

steal a few sips of her precious sherry without tipping off any of her charges. Her quiet alcoholism was her most closely guarded secret. Before she left the house she would sometimes insist on helping to empty the trash-cans or carry the laundry, but this was almost always a ruse—a cover to allow Sarah to ferry empty bottles away and move in fresh ones from her stash in the cellar.

Sarah enjoyed being sneaky more than she enjoyed the sherry. “And why not?” she thought. “Am I not entitled to a little fun?”

Despite a life of sacrifice and giving, Sarah became consumed by guilt for her deceit as she lay withering in palliative care. Even as Dalia and Margarita held her hand while she slipped away, Sarah thought only of sherry.

At midnight’s stroke Sarah’s head sank back into the starched hospital pillow, her ears ringing with the roar of Hell’s flame.



NIGHT FLIGHT MIKE

1.

Two weeks before his first wet dream, Mike Zhang Cuthbertson escaped from the custody of his adoptive parents and became a briefly burning nightclub hero.

The idea had come to him through the television: a pretzel-plot sit-com chosen by his white sister India when her turn came up. On the periphery his black sister Bianca glowered and fretted, anxious to resume televisual control in order to pursue documentaries about things that explode.

On the screen a straitlaced teenager took the opportunity of a family vacation to sneak into the hotel discotheque, ending up drunk and gyrating on tabletop for a rowdy audience when her parents showed up for the third act's retrieval and retribution routine. "That is *so* not believable," snorted Bianca.

"Why?" asked India listlessly, lolling on the couch.

"Because nerds can't dance."

India considered this, the light of commercials flashing in her eyes. "Even when they're drunk?"

"Especially then," confirmed Bianca. "Now give me the remote."

"There's still more show."

"Just the credits."

"I want to hear the ending music. I like it."

Mike looked up from his homework and adjusted his glasses seriously. He was wondering whether or not he was a nerd, and therefore whether or not he possessed the ability—or even the desire—to gyrate on a tabletop. He absently pulled his feet out of the way as his sisters rolled across the rec room carpet, pulling each others' hair and screeching.

A seed had been planted in young Mike's sharp mind, and in those meanders it would find firm root.

2.

Three months after Christmas Mike's white sister India won the district spelling bee championship and Mike's black sister Bianca was warned that she was in danger of failing English. It was decided that both sisters would attend the Grand Bee in the big city, the former to make an attempt for the cup and the latter to be kept close by and out of trouble. As a corollary it was hoped that Bianca's spelling might improve

after sitting through two days of master beeing.

Mike's parents made a generous offer: "We've decided that you're responsible enough to stay home alone. Mom will freeze you a set of dinners."

"If it's all the same," replied Mike, "I'd like to come along."

His parents looked at one another. "But you'll miss the science fair, honey," said Mother.

Mike shrugged. "Somebody else can win this year."

She took his temperature. Father was also concerned. "This is your chance to get away from the girls for a few days, champ. Don't you want to give independence a whirl?"

Mike considered this, rolling the glass thermometer from one side of his mouth to the other. "I wanch 'o shee uh shitty."

"Stay still," said Mother.

"You want what?" asked Father, furrowing his brow.

Mike's mother withdrew the thermometer and examined the grade seriously. "Normal," she declared.

"I want to see the city, Pop."

Father sighed. "I suppose he can sleep on the floor of our room, can't he?" He was thinking about his credit card.

Mother seemed nervous. "I've already frozen a quiche."

Father shrugged in unconscious imitation of Mike's conscious imitation of him. "It'll keep."

3.

Four blocks from the bus station to the hotel didn't sound far, but heaving baggage along and negotiating the girls' bickering made it a marathon. Though April was unfolding the warmth had not yet been sufficient to melt the snowbanks away, but had instead revealed their black, cigarette-butt stuffed cores, ledges of treacherous silty ice that snaked along the sidewalk borders like petrified boa constrictors coming off dumpster-diving benders. India tripped on one and blamed Bianca, whom she subsequently characterized as a bumbling bitch-goblin.

"No swearing," muttered Father wearily.

"She hip-checked me," whined India.

"Didn't," said Bianca.

They walked through Chinatown. There were squashed vegetables mashed into the ice crusts, and the air smelled like a fast-food grease-trap. The family wormed their way through dense, jostling crowds of shoppers pressed around make-shift market stalls filled with octopus tentacles and knock-off MP3 players. They were awash in a constant babble of Mandarin, and Mike experienced some regret that he understood none of it despite his heritage.

"I want to learn Chinese," he told his mother.

"Not now, honey" she said.

The Fairbrook Hotel rose from the corner of Dundas Street and a dingy side alley populated by oily-haired aboriginals arguing over a patch of grating through which bloomed warm farts of subway air. India drew up against Mike at the sound of their sharp, gravelly profanity. Bianca laughed at her.

The bellhops at the Fairbrook were dressed like movie-ushers. They wore little crooked cranberry caps and had stripes running down each pantleg like Han Solo. They bowed to people who looked like big tippers and ignored everyone else, including Mike

and his family.

When one of the bellhops was dispatched by the desk clerk he reluctantly loaded the baggage onto a cart with a squeaky wheel and studied the wall with severe indifference while they all waited for the elevator. He swiped the card to admit them into the room and then piled the bags unceremoniously next to the closest bed.

On his way out the bellhop loitered at the jamb and held open his hand expectantly. Father slapped his palm and said, "Thanks, man."

Once they were settled Mother reviewed the itinerary, stepping through two days of round robin spelling and themed lunches culminating in a grand awards dinner of roast beef for finalists and parents only. Tentatively, half-jokingly, musingly, Mike set that final evening as the stage for his mission.

"Will you two be okay on your own?" asked Mother.

"Yes," said Mike.

"No," said Bianca.

"I don't like roast beef," said India.

4.

Twenty minutes later Mike was on reconnaissance. He told his parents he would request from the front desk an additional reading lamp to do his schoolwork by, which he did upon reaching the lobby. Afterward, however, he parked himself in front of a wall-sized map of the hotel's innards and set to studying the layout.

A white woman in a fancy suit with a hotel crest on the lapel wandered over and asked Mike if was lost. "No," he said. She went away.

The Fairbrook Hotel housed many facilities including a sauna, a swimming pool, a sports bar, a karaoke bar, a business centre, a fitness centre, a luncheon cafeteria with both kosher and halal dishes, a teleconferencing room and a gift shop. Try as he might, Mike could find no listing for anything resembling a nightclub.

He looked around to find the lady with the crest on her lapel but she'd vanished. Instead he caught the eye of tired-looking black woman flopped out on one of the lobby's leather couches with her long, scabby legs sprawled out carelessly before her. "Hi," she said.

"Can you help me?"

She shrugged, chewing a lump of gum rhythmically. "You looking for a good time, honeypie?"

"Yes," said Mike, stepping closer. She smelled like rubbing alcohol, and when she crossed her legs he caught a bewildering whiff of tuna fish. Mike pointed at the map. "I'm trying to find the nightclub."

"What nightclub?"

"Any nightclub. I thought there would be one in the hotel."

The woman stretched her bruised arms and cracked her thick knuckles. Her face was heavily painted, smeared around the lips. "You want to go dancing or something, baby?"

"Yes."

"What's your name, sugar?"

"Mike," said Mike.

"I'm Sapphire."

"It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Coriander's is down the block," she said, gesturing vaguely. "They got pretty girls in there, maybe you'll find yourself a girlfriend, Mike."

Mike blushed, and then two security guards with muttering walkie-talkies came and escorted Sapphire out of the lobby. Mike guessed that she must be an important person in order to warrant a security entourage. He waved and she waved back.

5.

Three incidents marred Mike's enjoyment of the first day of the Grand Bee. The first incident occurred when Mike was caught unconsciously mouthing the spelling of the words each contestant on stage was challenged with, leading to a harshly whispered reprimand from a fat judge with creased jowls who had shuffled over from the wings to accuse Mike of trying to help somebody cheat. "If you're such a whiz-bang speller you should be up there yourself," said the fat judge. His shirt bore a trail of white debris from the powdered doughnut he wagged at Mike in warning.

The second incident occurred when Mike went to the washroom and two obnoxious boys in private school suits accused him of being a "shy pisser" because he took too long standing in the stall. Mike immediately lost the ability to urinate and spent the remainder of the morning session with crossed legs.

The third incident took place during lunch when one of the other parents chatting up Father asked him to point out his children, which Father dutifully did. The blonde, pink-faced man furrowed his brow and then smiled. "Oh I see, they're not your real children," he said.

"I'm sorry?" asked Father, ceasing to chew his pasta.

"That explains the complexions," added the blonde man.

The man hadn't meant to offend Father but Father was offended. He had been offended in this way before. There was, in fact, an invisible valise of stored up offense sitting unseen on Father's shoulder. Mother touched his arm and said his name quietly, but he shook her off. "What, pray tell, do you mean by *that* exactly?" Father wanted to know, stepping closer to the blonde man.

Mike didn't hear what the man stammered in his defense, but Father put him in a headlock. Father had been a wrestler in college. The fat judge jogged up in a tizzy but, evidently lacking experience with wrestling, attempted to prise Father's arm loose in entirely the wrong way, succeeding only in knocking himself to the floor when Father turned around to see who was pulling on him.

Violence upset Mike, so he ran away.

When Mother found him in the lobby hiding behind a magazine about Filipino pirates she stroked his dark hair and gave him the speech about Father being under a lot of stress lately due to difficulties in the adoption process of Baby Ruby and the threat of downsizing at the office. "When it's all too much for him he falls back on wrestling," she concluded lamely.

"I know," said Mike.

"He wishes you would get into wrestling. He could be your coach."

"I don't like wrestling."

"I know."

They sat in silence a while, mother and son, watching people pass by on the sidewalk outside through the tinted glass of the hotel's face. They saw a bellhop badly mistake the balance of his cargo and go sprawling to the floor, suitcases skidding away in a hissing ring of ejecta. Mike and Mother cracked up, and laughed more than may have been appropriate.

"Sometimes it's hard..." Mother began wistfully.

Mike was patient and he waited, but the sentence remained dangling.

“Sometimes what’s hard?”

Mother blinked the faraway look out of her eyes. “Sometimes it’s just hard, is all.” She hugged him. “Try to remember the burden your father carries. It isn’t always easy.”

“Okay,” agreed Mike.

6.

For a long moment after Mother, Father and India had set off to the awards banquet Bianca stood by the just closed door poised like a cat, eyes closed, listening. After half a minute Mike said her name and she gave him the finger. “Shut the f up,” she mouthed silently.

Footfalls sounded in the corridor. Somebody was coming. Bass mumbling was interrupted by Mother’s voice: “...Oh nevermind, it’s right here in my purse.”

Bianca looked at Mike and raised one eyebrow. Mike nodded mutely.

They froze again, listening to their family walk away from the suite a second time. At the edge of strained hearing Mike imagined he could detect the chime of the arriving elevator and the rumble of its doors. Bianca’s eyes were closed again, fingers splayed out in space as if they were psychic antennae. Her brow creased briefly when a lone person passed through the corridor outside their room, but Mike knew the stride didn’t belong to anyone he knew.

Bianca’s eyes snapped open. She crossed the room briskly and tried to open the hermetically sealed window. “F it,” she said, and then rummaged through her knapsack and extracted a neat faggot of cigarettes rolled inside the cardboard cover of a school notebook. She lit one with a hotel match and glared at Mike expectantly.

“What?” asked Mike, sitting on the bed, his homework on his lap.

“I’m just waiting for you to start up with what you’re going to say about this, so you can get it out of your system or whatever.” Bianca blew smoke out of her mouth and inhaled it into her nose in twin silvery streams. She kicked out her hip in that challenging way she used when lying about her chores.

“I’m not going to say anything,” said Mike.

“Sure,” scoffed Bianca.

“I’ll even leave you alone.”

“You’re going to do your homework in the bathroom?”

“No, I’ll leave the room. I’ll just go.”

“Why would I want you to go? I’m supposed to be in charge of you.”

“Shut up.”

“Excuse me?”

“We both know you want me to go. But you have to do something for me in return.”

“Here it comes.”

“If Mom and Dad call up to the room and ask you where I am, you just say ‘he’s right here,’ okay?”

“He’s right here?”

“He’s right here. That’s all you have to say. Can you promise? If you promise, I’ll leave you alone all night. I just don’t want to get in trouble for it. Okay?”

Bianca narrowed her eyes slyly and dragged on her cigarette. “What’s in it for me?”

“You get what you want.”

“So what’s in it for *you*?”

Mike flushed. "Nothing."

"You're a liar."

"I'm sneaking into the business centre to use the computers."

"Shut up, Mike."

"I'm sneaking into the karaoke bar."

They stared at one another's brown eyes for a moment, pupil to pupil. Mike knew how to see the love between the flecks of resentment in Bianca's gaze, and it comforted him. Finally Bianca blinked and began to nod. "It's a deal. Now get the f out of here."

Mike snapped closed his textbook. "I'm already gone."

7.

Once he hit the lobby Mike's pace slackened with doubt. The bloom of having bested his first obstacle, Bianca, paled as he recognized in his guts the challenge of the obstacles to come. Would they even let him, a minor, wander out of the hotel at night? Even if he did, would the nightclub have bouncers who would refuse all kids? Even if it didn't, would everyone inside laugh at him?

Mike felt the urge to pee but knew he couldn't. He had to stay on-mission.

He looked at his shoes as he passed the bellhops and swept out the wide doors, the bite of the evening air at first startling and then invigorating. It also exacerbated his need to pee. The street was colourful and loud, a jostling, veering, blinking blur that Mike found easier to ignore than to parse. He marched down the outer edge of the curb in the direction Sapphire had indicated, eyes locked along the sign-fronts hunting for any combination of spelling or logotype signifying *Coriander*.

"Coriander, Coriander..." whispered Mike. "Come on Coriander."

He crashed into something meaty and leapt back, gasping. "Heavens to Betsy Ross!" cried Sapphire, stumbling against a mailbox. "You almost ate my lunch there, kid."

They couldn't say anything to one another for a moment while a streetcar rumbled by. "Am I almost at Coriander's?" shouted Mike while Sapphire shouted, "What's your name again, sweetie?"

The streetcar screeched as it slowed and chuffed as its doors unfolded.

"Coriander's?" Mike repeated.

"Like the bar?" said Sapphire, frowning. "You're named after a bar?"

"My name is Mike."

"Shit, that's right," she agreed.

Mike was about to ask her to point him on to Coriander's when she held up a hand with long fingernails and then stepped into the road to chat with someone in a car. Mike wandered on, having caught sight of an illuminated letter C on a sign occulted by a Vietnamese delivery van in the reflection of a shop window across the street.

He tilted his head to reveal the reflected letters *S R E D N A I R O C*, and his purpose was renewed. The sign was wrought in neon which was just the way he'd imagined it. The R stammered an irregular buzzing tattoo.

Mike turned to see the nightclub and his triumph chilled: the mouth of the place was entwined in a snaking line of people in various combinations of black clothing advancing by impatient twos to have their wallets inspected by someone or something in the shadowy maw before passing on within. The snake of people cackled and murmured, tall and sophisticated and ribald and adult.

Frightened that they would catch him staring Mike put his hands behind his

back and pretended to be studying something on the other side of the street. In the shop glass reflection he glimpsed hope: an alley running beside Coriander's. Could there be another way in?

Sapphire could not help him. She had climbed into her friend's car to go for a ride, waving to Mike as they passed by.

Mike steeled himself and turned to march into the alley, on-mission once again.

8.

Three Inuit roadies worked in casual concert to ferry metal-edged boxes of sound equipment through the back door, joined on their final trip by Mike whose Asian features and humble height satisfied the bored Filipino bouncer as just Inuit enough to ignore. Nobody said anything until Mike and the Inuit on the other side of the box they were carrying between them looked at one another as they let go of the metal handles and straightened. "Hey, thanks," said the Inuit.

"No problem," said Mike.

The Inuit looked awkward. "Are you with Lorenzo?"

Mike interrupted him to ask where the washroom was. The chubbiest roadie explained something in a throaty, clicking mumble to the tallest roadie, who said in turn, "My brother says the way lies down, and then around a corner."

The chubby roadie pointed to a flight of concrete steps.

At the bottom of the steps Mike found an ill-lit corridor with walls stained in floral blobs and streaks of mould. He followed the corridor around a ninety-degree bend and came to three unmarked doors. Investigation revealed a broom closet and a boiler room with old condoms on the floor before Mike came upon a decrepit water closet with a yellow toilet filled with something that looked like corn flakes.

Seeing no alternative, Mike peed on the corn flakes.

In the wake of relief came a new sensitivity to his perceptions: as Mike repackaged his willy he became aware of the steady throb of music coming from upstairs. He had at first mistaken it for the hammering of his heart. He next became aware of the smell of the tiny, grimy washroom and realized that it was putrid.

He was trying to formulate the best way to advance his plan when he heard the sound of approaching Inuit voices. There was a closet in the washroom so Mike opened it, revealing cartons of toilet tissue and a metal ladder leading up through a darkened aperture. As the voices drew near he grabbed the rungs and hauled himself up into the shadows.

He found himself in a second closet, surrounded by bottles of soap interspersed with mousetraps. Through the aperture below he heard the Inuit roadies joking with one another while they took a turn peeing on the corn flakes. Mike carefully shuffled away from the ladder and approached the closed door of the vestibule, pressing his ear against the cool wood. Silence. Tentatively he pushed at the door and it swung open freely.

Mike emerged into a second washroom, more spacious than the first, illuminated principally by strips of buzzing purple neon under the counters. It smelled like cigarettes and skunk, which was a welcome change. The steady pulse of the music was louder here, more insistent. Mike quailed. The beat felt angry to him—unwelcoming, challenging, bigger than Mike.

His nerve failed him again so he went into one of the stalls and sat on the closed toilet, wondering what to do. How deeply into the nightclub did he need to

penetrate in order to feel that his mission had been fulfilled? Already he felt a certain triumph at his act of subterfuge in slipping in with the Inuit roadies, and already he felt a real apprehension to push his luck further. What if he were caught? Was what he was doing illegal? He had been thinking of the consequences in terms of being grounded, but now wondered whether the stakes were higher.

Under the looming throb of the angry music outside of the washroom, Mike felt pinned.

9.

Six seconds later Mike heard the washroom door whine open and flap closed. Footfalls shuffled across the floor and a sink came on. Someone was snuffling, breathing raggedly. "Jesus, Jocelyn," said a woman.

"I know," said Jocelyn.

"Are you okay?" asked the first woman.

"Fuck," mumbled Jocelyn. She was crying.

With a terrible sinking sensation Mike realized that he had climbed from the basement directly into the ladies' room. Somehow this seemed to compound his crime geometrically, as if it were somehow possible to explain his underage presence in a nightclub but it defied all defense to justify why or how he would have the temerity to penetrate the sanctity of a ladies' room. He didn't want his mom to think he was a pervert.

Mike began to sweat. He locked the stall door.

"You can't take this shit from him. I mean, fuck. You just can't."

"I know," repeated Jocelyn wearily.

Mike jumped as the washroom door sang again and then banged as it smacked into the opposite wall, the music briefly blaring and then muffled again as the door swung shut. A deep voice bellowed, "*Jocelyn what the fuck?*"

"Jesus Christ!"

The women gasped. "Get the fuck out of here!" screeched Jocelyn, the imploring quaver in her voice making the hairs on Mike's arms stand on end.

"What the *fuck*, Jocelyn?" repeated the man, and then came the sound of scrambling feet, grunting, and the tearing of cloth.

"I'm going to get help," said the first woman, and the door swung open and closed again.

"Don't leave me!" cried Jocelyn.

"For once in your life why don't you *shut the fuck up?*" demanded the interloper. Jocelyn gasped again and there were more wildly shuffling feet. Mike felt the familiar knot harden in the pit of his stomach that developed whenever Father lost his temper and tried to start wrestling with somebody.

"Let go of me, Nick! I fucking *swear*—"

There came a harsh, organic sound like a steak slapped down on a butcher's counter, then a few seconds of silence. Jocelyn was crying again. Nick was breathing like a bull. Mike was shivering like a leaf.

"Now," pronounced Nick at last, "maybe you're starting to understand how far you crossed over the line this time. It's time to fucking *listen* instead of talking, you got that, Jocelyn?"

"Please don't hit me again," whimpered Jocelyn.

But he did. Mike jumped as a weight crashed into the side of the stall he was hiding inside, the thin metal walls rattling and raining grains of rust from the brackets.

Jocelyn slumped down to the floor, and in the gap beneath the wall Mike saw her pale leg and pointy shoe. He was sure Nick was going to kill Jocelyn, and then probably kill Mike for witnessing it. He had never been so scared in his life. He tasted bile as his belly hiccupped.

“Get up,” said Nick quietly.

“Fuck, Nick...” mumbled Jocelyn blearily.

“I said get the fuck up, bitch!”

This roar of rage spoke to something primordial inside of Mike, and he could no longer contain his fear. In a blind blast of frenetic energy Mike clawed at the stall door, forgetting that he had locked it. This kindled his fear into fully realized panic. Without thinking, he leaned back on the toilet and used both his legs to savagely kick out the door.

The lock snapped in two. The door flew opened with terrifying speed and then stopped dead at ninety degrees with a concussive bang.

Nick, whom had received the full force of the flying door with his forehead, tottered slowly backward on his heels and then tumbled into a garbage can of lipstick-blotted tissues and tampon packaging. An empty box of Tic Tacs spun across the tiles and came to rest under the still running sink.

Mike was frozen in the stall, staring at Nick’s crumpled form. Jocelyn was frozen on the floor, red-rimmed eyes locked on Mike. They both took a moment to breathe.

“We should turn off the faucet,” Mike said stupidly.

“Holy shit, kid,” whispered Jocelyn.

“Is he dead?”

“I don’t think so.”

Mike thought about helping Jocelyn to her feet but was unable to will himself to move from the mouth of the stall. She was nearly as terrifying an apparition as Nick, her face pinched and white and moist, a rivulet of blood running freely from one nostril and dripping on her shoulder from which one green spaghetti-strap hung loosely. The other side was torn, her brassiere exposed.

They stared at one another.

The washroom door slammed open again and was pinned against the wall by a small crowd, framed by the throbbing bass and a speckling of multicoloured light. A slim black girl with obnoxious green boots was at the head of the posse, and it was she who ran to Jocelyn’s side as the others filed in more cautiously, eyeing Nick’s prone form. “What the fuck happened?” she asked Jocelyn.

Jocelyn wiped her bloody muzzle on her forearm. “*He* happened,” she said, pointing to Mike. “This kid is a fucking *ninja*.”

A man with an orange mohawk scratched the stubbly side of his head and adjusted his patched khaki skirt. “You’re a ninja?” he asked Mike.

Mike didn’t say anything.

“He *saved* me,” explained Jocelyn.

“Jesus fuck,” said the girl with green boots.

The man with the mohawk bowed gracefully to Mike who, in automatic response, bowed gracefully in turn. It was the most Asian Mike had ever felt. The mohawk man put his hand on Mike’s shoulder and gave it a friendly squeeze. “My name’s Duff,” he said. “Let me be the first to buy you a drink, Little Ninja.”

One by one the posse sublimated into a parade, a single-file serpent that wove from the washroom toward the bar. As they passed out of the safe, echoey womb where Nick continued to nap Mike felt a surge of apprehension; they broached the sea of tall shadows backlit by the chromatic radiance of swinging lights and Mike huddled himself up closer to the swaying skirt of the man with the orange mohawk, unwilling to risk being lost in the miasma.

The music was overwhelming, the stomp of its relentless hoofbeats cut by electronic zings and pops, the warbles of banshees, the click and hum of machinery, the sighs of ecstatic and unearthly choirs. The floor was black. As far as Mike could tell, he had no feet.

He was in the maw of the beast. He could no longer discern whether it was he who was shaking, or the world. "I did it," he whispered to himself nervously. "I'm really here."

The bar was encrusted by a spasmodically surging bank of adults, cycling through states of loitering, pressing inward, vying for attention, waiting to be served, retreating while defending against spillage. Over the din they yelled the names of drinks Mike had never heard of, even on TV. He clung to his station behind Duff's skirt, monitoring the other members of the party in his peripheral vision and attempting to keep them positioned between himself and the fray.

The woman in green boots leaned in close and shouted something into Mike's ear with hot, sharp smelling breath. Mike didn't understand her question so he just nodded agreeably. She smiled, her white teeth illuminated to a shocking purple by the bar's neon piping.

In time they struck out across the sea of humanity once again, each member of the parade save Mike decorated by outstretched arms guarding drinks from sloshing. They squeezed around the sides of a round table in a dark booth, and Mike found himself hemmed into the middle. A pint of beer was put down in front of him.

"To the Little Ninja!" cried Duff, raising his glass and draining it in a single swig.

"*Cheers!*" rang the others, and they drank.

Mike grasped the frosted handle of his mug uncertainly, enjoying the feel of the cool glass. He blew tentatively on the frosty head, causing it to dent. He realized they were all looking at him, so he raised the surprisingly heavy drink to his lips and took a cold, bittersweet pull. "Thanks," said Mike.

The cold draught traced a line down his gullet and then disappeared there. Mike took another sip. A light tingling sensation accompanied by a relaxing warmth began on the back of Mike's neck and then diffused over his entire body, culminating in the subtle but surprising loosening of his rectum. "Oh!" he exclaimed.

"Are you okay?" Duff shouted into his ear.

"I think I'm drunk!" replied Mike with a building sense of alarm.

"You've hardly had any," shouted a blue-haired girl with warm brown eyes, her lips close to Mike's other ear.

"But I can feel it," he shouted back, alternating uncertainly between shouting at Duff's ear and that of the blue-haired girl. "I can feel it doing something inside me. Isn't that enough?"

"Sometimes enough isn't enough," opined Duff.

"I'm on a mission of exploration," Mike explained. "I don't want to compromise my ability to fulfill the mission."

“You’re so cute,” the blue-haired girl said, resting her chin on her palm. “How old are you, anyway?”

Mike blushed. “I’m almost twelve.”

He had said this very quietly so it had to be repeated more loudly for the others in the booth. Everyone laughed, though it wasn’t cruel laughter. Mike was beginning to feel very well disposed toward his new friends. He did not fear they would expose him and have him turned out into the street or handed over to the police or his parents. Mike smiled, then belched. Everyone laughed harder.

“Let’s dance!” declared Duff, slamming down his empty glass. He stood up on the seat, walked over the table, and jumped into the crowd, khaki skirt billowing.

By twos and threes the company bled off, Mike stiffening as he saw the defensive wall of meat fall away around him. The blue-haired girl noticed his anxiety and took his hand. “Come on,” she said into his ear. “You can dance with me, Little Ninja.”

“Okay,” said Mike.

He allowed himself to be led into the thickest knot of adult bodies swaying, dipping and bobbing before the empty stage surrounded by pillars of stacked speakers whose grilles seemed to scintillate as they shook. The lights flashed and played, causing the blue-haired girl to become pink and then green, striped by flecks of light and then suddenly cast into darkness.

“I’m right here,” she said, again her mouth by his ear.

“Okay,” said Mike.

He could see her again—purple now, then yellow. She was rolling her hips and nodding her head in time to the music, watching Mike with a smile. Watching her Mike found himself beginning to nod as well, and he let the movement descend through to his shoulders and finally to his hips. The music, so suffocating before, became a power beneath him, lifting his feet, guiding his rhythm, pushing him on to the next crescendo. Her lips moved inaudibly, “That’s it.”

“This is fun,” Mike realized aloud, but nobody could hear him.

The blue-haired girl placed Mike’s hands on her hips and then laced her arms around his shoulders. She was slight and not too tall, and Mike almost felt as if she were his size. Secured to her thusly he felt free to take his eyes off her, recognizing the faces of those who had been sitting in the booth with them flashing in and out of visibility in the mass of moving bodies on all sides. When he turned back he caught the girl watching him again. She leaned in and said, “You’re just taking it all in, eh?”

He nodded.

“What’s your name?” she asked next.

“Mike,” said Mike. He had to repeat it, pushing closer to her ear. His balance seemed to get ahead of him and he leaned heavily into her shoulder. “I’m sorry!”

“It’s okay,” she said, laughing. “You’re a good dancer, Mike.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m Courtney.”

“Thank you, Courtney.” Then, pausing with his nose an inch from her neck, he added, “You smell nice.” Then he flushed and pulled away and apologized again.

“It’s okay.”

“I’m not trying to hit on you or anything,” stammered Mike.

“It’s okay,” she repeated. “You’re allowed to hit on me.”

“You’re nice,” admitted Mike.

“So are you.”

That's when the man with the orange mohawk rushed up and grabbed Mike's shoulder. For a moment Mike believed he was about to be beaten by a jealous boyfriend, but Duff's message was of even greater urgency: "Nick's awake!" he cried over the noise. "We should get scarce."

Courtney nodded. She took Mike's hand and pulled him through the gyrating crowd, split momentarily in Duff's wake. They flew headlong into what looked to Mike like a solid black wall until, at the last moment as he prepared to flinch for pain, he felt velvet curtains splash against him.

Trailing by the hand he allowed himself to be taken through the veil.

11.

Nine o'clock came and went. India was asleep in Father's arms as Mother fumbled through her purse for the keycard that would unlock their hotel room. Because India was asleep Father used the opportunity to express his frustration by way of some colourful metaphors which, unbeknownst to him, inspired a series of disturbing dreams for his daughter. In the morning the first words to her father would be, "What's a motherfuck?"

Eventually he handed the child to Mother and she passed him the purse, then, while attempting to rifle through its contents, Father ended up juggling her wallet and India's grand prize trophy. He chose to save the trophy so all of Mother's things went sprawling and bouncing out along the corridor. "*Motherfuck!*" bellowed Father.

"Jules!" hissed Mother. "*Je-sus.*"

None of this was sufficient to fully rouse India or even partially rouse Bianca, who had passed out in a small pool of her own vomit on the bed. Mother confirmed that Bianca was still breathing while Father tucked India into the other bed and guided the trophy into a corner with his foot. Then Mother went back into the corridor to collect her debit card, lipstick and baby pictures.

"Where's Mike?" Father asked as she returned.

"What do you mean?"

Father popped his head into the washroom. "Mike?" Then he opened the closet. "Mike?"

"Where is he?" asked Mother.

"Exactly," said Father, checking the washroom again.

"Oh Jesus," said Mother.

They secured the room and rushed down to the lobby. Father dinged the little bell continuously until a tired-looking young man with a shock of rust-coloured hair wandered out from a back room and took his place at the counter, knuckling his eyes sleepily. He looked annoyed at being disturbed. "Can I help you?" he muttered.

"Have you been on duty all night?" asked Father.

"Yeah."

"Have you seen a little boy? About this tall—black hair, glasses."

"I think he was wearing his blue shirt," added Mother.

"Maybe in a blue shirt," confirmed Father impatiently.

The desk-clerk scratched his stubbly jaw pensively. "You're looking for a kid with black hair?"

"He would've been unaccompanied by an adult," said Mother.

Something seemed to occur to the clerk. "Oriental kid?"

Father started to say something but Mother put her hand on his arm firmly and squeezed. "Yes, that's right," she replied. "His name is Michael."

"All by himself, yeah," said the clerk, nodding. "He came through about an hour ago, looking at his shoes. Headed outside."

"You just let him waltz out of here *alone*? A *kid*?" Father growled menacingly. Mother squeezed his arm again.

"Sir, I'm not a babysitter," said the clerk.

"Christ!" said Father. He began to look around wildly. "Where could he have gone?"

The clerk yawned. "Is he into Cherry Nuk-Nuk?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You know, Cherry Nuk-Nuk—the singer. She's playing at Coriander's tonight. You have to know who I'm talking about. She's huge. Cherry Nuk-Nuk? C'mon."

Mother and Father exchanged blank looks. "I don't think he's into singers," said Mother. "He's more of an astronomy and math guy."

"Huh," grunted the clerk apathetically. "Yeah, my parents had no idea what I was into, either."

There was a pause. Mother looked imploringly at Father. Father stood with a grim expression fixed on his face, staring at the clerk with a faraway look. His reverie broke and he dug into his pocket and extracted a crisp ruby bill from his wallet. "Fifty bucks to help us find him."

"I, uh, can't leave the desk..."

Father unveiled a second bill. "We're from out of town. We need help. We need it now, er..."

"Red."

"We need your help, Red. This is serious. This is about a kid."

Father's brown eyes bore into the clerk's blue ones until the latter blinked. He sneered briefly and then called over his shoulder, "Hey, Dennis! Get out here, will you? I need you to cover me for a while." The money disappeared and then he straightened his rumpled tie. To the anxious parents he mumbled, "Let's go."

12.

To be frank Mike had lost all track of time, and the recognition of this fact caused him to break out in a cold sweat. The more he thought about it the more he became convinced that two or even three hours had passed without his having a grip on the slipping minutes, and he wondered whether it was past midnight. "What time is it?" he cried, sitting bolt upright.

"Ease up yourself, yo," chuckled Lefranc, a portly Jamaican in a woolen cap who was occupying two thirds of the sofa Mike shared. "It's still early yet, mon."

Mike and Lefranc were sitting in the VIP lounge at the back of the second storey of Coriander's, the artillery march of the music downstairs thrumming through the soles of their shoes. For the fourth or fifth time Mike refused the ill-formed hand-rolled cigarettes Lefranc was passing back and forth with his friends, waving away the dense smoke which was a funny mixture of sweet and acrid. "I don't smoke," Mike reminded Lefranc.

"Everybody smokes, mon," said Lefranc. "It's just that some people don't know it yet."

The lounge was small and intimate, peppered with sofas and easy-chairs and lava lamps. Mike found the globs of oil inside the lamps to be hypnotic in a way he had never experienced, despite seeing lava lamps in the past. As he watched the globs

separate and combine in a slow samba he wondered when Courtney would come back to retrieve him, and then worried that something had gone wrong downstairs with Nick. Again Mike eyed the Filipino bouncer who had been eying him suspiciously since he arrived. "He's with us, he's cool," Courtney had told the bouncer.

Suddenly Mike remembered about the time again, and wondered how he'd forgotten to keep remembering it. "I've got to go!" he cried.

"Cherry doesn't go on for another hour, brother," said Lefranc as he drew on one of the aromatic cigarettes. "Quit your fretting about, mon."

"No, no," persisted Mike, squirming out from beside Lefranc. "You don't understand. I'm going to get in trouble. I have to go." He hit the floor with both feet and swayed a bit, his balance unpredictable. "Thanks for being so nice to me," he added.

"Peace," said Lefranc.

The lounge seemed bigger on the way out than it had on the way in, and it took Mike an enormous amount of time to cross the threadbare carpet to the heavy wooden door. He flicked his eyes up at the Filipino nervously. "I'm just going out," he murmured. The Filipino said nothing. Mike went through the door.

He was assaulted by a wall of noise. The second storey bar had no dance floor but rather a maze of dim tables separated by screens, the ways between them jammed with knots of standing adults smoking and drinking and shouting into one another's ears. Their talk and laughter melded into a uniform alien babble that was indistinguishable from the treble buzzing of the amplified rock music coming through the speakers. The air above their heads was a yellow blanket that swam and drifted seductively and strangely.

Without guides or friends Mike felt suddenly at a loss. He didn't even know which way to go to find the stairwell back to street level.

Also, for some reason he felt profoundly hungry.

As he was worming his way through the forest of people he was shoved sideways and he hit the ground hard. He felt his glasses leave his face. Raised voices sounded above him, all around him. The crowd was seizing and warping. Feet scuffled. A fist-fight had broken out, a bubble of vacuum opening up around the combatants.

He turned to see the bouncer coming out of the lounge, zeroing in on the fight, raising his hands and his voice for order.

Mike sought refuge under a table.

He sat paralyzed with indecision between two sets of large legs, pawing carefully around in the shadows for his glasses. He found them and sighed with relief as his fingers explored the intact surfaces of the lenses. He put them on and wondered what to do next. How does one choose the most auspicious moment to crawl out from under somebody's legs?

A new pair of legs walked up to the table. "I lost the kid," said a voice which Mike tentatively identified as the bouncer.

"You pucking idiot!" said one of the people at the table. "I gibe you *one thing* to do..."

"What's this about a kid, na?" asked the other person at the table. All three of the men wore heavy, dark boots. One of them had a long knife strapped to his leg. Mike caught a glimpse of a densely tattooed hand pawing for a cigarette and ducked his head to avoid its reach.

"I don't even know if he's a pucking kid or not," said the bouncer. "He's some kind of martial arts exfert or something, man. He pucking took out Nick."

"That just makes things easier for us, na?"

"Yeah man, but who is he? I don't want some pucking karate kid trying to be a hero when we do this shit, right man?"

"I get you."

"I'll take care of it," promised the bouncer.

They were talking about *him*! Mike gulped and then, as smoothly as he could, crawled along the floor to the space beneath the next table, carefully picking his way over the feet radiating in from its edges. As a man switched his crossed leg from left to right Mike was forced to dodge backward, his cheek coming to rest against the smooth skin of a woman's inner thigh. "Oh Lee, you're such a flirt," she said from above.

"Huh?" said Lee, again recrossing his legs the other way. "I think I broke the seal," he added; "gotta take a leak."

Lee pushed back from the table and Mike took the opportunity to worm through the hole he had left, scooting behind Lee's chair and diving behind a screen. He straightened up only to find himself standing at the edge of another table full of babbling adults. Mike froze, uncertain what to do. One of the adults pushed a glass at him without looking. "Gimmie another rye and ginger," he commanded.

Mike accepted the glass and squirmed away through the crowd.

13.

For the fourth time Mother and Father met by the bank of pay telephones on the landing just below the second floor, acknowledging without words that their separate forays had returned no intelligence on the whereabouts of Mike. They hugged. "Oh my God, oh my God..." mumbled Mother into Father's shoulder. "I've been everywhere, Jules. He's not here. What are we going to do?"

"Relax, Kate," said Father. "Let's call the room. Maybe he's gone back by now. It's almost ten o'clock."

The two of them spent a few moments frisking down the pay telephones. "There's no slot!" cried Mother. "What kind of payphones are these? Where do we put the money?"

"Card," croaked a fallen-cheeked youth in black leather with a head of lank, oily hair striped with green. He was leaning against the wall with his eyes closed, tapping his foot, piercings jiggling in time.

"Pardon?"

"You need a phone-card," croaked the youth again, eyes still closed.

Father swore. "What the hell is a phone-card?"

The youth opened his eyes—glassy, dilated, alien. "A phone-card is the phone-company's way of delivering you to Big Brother, man. It's a device to separate your money from your transactions, man. To track you. To trap you. To fuck with you. A phone-card is just another brick in the wall, man."

Father frowned. "Where do I get one?"

"Take mine."

When Father reached for the proffered card the youth hesitated. "Local call?" he asked.

"Er, yes."

"Alright."

After a seemingly interminable series of rings the room phone was answered like an obscene call—heavy breathing, smacking lips. Bianca blinked at the handset in the feeble light of a clock-radio's LEDs and tried to remember where she was and why

she smelled like puke. An insistent voice was shouting out of the receiver atop a background of overlapping murmurs and pounding music. "*What?*" coughed Bianca.

"Bianca!" yelled Father.

"Oh, Dad, hi," she mumbled. "How's the banquet?"

"Is Mike there?"

Bianca pinched the bridge of her nose. Her head felt like it was in a vicegrip. "What?"

"Bianca, this is very important. Is Mike there, in the room with you?"

Bianca looked around, taking in India snoring in the next bed and the trophy on the floor. Her eyes threatened to close and bile rose in her throat. She knew there was something she was supposed to remember...

"Bianca!" shouted Father. "Is Mike there or isn't he?"

Bianca blinked and it all came back to her. "Mike's here," she said. "Mike's right here now. He's here." Then, discharged of her mission, she passed out with her face smooshed against the clock-radio and dropped the telephone.

Father passed this on to Mother and they hugged again. "Let's get out of here," she said breathlessly.

"I need a drink," said Father, wiping his hand down his face. "Let's have just one."

Mother smiled. "We haven't been out for a drink in *ages*."

"Exactly," said Father.

"I look awful."

"No you don't."

Mother shot her cuff and checked her watch. "Okay, okay. We'll have just one drink. I'm going to nip off to ladies' room to clean myself up a bit and I'll meet you at the bar in five."

"It's a date," said Father with a grin.

They kissed, first quickly and then longer, then Mother waded into the second floor in search of a washroom and Father skipped down the stairs to the first floor. The young man in black leather leaned back against the wall in the landing and was about to take up bobbing his head in time to the music again when he spotted a figure flattened against the wall in the shadows. The figure tentatively stuck a head out to watch Father disappear.

"You must be Mike," guessed the young man.

"What?" said Mike, startled.

"They're looking for you, man. The net is tightening, man. They used my phone-card, so now even the government knows you're AWOL."

"They think I'm back at the hotel," said Mike.

"But you're not, are you?"

"No."

"Better run like Bueller, man. Better get back before they do. The clock is ticking."

Mike looked around desperately. "But how can I get out without going past them?"

The young man inclined his head at the darkness beyond the pay-phones. "When you can't get any lower, man, the only direction to go is up."

Sending out fingers out into the inky blackness as probes, Mike encountered a door. Beyond it was a narrow flight of steps rising to a third storey. He looked back at the black and green haired youth for reassurance, but he had returned to the world of

music behind his eyelids, piercings tinkling like tiny tambourines as he nodded and swayed.

A split second before Mother crossed the landing on her way out of the washroom Mike pushed through the door and proceeded up the steep risers to the next level.

14.

Fifteen minutes of waiting at the downstairs bar cost Father two highballs and a shouted but friendly conversation about which nationality naturally bred the best football players, with Father coming down on the side of Ghana and his new friend voting for Serbia. His new friend was Serbian.

"Do you enjoy dancing?" he asked Father. Their elbows were touching on the bar as they watched the TV screen behind the bartender. The bartender was a skinny Goan in a yellow toque. The Goan hated football. He was purposefully slow to serve anyone who looked like they were interested in the TV. He was watching Father and the Serb out of the corner of his eye.

"I'm waiting for my wife," explained Father.

The Serb cocked his head. "We'll be right over there. She'll see you easy."

"Let's have one more drink," suggested Father.

Suddenly the bartender was no longer looking at them but instead at the space over their heads, and Father had to wave broadly to recapture his attention. He made a sign for "two more" and then turned back to his new friend. The Serb was looking at Father look at him, a little smile playing over his thin lips. "You're in good shape," he said.

"Nah," said Father.

"You were a bodybuilder?"

"I used to wrestle in college."

"Isn't that interesting? I was also wrestling in school."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes, but not for many years. Ten, fifteen years ago. In Belgrade. Do you still work out?"

"When I can."

"It's important to take care of the body."

"It is," agreed Father earnestly.

The Serb asked the bartender what the hold up was and then the men received their fresh drinks. Then they started talking about wrestling moves, and somewhere in there Father ended up in a headlock. "You're *fast!*" he panted, his face squished into the Serb's ribs.

"Yes," agreed the Serb, releasing him.

"Another round," called Father, tasting the Serb's sweat on his lips.

15.

Nine drops of sweat beaded on Mike's forehead as he stared into the morbid singularity at the end of the gun, his bowels creaking ominously in anticipation of a bullet. He dared not breathe or blink.

"Jesus, Ed! Put that away. He's just a kid."

With deliberate hesitation Ed lowered the weapon but kept his gaze riveted on Mike, his eyes so steady they seemed to be made of glass. His face was criss-crossed in a netting of fine scars, his head shaven, his nicked mouth a hard line. After another beat

he turned abruptly away and took two steps back, replacing the hand-gun in a holster strapped under his armpit. He pulled his jacket back around his front to conceal the weapon and sat back down.

"I'm sorry!" squeaked Mike.

The third storey of Coriander's was an apartment. It was dimly lit, which was why Mike had wandered so far in before he'd been able to discern the three figures bent over the coffee table which was a transparent plastic box filled with old vinyl records and spools of tape. On top of the coffee table was a little mirror, a razorblade and two neat lines of white powder.

On the couch was a copper-skinned man, also with a shaven head, whose green eyes sparkled with a kind of detached contentment. He clasped his hands before him in an attitude of prayer, and wore a long purple chemise and a pair of battered leather sandals. Beside him was a voluptuous girl with long, straight black hair and neat almond eyes. She wore an outlandish costume of fur and beads that revealed more of her curvaceous secondary sexual characteristics than it concealed.

Ed saw Mike looking at her and pronounced in a gravelly baritone: "No autographs."

The copper-skinned man smiled and then spoke with a melodious Spanish accent. "Now Ed, let's not make our new guest feel unwelcome. Don't be shy, mang. What's your name?"

"Mike," said Mike.

"May I ask you something, Mike?" Mike nodded. The man went on, "What are you doing in my apartment?"

"Hiding," said Mike. "I'm sorry. I didn't know what was up here."

"And from whom or what are you hiding yourself, little mang?"

"A guy named Nick," Mike lied, and then, feeling guilty, added, "And from my parents."

The man raised a thick eyebrow. "Are you, by any chance, the little friend of Courtney?"

Mike nodded.

The man thrust out his hand, and Mike shook it. "Welcome to Coriander's, Mike. My name is Lorenzo. This is my club."

"Are you going to call the police on me?"

"No, no, no. I've been hearing about you. You're some kind of fugging hero, mang. Why don't you sit down? You're shaking. Take a load off, mang. My friend here was just pepping up before her show, you know?"

He gestured toward the fur-clad girl and smiled. Mike had trouble meeting her eyes. She was very, very pretty. "Hello," he mumbled.

"Hi Mike," she said. "Did you really kick some guy's ass in the washroom for hitting his girlfriend?"

Mike nodded. "Sort of."

Lorenzo scooped over on the couch and patted the cushion beside him. Mike dutifully sat down, eyes glued to the white powder on the coffee table between them. Ed observed Mike dispassionately, never blinking. "So tell me, young Mike, what brings you to my club tonight?" asked Lorenzo.

"I was just curious. I just wanted to know what it's like."

"So, do you like what you see, mang?"

Mike shrugged uncomfortably. "Some parts of it are kind of scary."

"I agree," said Lorenzo, smiling. He watched the fur-clad girl lean over the

coffee table and inhale a line of powder, her barely restrained breasts swaying over the glass quadruply—two from above and two in the reflection. “Adults sometimes do some fugging strange things, don’t they Mike?”

“Yes.”

The girl straightened and spent a moment adjusting her narrow nostrils. “Have you come to see me perform?” she asked coyly.

“I’m—I’m not actually sure who you are,” said Mike.

Lorenzo laughed loudly and clapped his hands together. “Mike, let me have the special privilege of introducing to you the world’s most famous Eskimo pop singer: Cherry Nuk-Nuk.”

“Inuit,” corrected Cherry.

“My apologies,” amended Lorenzo happily. “This is her personal bodyguard, Mr. Ed Hulver, whom you’ve already met. We were just having a chat about India.”

Off kilter, Mike at first thought Lorenzo meant he was discussing Mike’s sister. “India?” he echoed dumbly.

Lorenzo gestured to the walls around them, which Mike now recognized as covered in images of Siddhartha Gautama, the smiling Buddha. Lorenzo explained, “I have just returned from an extended stay in India, and I am considering selling this club. Cherry, dear that she is, is trying to fugging talk me out of it.”

“You were born to run this place,” opined Cherry Nuk-Nuk. “You gave me my first break, Lo.”

“Jes, but what we might have been born to do can require reanalysis in light of India,” said Lorenzo. “It is a perspective that can be hard to shake, mang. Just ask Ed. Did India change your life, mang?”

Ed nodded but did not elaborate.

“See?” said Lorenzo. “You can’t go back, mang. You visit a world so different you’re forced to reconsider the familiar, because what was normal to you now seems all fugged up. That’s what I learned from the monks: to see how really fugged up everything is, mang.”

“I think I understand,” said Mike soberly, gaze wandering from a statue of the famous jolly fat man to a tapestry of the same emblazoned on a background of eightfold symmetry.

“Of course you do,” nodded Lorenzo. “You’re an explorer, mang. This is your India, mang. Will *you* ever be the same?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Mike.

“Good answer,” said Cherry Nuk-Nuk before leaning down over the final line of powder. She hesitated. “Lo?”

“Thank you no, sweetheart,” said Lorenzo with an indulgent smile. “My body is a fugging temple now. I don’t touch that shit anymore. I’m keeping myself fugging pure, you know?”

“Totally,” agreed Cherry after she snortled away the line. She pinched her nostrils and inhaled sharply a couple of times, then blinked and smiled. “*Wooo!*”

Mike touched Lorenzo’s arm. “Mr. Coriander, I’ve had a really interesting time tonight but if I don’t get back to the hotel before my parents do I’m going to be in very serious trouble. I need to know how to get out of here. Can you help me?”

“Mike,” said Lorenzo, leaning back and holding his hands together serenely, “it would be a crime if I let you leave without seeing this amazing woman sing.”

“But I really can’t—”

“Nonsense,” said Lorenzo firmly. “You will be my special guest.”

"There's something else," said Mike. "I overheard some guys talking, and...I think they're up to something. They were saying that I took Nick out of the way for them."

"Pah," chuckled Lorenzo dismissively. "That guy is fugging dick. Somebody always wants to kick his ass, you know? And besides, I've hired extra security just for Cherry. My bouncer brought in all his Filipino buddies. This place is like Fort fugging Knox tonight, my friend."

Meanwhile Cherry has raised herself from the couch and begun engaging in a series of stretches and yelps. "*Wooooooo!*" she cried, flexing her legs and pumping out her arms. "*Yeeeeeeeah!*" she called, boxing in the air and jumping on the spot.

Mike found himself hypnotized by the rhythm of motion cascading across her body, the rise and fall of her breasts, her belly, her thighs, her round brown bum. It would be this image that he would dream during his first nocturnal emission two weeks hence: the undulations of Cherry Nuk-Nuk as she infused herself with the frenetic spirit of performance, flexing her lips, cocking her head, stretching her back.

"Fug, Cherry!" laughed Lorenzo. "You're giving my Buddhas a boner."

Mike crossed his legs uncomfortably.

16.

Three trips between the two bars were all the patience Mother had for finding Father so she gave up in favour of communing with a frosty glass of white wine. She felt like a loser. Everyone around her seemed to be mingling in groups or couples, and she sat alone on a high stool and tried not to look at herself in the mirror behind the bar.

She had gussied herself up for Jules and now he was nowhere to be found. Irritated and suddenly self-conscious she did up another button on her blouse and wondered whether even her husband could be excited by such a brazen view of her aging bosom where the once smooth skin of her cleavage had been replaced gradually by a series of fold-lines like a geographic contour map.

Without really thinking about it she allowed her glass to be refilled when it had been drained. Without really feeling anything she bummed a cigarette from a sad drag queen, and lit it with a cardboard bar match.

Smoking a cigarette made her feel seventeen: the warm, woody smell in her nostrils, the poses she unconsciously struck. She downed another glass of white wine and felt herself smile a bit despite everything.

Twice she almost got off her stool to again search the upstairs bar for Jules. On the third attempt she slipped off and found herself wandering to the dance floor instead, her hips already knocking sideways playfully in time to the pounding beat. "Just one song," she told herself.

Three songs later she had unbuttoned her blouse again and by the fifth song she had a dance partner—a lithe Somali with fluffy hair and an unrepentantly sexual intensity burning in his cocoa eyes. He moved like an athlete, pushing himself closer to her by degrees, and then she was in his surprisingly strong arms.

"I can see you need to dance," he said into her ear, lips brushing the lobe.

"I do, I do," she agreed.

"What's your name, beautiful lady?"

"Kate," said Kate.

"My name is Asad," said the Somali. "You move like a bird, Kate."

"A pigeon," countered Kate.

"A swan," smiled Asad.

She had barely acknowledged the urge to touch his thin, graceful neck before she found herself doing so, tracing her fingers down a rivulet of sweat past his adam's apple and along his clavicle. She smiled up at him nervously and he grinned, then traced his own finger down her neck and drew a line of heat to her exposed sternum. Before she could gasp he slipped his hand beneath her brassiere and cupped her left breast gently, the nipple hardening instantly against his skin.

"Oh!" she said in a small voice.

"Ha," he agreed languorously.

Kate considered various forms of resistance: flight, combat, argument—then decisively took Asad's left hand and put it down her pants. She shifted her pelvis to help his finger find a suitably moist angle of attack. Asad took a turn at surprise. Kate laughed at his expression and coaxed him onward, pressing against him as they swayed in time to the thumping rhythm.

Kate thought it was a really good song.

Her anxieties dissolved away with a flighty lurch in her belly—bills, work, the household, the gulf of physical intimacy with her husband—and she found herself feeling unbounded. In a feat of uncharacteristic immodesty she remembered distinctly thinking that she had no qualms about the possibility of the other people on the dancefloor catching sight of her pubic hair peeking above her open fly. In fact, she reveled in the display.

As the song climaxed so did she. She closed her eyes and saw a white energy radiating up through her body, out through her head and into space, leaving her numbed and buoyant. When she opened her eyes again she was dazzled by multicoloured lights and she sighed gratefully. She was unbreakable.

"Ho my," breathed Asad, a sheen of sweat on his brow.

"Thanks for the dance," said Kate.

17.

One by one the upstairs tables began to empty as their denizens headed down below in anticipation of Cherry Nuk-Nuk taking the stage.

Father and his Serbian friend made out on the largely abandoned dancefloor and then retired to the bar to discuss how neither of them were homosexual. The Serb explained how he had always felt a great affection for his male friends and that, being European, he was less hesitant than most North Americans to express that affection. Father, for his part, confessed that he had been plagued throughout his life by a feeling that he was not sufficiently manly and he therefore sought a kind of masculine affirmation from his fellow men.

"Why should you feel unmasculine?" asked the Serb, waving for the Goan bartender's attention.

"I'm infertile," said Father—simple words never uttered outside of a doctor's office or the marital bed. To speak them gave him a weird thrill. "I contracted mumps as a teenager and my testicles were damaged," he went on to explain. "I had to take hormone supplements in order to finish growing properly. But I always felt scrawny. I always felt like a *boy*."

"You're not scrawny now," the Serb pointed out.

The surly Goan brought them two more highballs. "I work hard on my body," said Father.

"It can be hard to know how to be a man in today's world," philosophized the

Serb.

"I want to be somebody my kids can look up to," said Father.

"You're a good man."

"I'm trying to be."

"You're very sensitive."

"I owe it to my kids to care."

"Let's make the next round doubles."

"These are doubles."

"Let's get two at once, then."

"Yeah, alright."

Later on Father tried to get up to go the washroom but stumbled against the bar. The Serb propped him up against his shoulder and escorted him around the corner and into the men's room. They spilled into one another and ended up squeezed between two sinks. They kissed a bit, stubble against stubble, and then asked each other's names. "I'm Drago," said the Serb.

"Jules," said Jules.

Two white boys with rural hair sallied into the washroom then and, after taking one look at Drago and Jules in one another's arms, began talking loudly about how nobody had apprised of them of the fact that Coriander's catered to gays. "Fucking faggots'r gettin' faggot germs on the sink, bral!" exclaimed one to the other theatrically.

"That's fuckin' unsanitary, you cocksucking bitches," noted the second fellow.

"I don't want no AIDS on my soap."

"Why don't you leave us alone?" said Drago quietly.

"Why don't you fuck a pussy you fuckin' degenerate?"

"Fuck you," said Jules.

"Excuse me, queer?"

Jules clarified his position by putting the boy into a Half Nelson, spinning him into a Majistral Cradle, and then pounding his body against the tiled wall a couple of times. Without missing a beat his partner was twisted into a very slick Blizzard Suplex by Drago and then forced to the floor. Some pressure was applied to the boys limbs until their eyes watered and one of them began to moan plaintively.

"Get," commanded Jules crisply; "The fuck. Out of here."

The boys fled, the door flapping violently back and forth in their wake. Jules and Drago cracked up laughing. They sat on the floor and howled. They gasped for breath and tried to recover but then made the mistake of looking at one another again and set off into fresh peals.

Then the door banged open again and one of the boys ran inside. He was carrying a beer bottle, and he struck Jules across the back of the head with every ounce of his farmboy strength. He ran away before Jules collapsed with a look of stunned curiosity half-bloomed on his slackening features.

He was bleeding, but not badly. It was suddenly very quiet.

Drago checked his companion's pulse and breathing, and then dragged him over to one side of the washroom rather than having him sprawled out in the middle of the grimy floor. He propped him up against the wall and dabbed at the wound at the back of his scalp with a folded compress of moist paper towel.

Then Drago checked his watch, stole Jules' wallet, and left.

18.

Two lone figures loitered outside on Dundas Street.

The snake outside of Coriander's had eaten its own tail and disappeared, leaving only cigarette butts and bits of plastic skittering in the wind. A young couple with their bums showing at the top of their low-slung jeans tried to waltz in but the Filipino bouncer stopped them with an upraised hand.

"Pilled to capacity," he said.

"Aw, c'mon," said the young man. "We gotta see Cherry. We'll double the cover."

The stalky Filipino shook his head. "Sorry. Pire code."

As the couple sadly walked away Red and the bouncer were connected for a brief moment by their mutual appreciation of the girl's departing bum peeking and nodding from her jeans. Red pulled his hotel blazer tighter around his shoulders and rubbed his hands together. "You don't have a cigarette, do you?" he asked the bouncer.

"No."

"I can set you up, honey," called a bleary-eyed prostitute leaning against a flyer-swathed pole. "Can you make it worth my while?"

"I have to wait here," said Red.

The prostitute sauntered over, tossed her black hair. "What are you? The bouncer's butler?"

"I work at the Fairbrook." Red gestured vaguely down the block.

"Whatcha doing hanging around here then?"

Red shrugged. "Some people lost their kid. They think he's in here. I'm covering the door, like in case he comes out."

"Oh, you gotta mean *Mike*."

Red furrowed his brow. "You know the kid?"

"Sure. I told him where this place is." She drew a crumpled pack of Marlboros out of a tiny cigarette-pack sized purse and knocked out two smokes, passing one to Red. "I'm Sapphire."

"Thanks, Sapphire," said Red, jamming the smoke into his mouth and patting his pockets until he found a lighter. He struggled with it in the wind until Sapphire took it from him and expertly bit off the child-proof mechanism with her teeth. "Thanks again," said Red, then he blinked. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You used to be somebody, didn't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Shit—you're Red Vicious, the punk rocker. Go on, deny it sugar—I can already see the look on your face, huh, but I know it's bullshit 'cause I used to see you play at the Horseshoe."

Red spread his arms helplessly. "Tried and convicted."

"Small world," said Sapphire, her cheeks deflating as she dragged hard on her cigarette. "Small city, too. So you're telling me that Mike's parents are in there now?"

Red nodded. "It's been almost two hours."

"And you're still hanging out here shivering, for what?"

Red shifted uncomfortably and looked at his shoes. "I'm working for tips."

"Half now, half later?"

"Something like that."

Sapphire smiled. "So you've got some money in your pocket, huh? Why don't you let me warm you up a little, Red honey?"

Red blushed. "I can't. Like I said, I have to stay—"

She rolled her eyes and took his hand. "Don't trouble your mind, sugar. I know a little place we can go out back; then, after, we can go inside and find Mike

together. He trusts me. It'll be cool. His folks'll think you're a hero."

Red attempted to consider this proposal objectively as his penis hardened.

"Okay. Let's go," he decided.

Sapphire led the way into the alley beside Coriander's. The bouncer's narrow eyes followed them. As they turned the corner he withdrew a telephone from his pocket and unfolded it against his caulflowered left ear.

19.

To protect his hearing Mike shoved two scrunched up bits of napkin into his ears, the hard-edged wads doing an equally effective job of abrading his skin and mitigating the blazingly loud phantasmagoria of sound pouring from the giant speakers on all sides. The crowd was also deafening, a sea of howls and stomps and cheers.

There came a brief pause as Cherry Nuk-Nuk shook a shower of sweat from her face and then spent a moment screaming incoherently at the audience, who screamed back delightedly. "Hell yeah!" she hollered and the mass hollered her words back to her mushily.

She struck a new pose in front of the microphone, her furs backlit and her muscled thighs glistening tautly. "This one's called *Huffer Boy*," she said and then gave a nod to the band, cuing them into releasing a fresh volley of aural slurry that Mike could feel in his teeth. As if marionnetted by the music Cherry's body instantly began to shake and sway, cavorting her back and forth before the players.

Standing beside Mike in the offstage wing was Lorenzo, his head bobbing in time and a placid smile spread across his fleshy lips. "What did I tell jou?" he shouted over the din; "is she the world's fugging best Eskimo pop singer or what?"

Mike nodded that this was indeed the case.

Cherry's bodyguard, Ed, stood in the opposite wing and scanned the crowd humourlessly. The music did not appear to affect him. While Mike could not help but move in sympathy to the driving rhythm, Ed was a statue.

In the break between sets Cherry swept past Lorenzo into the backstage anteroom and upended two bottles of spring water down her throat in rapid succession, then poured a third over her chest and back. She was joined by the guitarist, an amicable white guy with bristle-short hair and little goatee. His name was Danny Marks and it was he who had advised Mike to plug his ears. "How're the ears, fella?" he asked as he reached for a bottle of water.

"Great!" said Mike a trifle too loudly on account of his earplugs.

The bassist, a big man with Elvis-like lambchop sideburns, lit two cigarettes and passed one to Cherry. "Thanks Wade," she said. "You enjoying the show, Mike?"

Mike said he was enjoying it very much. "It must be tiring, though. You go crazy when you sing."

"I'll sleep when I'm dead," claimed Cherry.

Danny snorted. "You'll sleep on the plane all the way to New York."

"On a plane—dead—same difference. When do we have to be at the airport?"

Danny checked his watch. "Two hours."

"Shit," said Cherry. "Better get out there and finish this up, eh? Hey, where are the roadies?"

"Fucking off somewhere as usual," growled Wade. "Ten to one: drunk."

"Those are my cousins, asshole. Watch your tone."

"Sorry Cherry."

Cherry hopped up and down a few times and then flexed her neck and her

mouth athletically. She tucked one errant breast back into her beaded top and smoothed down her hair. The musicians nodded at one another to time their entrance and then barreled back onstage, received by an eruption of cheers. “*Cher-ry! Cher-ry! Cher-ry!*”

Mike was struck dumb by the next announcement he heard echoing from the microphone: “Before we get going again I want to introduce everybody to a new friend of mine who’s been doing some ninja ass-kicking here at Coriander’s tonight. Mike—come out here. Come on, Mike!”

Mike felt frozen, but he was propelled onstage by Lorenzo’s firm hand. He stumbled out of the wing and found himself blinded by lights, the crowd an amorphous blur of shadow and glinting reflections. “*Mike! Mike! Mike!*” they chanted.

Cherry grabbed Mike and pulled him into a hug, his face plastered into her ample bosom for one exhilarating but suffocating instant. Then she held up his arm like a champion boxer or a wrestler. “This next one’s for you, Mike! It’s called *Bison Heart*. One-two-three-four—”

The band played. The crowd roared. Cherry sang. Through his fogged glasses Mike took it all in with surreal soft-focus, embarrassed at being so near the centre of attention but thrilled at the honour. He jumped around the stage a bit and the crowd responded enthusiastically. Mike grinned.

A member of the audience climbed up on the stage, turned to face the band, and then jumped backward into the crowd. He was caught and lifted, carried away on a surge of arms, disappearing into the light and shadows once more.

Mike paused then, startled by the fact that Ed’s post in the far wing was empty. He pivoted to look into the other wing and saw only Lorenzo smiling beatifically. “Mike!” someone was shouting. Mike looked out into the crowd, squinting through the beaded water on his lenses.

Courtney and Duff were gesturing at him, imploring him forward. “Jump!” they hooted in unison when they saw they had his attention. “Jump, Mike!”

The crowd in their vicinity took up the call: “*Jump, Mike! Jump, Mike!*”

He jumped.

Supported by a dozen hands Mike was floated and gently tossed away from the stage and then eventually deposited in the middle of the audience. People slapped his hand and touched his shoulder and hooted happily. Caught in the buzzing ambience of togetherness, Mike guffawed out loud—never had he felt such an energy before.

He drifted to the lee of a pillar where he could collect himself and wipe his glasses. Suffused with contentment and a kind of savage pride at realizing his mission beyond his wildest expectations, he decided that it was time for him to leave. He took one last look at Cherry thrashing around maniacally behind a fan of silhouetted hands with lit lighters, sighed, then picked out a path toward the back exit.

He pushed through a fire-door into the staff parking lot connected to the side alley, trailing his hand along the railing that led to the steps down which he had helped the Inuit roadies carry Cherry Nuk-Nuk’s gear. The air was crisp and cool, invigorating after the close, damp atmosphere of the nightclub.

It was quiet. His ears rang. He pulled the bits of napkin out of them.

Someone was coughing. Mike wandered forward and saw a girl leaning on the hood of a car, vomiting a spectacular Rorschach of curdled beer onto the pavement. Uncertain about how to help but emboldened by his adventures he drew up beside her and held her long, dirty blonde hair out of the way of the stream of bile hanging from her lips. After another spasm of coughing she spat, swallowed, and closed her eyes.

“Are you okay?” asked Mike.

“Fine,” she said. And then, “Thanks.”

Recognizing there was nothing to say but buoyed by an unshakeable sense of giddiness Mike couldn’t help but go on. “My name’s Mike.”

“Dalia,” muttered the girl, wiping the back of her hand across her mouth. She opened her eyes and frowned. “Damn. What are you? Like, ten?”

“Almost twelve.”

“Huh. What the fuck? Go to bed, kid.”

“I just wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“Yeah? Tell that to the guy who punched me in the gut.”

“Why did somebody punch you in the gut?”

She shrugged. “I was trying to bum a smoke.”

“From who?”

She pointed to a black van parked in the middle of the lot. “From them.”

The van was jostling. It rocked to and fro and then something banged hard against it from inside. Curious, Mike found himself stepping closer, squinting. He jumped back as one of the rear doors flew open with startling velocity, rebounded and started to whine close. It was stopped by a foot in an untied steel-toed workboot.

Mike craned his head further.

The three Inuit roadies were lying inside, their arms bound behind them and strips of silver duct-tape across their mouths—that is except for the tallest, the one who had directed Mike to the washroom, whose tape was squinched into a twisted strap around his chin. Seeing Mike see him he lifted his head and yelled, “They’re gonna kidnap Cherry!”

The fat Inuit nodded vigorously, almond eyes wide.

Somebody inside the van hit the tall roadie across the face but Mike did not have time to further decipher the action as he was roughly grabbed from behind a split second after Dalia meeped a muffled warning.

Taken off-balance, Mike stumbled sideways against his captor and they both shuffled backward quickly in an effort to find an even keel. They crashed into a rusted dumpster and spilled to the asphalt with twin grunts.

Mike rolled away and jumped to his feet, but not quickly enough to escape. The heavy-set Filipino in black clamped a giant fist around Mike’s ankle and pulled him to the ground again, using the moment to find his own footing and stand up. He drew back his boot in preparation to kick Mike in the ribs. Mike froze and winced, his hands instinctively flying to cover his face.

A strange and haunting moan emitted from the dumpster.

The Filipino hesitated, broad brow furrowed. And then Sapphire stood up out of the dumpster and, with barely a pause to assess the situation, jetted a mouthful of stringy jissom from her pursed lips into the Filipino’s eyes. “*Puck!*” he roared, rolling his knuckles into his face and blinking.

Mike scampered backward like a crab. Dalia twisted out of the grasp of the equally burly Filipino behind her and dove over the hood of a yellow Mini Cooper with surprising dexterity. A red-headed man in a blazer from the Fairbrook Hotel jumped out of the dumpster and made a mad dash for the mouth of the alley, his progress erratic as he tried to do up his pants. He stopped short in the face of the bouncer from out front, blocking the alley and speaking quickly into a glowing telephone pressed to his ear.

“I’m not even a part of this—I don’t even want to know,” stammered Red, now walking backwards and glancing over his shoulder as the bouncer advanced. “I

don't have any problem with you guys," he added desperately.

The bouncer's eyes widened as he saw past Red. "He's here—the pucking ninja kid is here!" he shouted into the telephone.

And so Mike, Sapphire and Red found themselves at the centre of a shrinking circle of Filipino toughs, the tattoos on their arms seeming to come alive as they flexed their muscles and cleared their knuckles of bubbles at the joints, crackling wetly.

"Oh shit oh shit oh shit," whispered Red.

Two more Filipinos stepped out of the back door of Coriander's, folding their telephones away and narrowing their dark eyes.

Bereft of any solid plan and seeing no way to escape, Mike chose to put aside fear in favour of dignity. He stepped up to the front of his cowering companions and assumed his best approximation of a fighting stance, feet shoulder-width apart, chest inflated, eyes locked on the approaching opponents. He took a deep breath in and then let it escape slowly. Then he nodded sedately and flexed his outstretched fingers to beckon the Filipinos to combat, as if he were Keanu Reeves.

The Filipinos hesitated, a contagious apprehension inspired by Mike's confident pose spreading like a smell.

"Get him," growled the tallest Filipino.

"But he's a pucking ninja," protested the bouncer.

And that's when the fire alarm sounded. The heavy door at the back of Coriander's flew open, disgorging a rabid mob with Dalia at its head. Behind her came Duff and Courtney and Lorenzo, then Cherry and Danny and Wade still carrying their instruments. They were shoved forward as denizens of the club poured into the parking lot, all talk suddenly ceasing as they took in the situation.

"What the fug is going on here?" shouted Lorenzo over the shrilly ringing alarm.

The Filipinos were suddenly armed with long knives. A cluster of Cherry fans from the Korean Mafia crowded up before them and withdrew hand-guns from the waists of their loose trousers, training the muzzles on the pirates. All movement stopped. No one dared breathe.

"Hey hey! No no!" cried Cherry, flustered.

"No fugging guns!"

Courtney yelled, "Mike!"

As Mike turned toward her the bouncer regained his courage. Mike had a brief glimpse of a brown fist before it connected with the side of his head, his vision exploding with sparks, pain reverberating through his skull. He spun and hit the ground hard.

Tasting gravel, Mike groaned and tried to raise his pounding head. A sound he had at first taken to be a roaring in his own ears turned out to be the roaring of the crowd. Every ounce of paralysis had left them as an incendiary rage at seeing Mike struck down ignited through their numbers.

Before anyone could blink they surged forward, encompassing the knife-wielding Filipinos like spume. Wade swung his bass like a club, bringing it down hard on top of the tallest Filipino, causing him to fold and disappear with a discordant twang of broken strings. Duff leapt off the front bumper of a car and tackled the bouncer, knocking the knife free. The third and fourth Filipinos held up their hands in an attitude of terrified supplication an instant before they were consumed by the crowd.

One of the Korean Mafia boys tucked his gun away and picked Mike up, then muscled backward out of the fray. Courtney ran to his side. "Are you okay?" she cried

breathlessly.

"Yup," reported Mike, which was close enough to the truth to fit the circumstances.

Lorenzo then appeared at the heart of the mob, separating combatants and verifying that the would-be kidnappers were secured by panting volunteers. The last act of violence occurred when Cherry waded up to him and kicked the bouncer in the balls with a grunt of athletic effort. The bouncer, pink eyes still stinging from flying jissom, collapsed and moaned.

"*Nobody* hits my friends," the beautiful Inuit pronounced coldly.

Lorenzo mopped his glistening brow and sighed. "Shit," he said. "Does anybody have a fugging cigarette?"

20.

Four firetrucks rumbled to a halt on Dundas Street, followed by two squad cars with flashing bubble lights. Lorenzo jogged over to bring them up to speed on the situation and to direct the police to the captive kidnappers. A majority of the crowd melted away instantly in defense of their various contraband, leaving only a few tired or injured members behind. Dazed and aching, Mike took in very little of it all until Danny and Wade re-appeared carrying two prone forms from inside Coriander's: they were Mike's parents.

Red turned up with a large luggage cart from the Fairbrook and Duff helped the musicians load the unconscious bodies on the carpeted platform. "Are they okay?" Mike asked anxiously.

"They seem to be okay," confirmed Duff. "I think they're just drunk."

"My parents? *Drunk?*" echoed Mike dumbly.

"Sometimes enough just isn't enough."

The Inuit roadies were untied and given free drinks, and Lorenzo gave Dalia a pass for lifetime free admittance to Coriander's. Danny got on his phone to change the flight reservation and Wade got on his phone to see about borrowing a friend's bass for the New York gig.

It was the police who found Ed, Cherry's bodyguard, still engaged in a protracted life or death hand to hand struggle with a fifth Filipino thug in the nightclub's walk-in refrigerator. Spilled condiments were everywhere—the floor slick with relish, the walls garish with teriyaki. They had been going at it for more than twenty minutes by that point, and both men were secretly relieved to be spared the burden of seeing the duel through to the end. They had, in fact, developed a certain brand of camaraderie during their intimate tussling and they nodded to each other in breathless salute before consenting to be separated.

As the paramedics arrived in the rear parking lot to assess the situation there Lorenzo motioned urgently for Mike to move along, and so he and Red and Sapphire pushed the luggage cart into the shadowed alley running the length of the block to head back to the Fairbrook Hotel.

Duff, Courtney and Cherry ran up to say their goodbyes. They exchanged e-mail addresses and Cherry promised that her manager would arrange free tickets for any performance Mike could get himself to. "Thanks for saving me from being kidnapped by pirates," she said, and kissed Mike on each cheek.

"Anytime," mumbled Mike, blushing.

As they made their way down the dark alley Sapphire lit up a pair of Marlies for herself and Red to chase away the smell of refuse. Red tried to give her some

money. Sapphire refused theatrically and then took the crumpled bills and tucked them into her top. "Thanks," she said, and a moment later the load became heavier: without further warning, Sapphire had slipped away into the night.

At Red's direction they trundled the baggage cart up the hotel's rear loading dock and then through a series of concrete service corridors. They rode up in an extra-wide elevator car that smelled like lemons. Mike yawned.

They found the keycard for the room in Mother's purse, and once they had managed to arrange their snoring cargo on the unoccupied bed Red and Mike sat outside in the corridor and ate cheeseburgers and chips from room service. "How shall I bill this?" asked the girl from the kitchen.

"My tab," grunted Red through a mouthful of chips.

Mike tried to give Red some money from Mother's purse but Red insisted that saving his life from the knives of mad Filipinos was payment enough for his trouble. "It was Dalia who pulled the alarm," argued Mike. "I didn't really do anything but get hit."

"Yeah, well, whatever," said Red. "You're good people, kid."

When the food was gone they shook hands and yawned at one another. They were too tired for further ritual. Nodding vaguely at Mike's thanks Red hauled himself to his feet and nearly tripped over the tray as he shuffled toward the elevator. With a chime and a rumble he was gone.

"Goodnight," said Mike to the empty corridor.

No one had bothered to draw the blinds so when morning came the room was suffused by an unforgiving pall of bright sunlight. At seven o'clock Mother's eyes snapped open in a dreamy panic, quelled instantly when her barely conscious brain was able to count one, two, three children in the room with her: Bianca a lump of tangled covers on the next bed; India placidly watching cartoons on TV; Mike sitting at the small desk poring over a textbook.

"Whatcha doing, Mike?" murmured Mother, her throat pasty and head heavy.

Mike shrugged. "Homework."

"Make sure your sisters don't fight," Mother told him. Mike nodded and she fell back to sleep. She dreamed of Somalia, where it was too hot to wear any clothes.

For his part, Father dreamed of wrestling, a line of fermented drool soaking into his pillow. He shifted on the bed and farted ponderously.

India and Mike looked at each other and then fought to stifle their giggles. Mike pushed aside his school binder and rocked back on the wooden chair carelessly. "What are you watching?" he asked.

"*Spongebob Squarepants*," said India.

"What's happening?"

"Just whatever," she reported, playing with her fingers. "Patrick and Spongebob stole Squidward's car, and now they're joyriding around the ocean."

Mike raised one brow. "They stole a car?" He rocked back in his chair again, watching the skyline of reaching grey skyscrapers outside the window veer as his perspective changed. "Interesting..." he said thoughtfully.



TWO MOMENTS OF INVENTION

There are a hundred billion things for sale, and everybody is selling them. There are a hundred million brands to know, and everybody hears them. If you say the right word at the right time, this dying world can be your oyster.

Everything we buy has eyes, because we're all looking out for one another. That's co-operation. Everywhere we go has ears, because whispers and secrets are the holdings of those who would harm us. That's security. No one is alone, and no one is afraid.

And sure, there's always the scoundrels—the greedy and truthless barter-pirates of the invisible markets, the violent anti-automaton employment activists and their mediaeval dream, the sick privacy perverts who would shroud each life in a cloak of obfuscation and silence if they had their way—but nobody said this world was perfect.

Myself, I don't complain. I am a free man. I go where I please, and brand for my butter. Earth may not have much in the way of jobs these days, but I don't have much need for a career.

I have never worked a day in my life, and I live like a prince.

You see, when anybody could be subscribing to your feeds at any time, it counts to know what to mention when. And I'm the best: I can drop a hot slogan in a moneyed crowd ten times before the lesser advert-bums even know it's even on the rise. I can cross-market through innuendo, create logo awareness in the dark, bend any conversation toward a paying end...

And then I just kick back and watch the shining credit pile on the screen plink higher as the marketing machines weigh the world and make their decisions, plus or minus, credit or debit, advert or fair use. Plink! "Thank you, Viacom," I say. Plink-plink! "You're too kind, Monsanto."

Yes sir—it's nothing but the hobo life for me.

As I come out on deck I shiver at an autumn breeze that is sweeping in over the starboard side of the boat. It smells like burning leaves, and salt. The sun slips out from behind a fast cloud, and the white cruise-ship shines in the suddenly harsh light. I watch silver reflections dance in our churning wake, the Baltic coast withdrawing at a stately pace.

A nomadic waiter: "Can I get you anything, sir?"

“Sure,” I say. “I’ll have six poached eggs, nine rashers of bacon, challah toast and a dollop of baked beans, also a carafe of freshly-squeezed orange juice, a cup of Mocha Java, black, a cigarette and fellatio.”

I squint against the glare. Most of the coastline is wreathed in a dark green fringe of conifers, but a lone jetty has burst into deciduous blossom of reds and golds. As the sun hits the jetty and makes it glow against the grey horizon I begin to wonder if the local tourist office will pick up on any of my video feeds...

I saunter along the rail, back up a few steps, and include in my foreground a young couple holding hands and staring out over the water. The autumnal jetty balances out the right side of the background nicely. It’s a perfect postcard.

As I wander lazily away further along the rail, I slip out my plate and key up my accounts. Plink! “Thank you, European Bureau of Tourism and Immigration.” I chuckle to myself. Do I know the markets, or what?

I step inside the sun-deck commissary, my bare feet sinking into the plush, warmed carpeting. In the second or two before my aural counter-measures sink in, I hear the rattle and bleat of the ambient muzak. I scan the room for marks, but the place is virtually abandoned. Everyone is on deck watching Riga disappear.

I take up a seat under tall windows overlooking the deck by the turning shadow of the ship’s radar armature. I find the rotating shadow soothing, and I’m sure the hypnoid sites are already syndicating the stream. Network mutters in my head, and I turn around.

“Your breakfast, sir,” chime three waiters in starched faux-Naval whites, arranging their burdens on my table in a quick, smooth Tango triple-dip. On a planet where the unemployment rate typically runs over forty percent, you tend to get three-hundred percent service from those lucky enough to have jobs. I tap for a generous tip. The waiters are very happy. “Someone will be along to fellate you shortly, sir.”

Outside, reclining canvas chairs are being arranged on the sun-deck. The shadow of the radar armature turns and turns. I methodically put away my meal, and read eyelid-news.

The tables behind me fill up. I adjust my aural counter-measures to stifle the chatter. I smoke a cigarette, and stare out at the blue and silver waves.

The shadows have turned, and now the sun-deck is actually in the sun. No one reclines on the reclining chairs, however, until an unbelievably lithe, pale girl saunters slowly over from the stern. She places her handbag down with strangely careful poise, then gingerly lowers herself into the chair. She moves like an old woman who once studied ballet: deliberate, measured, graceful—but once settled she is nothing but creamy youth.

My appreciation is interrupted. I am being joined at my table. “Is this seat taken?”

“No. Feel free.”

A young man in worn clothes sits down, smiling sheepishly. “I just really wanted a window-seat...” I pick up a faint whiff of body odour, and realise he hasn’t bathed in a while. He’s a novice hobo, I bet. “Thanks,” he says brightly.

“Don’t mention it.”

“So...” he says conversationally, and I groan inwardly. He’s so green he thinks I’m a mark. “Have you been to Stockholm before?”

“Sure.” It’s more of a noncommittal grunt than a word.

“You know Joergen’s, of course,” he says, nonchalance feigned artlessly. “I hear the new games parlour has Polyfeel everywhere...ultra retro mood, but with all the

latest profiles.”

I shake my head in pity. “Look kid, that approach is never going to work. You just cost yourself a couple of pennies phrasing that the way you did.” He stares at me blankly, so I continue: “The way you’ve put it the markines are never going to think you’re trying to entice me to visit Joergen’s—they’ll think you’re trying to impress me with your worldliness, and the score will go against you. It’s not fair use.”

“You—you’re a hobo, too?” In a quick whisper he adds: “Are you a Sony?”

“Pfizer!” I swear quickly, costing me a credit or two. “Is it just me or are you a little wet behind the ears? You have all the discretion of a farting elephant. You can’t earn a living blindly tossing around expensive brand-memes like that. You’re playing with fire, kid. Just go back to your home-mall and say whatever it is your demographic is supposed to, and leave skimming the markines to the pros.”

“I...don’t have a home-mall to go back to,” he stammers, looking up to me in appeal. “I lost my job. I was disqualified from support, and I’m not classed for emigration. I don’t have any choice.”

I sniff dismissively. All the new kids have the same story. “You’re pretty clumsy. How did you ever get yourself on this cruise, I wonder...” It isn’t really a question—I’m standing up, dusting the crumbs off my lap. I squinch out my cigarette, and turn to go.

“I was caught in the latest Ingersol-Rand blast, in Riga,” says the kid. “Got a coupon.”

I sit down again, slowly. “Yeah,” I say, remembering. “Me too.”

I remember. I remember stumbling down the leafy terraces from the Ingersol-Rand bar, heading for my hole at the Hotel Nabisco, drunk on wine and slick takings. I am drunk in order to forget that without tonight’s takings I am a stone’s throw from being out on the low streets, unable to even to afford a new micropile for my fading data-plate. Tomorrow I can read the news, and track the trends, and nail the brands to broadcast. And maybe figure a way out of this jam I’m in, credit-wise.

Several sections of the mall are spread out before me along the east bank of the glistening Daugava, rooves awash with golden light from within. I spit over the edge of the terrace, and let the cold night air lend me the illusion of sobriety. Into the wind I sing:

*Hallelujah I’m a bum,
Hallelujah bum again,
Hallelujah give us a hand-out,
To revive us again.*

And then, suddenly, network goes quiet. The void leaves me suddenly sick and dizzy.

The three sections of the roof directly beneath me leap into the air, fracturing and dissolving beneath a roiling pimple of black smoke, glowing from within with a lurid light. The terrace rocks beneath my feet an instant before I am blown over by a geyser of hot air and broken dust. Thunder claps, and my ears ring...

I stumble to my feet and grab the twisted railing. I am engulfed in darkness, and at first I think I am inside the plume of smoke—but I’m not: instead, a gaping quarter of the city has come unpowered. My eyes adjust, and I see the ragged hole blown in the mall.

I think: lucky thing I’m not among the dead. One drink more, and I would’ve

been.

And then I think: too bad I'm not one of the soot-covered survivors. Ingersol-Rand will do anything for them, in order to save face.

The fact that the mall is without power slowly sinks in. No lights, no ventilators, no network, *no streaming feeds*. It is the strangest moment I have ever known. Until the power comes back on, history is matter of opinion. And who's to say I *wasn't* caught in the blast?

I blink, and digest. I have been granted a precious, impossible thing: a moment of invention. And he who hesitates is lost!

I lope along the fractured terrace to the edge of the square and let myself carefully over the edge, dropping on the buckled but intact roof of the next dome over from the blast. The air smells like burnt plastic, and I can hear distant sirens in the crisp, night air.

In a moment of pure faith, I sprint to the edge of the hole and leap in.

I land in a field of broken glass, and feel my feet and knees are sliced as I roll and slide in the darkness. Everything is hidden in a haze of acrid smoke. I can hear moans, and gasps, and screams. I move blindly toward these mewling animal noises, finding at last a heap of humanity amid the burning rubble.

I hear diagnostic signals flicker inside my mind, and know that I haven't much time before the sensors woven into my clothing and the clothing of everyone else will reawaken and resume transmitting to network. I squirm beneath the top layer of bodies, heavy and unresponsive. I wedge myself between two that I had taken for dead, but once I'm still I can hear a tiny, weak voice coming from one of them muttering, "Oh god, oh god, oh god..." over and over again.

A minute later the voice trails off, and I smell her bowels loosen in death.

It is another five minutes before I first hear the distant echoes of the soothing, androgynous voice of rescue robots, drawing slowly nearer as they methodically probe the debris for survivors. "You're going be okay," they coo; "Assistance is here. Everything is going to be fine."

And it is. Every retailer in the mall is going to beat a path to our hospital beds, to compete for our forgiveness and loyalty. We are consumers—the few, the mighty, the proud, the maimed—and without us they are nothing. We will be gifted something special by the management of Riga, and possibly even the Baltic Corporation itself. As I am strapped to a stretcher by the warmed, soft plastic hands of rescue robots I wonder to myself what prize I will be awarded: an extras-laden stay at a fabulous resort? Free run of a luxury hotel penthouse? A complimentary pleasure cruise?

"You're going to be okay," two robots sing in eerie synchronisation; "Everything is going to be fine."

And I am. I am fine. I shake myself out the reverie, and feel a heavy, clammy kind of pity for the clumsy kid, the wannabe hobo who actually *was* caught in the blast. I notice that he's got a fresh tattoo healing on his forearm—probably couldn't afford to pay the hospital, so they logoed him. Now he'll ever after wear the crescent moon and stars of Proctor & Gamble's benevolence on his sleeve.

"Order yourself breakfast, kid," I say, "it's on me." Nobody needs to witness this promise: network is always listening.

I again catch sight of my sunbathing beauty out on deck through the tall windows, and head outside. I walk against the current through a throng of babbling, pink-faced Germans, and squeeze out of the commissary.

I walk around to the sun-deck. The sun passes behind a cloud, and I shiver in the sudden autumn chill. The thin white girl laid out like a corpse on the canvas chair seems unperturbed, however, and I wonder at this.

A bell tolls. The call to prayer.

I am not a religious man, but it's always best to lay low when everybody else has their head down. Dozens of ship's staff have materialised everywhere, laying down prayer carpets, smiling and pointing the way to Mecca. People pour out of the commissary, blocking my view of the pale girl. Exasperated and impatient, I kneel. "A little to the right," says somebody through network. I nudge to the right. "Thanks," I mutter.

Commercial Islamic Futurism is by no means a very demanding faith—in most districts just going through the motions is enough to keep you out of trouble. But it can be a nuisance sometimes. Case in point: by the time everybody gets up from prayer the strange girl has disappeared.

The sun-deck is empty.

It is the late afternoon. I stand by the bar in the third deck lounge, reading an expensive news-layout over another man's shoulder. I admire how the colourful, crystal-clear images on his very showy data-plate can be seen from such a shallow angle, and wonder how much processing power is wasted casting those stupid little holographic shadows across his hands and forearm.

"Another drink, sir?" the bartenders ask in harmonious unison.

"Hit me."

I turn to my own scuffed plate, whose projections lack the vibrance and apparent substance of the rich man's bauble. If I move my head too far to one side the projection smears out in weird perspective, and the colours invert. Still, it serves me well. Even without the expedited syndication of a rich man's subscriptions it would have found the information I need, the tid-bits of market motion that keep me alive.

The playboy might be good for a couple of bucks, but I let him wander away. I've already scored enough today, and my plate shows the markines are thankful. "Plink!" Thank you, DuPont.

I polish off my drink and look around the third deck lounge. It's a late, lazy hour in the afternoon, and the many of the passengers have been lulled to napping by the gentle rumble of the cruise-ship's progress. Corpulent, curving bodies in all manner of garish fashions from all the provinces of Earth are curled in wide, pillowy chairs everywhere I look. Outside the windows the sea passes. The scene makes me feel suddenly lonely.

"Another drink, sir?" the bartenders ask in harmonious unison.

"No thanks."

I choose a nearby chair, and sink into it, my flesh spreading out like pudding. I close my eyes and flit through network, skimming a listing of the top ten feeds.

Children at a birthday party in Mexico City are beating a row of suspended pinatas shaped like erotic cartoon characters, clutching their sides laughing as they wrestle one another to deal the death blow that will spill out the prizes and candy and coupons—behind them, the twilight sky is a haunting mix of dusty grey and wine red; meanwhile, in Copenhagen a fifteen-year-old girl from Brussels with curly brown hair is deflowered by a sensitive blonde boyfriend who blanches at the sight of her blood; in Jakarta, a stunning fireworks display lights up clouds of its own smoke; in Istanbul, a taste-testing rally becomes a shoving match; in Beijing, a man on a bicycle has been hit

from above by a car...

I flit back to local. I find our cruise-ship, and snap through the available channels listlessly. Nobody is doing or seeing anything interesting. After a few minutes I figure out what I'm really looking for is the pale girl who sunbathes in the cold. Young but feeble, supple but slow—an enchanted discontinuity in a world of self-same streams of loud, round Earth girls and their familiar vices. The curiosity she awakens in me is far preferable to mulling over the wet guilt of invention reeking in the corner of my mind. Skinny and strange, I find my thoughts drawn to her again and again.

I hunger to meet her. I snap through the ship's channels faster, but I cannot find her feed, or any feed pointing at her. She seems invisible to network.

"What is this girl—from Mars?" I ask myself. And then it hits me.

She is. Of course she is.

With this filter in mind I find her quickly. She's listed in Cabin P421 as a foreign national under the bizarre name of Zuleika, Sadira Hayfa. She broadcasts no feeds. The ship says she's in the cabin, but I get nothing. When I can't find her on any of the ship's porno-streams, I surmise that she is alone.

Because I am lonely, I wonder if she is.

All the world's a shop, but the density varies. As I walk into the thick of it signs, songs and mongers compete for my expensive attention. I am crossing the balconied commercial galleria that fills the core the ship, my gaze slipping lazily from one window display to the next. Chocolates, cheeses, perfumes and pets; narcotics, animatronics, lifescans and bling-bling.

All manner of consumer princes waddle the aisles, taking free samples and being trailed by ship's staff or liveried robots carrying their bags. I amble my own generous carcass along, halfway pretending to myself that I am not making directly for Cabin P421. After a while I forget to look at the window displays. I push through the crowd with only a little cruelty.

The air throbs with the syncopated pulses of the hyperChristian clubbers, a clusterfuck of whom are gyrating shamelessly under flashing, coloured lights set up beside the galleria's logo-swaddled fountain. The shining, half-naked teenagers loll and gibber at one another in their trance and funk. An amplified voice implores and cajoles in time to the frenetic beat: "*P-P-Prraise the hyperChrist! P-P-Prraise the hyperChrist!*"

My aural counter-measures won't silence the chanting because they were programmed in Italy, and the laws are different there. Filtering religious content runs against the grain, even if the religion involved is little more than a tax-dodging sex cult. "*Hype! Hype! Hyper-Hallelujah: the hyperChrist is lo-o-ve!*"

My irritation dwindles as I find myself drawn to a nearby window display. A wide banner with iridescent letters that seem to turn in perspective as I approach proclaims: YOUR FUTURE IS ON ARES. Beneath it turns a giant globe of Mars, red continents fringed with green by bronzen seas, immigration and vacation destinations indicated by glowing dots girdled by lists of key attractions. For a moment I watch the globe turn, mesmerised by the crinkles of mountains I will never know.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" asks the saleslady, her cheeks dimpling as she smiles brightly. She has been made up in Mars *chic*, but if she were as cosmopolitan as she looked she wouldn't be working an emigration boutique on a cruise. "Thinking of making the big leap soon?"

"I'm not classed for emigration," I say flatly.

"That's not a problem at all," she says, without missing a beat. "Our match-

making tours are designed to help you find your unique bridge to citizenship in an Aresu partner. Think about it: you, an Aresu girl, the mists of the springs at Huo Hsing..."

For a moment I am transported. I can see a salmon sky under a yawning plain of rust, with *every moment invented*. I hesitate at the thought—balk a moment in dread and morbid fascination for my own blossoming perversity...

But I am a hard man, and not easily fooled. My gut tells me this travel agency whisks poor desperate saps off for lavish vacations in segregated camps, where they are plied from their valuable Terran credits by banquets, spiked neodil and whores. No one gets married, and no one gets to stay. A heartbeat later, network buzzes with rumours of similar scams.

"Not interested," I say, and move on.

At the end of the gallery hall between twin banks of glass elevators is a wide public plate projecting a colourful cut-away display of the ship. At the base of the plate a tall, sickly looking man in outlandish costume is arguing with one of the ship's staff. "Just show me on this map!" the tourist demands, his thick accent mincing the words.

"Sir, if you'll just go through network to the passenger menu—"

"For the last time, you idiot, I don't have network access!"

I recognize the haughty stranger as a Martian, and shake my head. He is every bit the caricature: arrogant, frustrated and lost, unwilling or unable to adapt to civilised ways. An uncouth wildman, from a rough pioneering drudge not featured on the tourist brochures, convinced of his own superiority because his genome is golden.

Cabin P421. I ring through network, but get no response. I hesitate, and then rap gently on the door with my knuckles. A muffled voice from within: "Who is it?"

I blink. *Who is it?*

That is the single strangest question I have ever heard in my life.

For a fleeting second, my mind tries of its own accord to fathom a world where people ask questions like "Who is it?" I am drunk and giddy, and cold butterflies whirl behind my sternum. It is terrifying. It is exhilarating. My palms begin to sweat.

"My name is Slimfast," I call awkwardly, not knowing where to look. "I, um, just thought you might appreciate some company."

The pause that follows seems interminable. I flit through network and check that no one is about to turn down this corridor, to witness me squirming at the door of Cabin P421. All clear. Just me and the subscribers.

A click. The door slides away, and I step through the companionway. My eyes sweep across the long, chilly suite, but it takes me a moment to find her, nestled in a blanket on a chair by a vent. Her pale, long face is all that shows above the swaddling, her hair tied and tucked away. She leans her head against the vent as it billows cold air into the room. Her eyes are closed. She wears a tiny throat-mic, ornamented to look like jewellery.

"Have a seat, Mr Slimfast," she says, her actual voice dampened artificially beneath the translation. "You'll have to excuse the translator. I never learned Cantonese English." She opens her eyes, and pierces me. The irises are an impossible shade of indigo.

"Fair enough. I never learned Marsgo." I turn a chair, and sink into it. "Slimfast is my first name, actually. Slimfast Metamucil." I smile sheepishly. "My parents took out a second mortgage to get me that name."

She smiles uncertainly. "I'm Sadira."

"That's a lovely name. What does it represent?"

"I don't know."

There is a pause. After a moment I realise that I have been politely waiting for her to finish her query, but she isn't making one. She's just waiting for me to speak again. She doesn't know what her name means, and network isn't going to tell her.

"This is going to sound...well, adolescent. But I saw you sunbathing in the cold this morning, and I found myself fascinated. It should have dawned on me right away that you're a Martian."

She winces. "Please: Aresu."

"I didn't mean to offend you."

"Of course not. But that term carries unpleasant associations—baggage from less tolerant times." A bare arm appears from the folds of blanket, hovers over a touchpad on the wall. "Will you take tea, Mr Metamucil?"

"Please, call me Slim."

The tea service extends, and we each take a cup. When I look up from the steaming surface, she is watching me. "The loneliness gnaws, doesn't it?"

"Pardon me?" I pause, mid-sip.

She closes her eyes for a moment, lolls her head back into the stream of chill air from the vent. "Earth people are funny," she sighs cryptically. She opens her eyes and asks in a conversational tone, "What do you do for a living, Slim?"

"I'm a commercial hobo," I hear myself admit. "A brand bum."

"I've heard of it. You don't live anywhere, and you have no career assignment." She searches my face for a moment. "On Ares, we watch foolish romances about brand bums, catching as catch can in the mazes of Old Earth."

"I had no idea."

She chuckles. "Are you the way they always paint the leading men? A cosmopolitan conversationalist with insides tough as diamond?" She sips tea. "When I was a girl I thought I wanted to marry one someday. I dreamed of a life without work assignments, social chores or school."

"Listen here, I subscribed to school just like everybody else," I correct her quickly. "It's the law."

"You needn't be so defensive."

"I just don't want anybody to get the wrong idea."

"Anybody who?"

"Anybody anybody." I gesture vaguely. "Everybody else." Her expression is blank. I explain: "Through *network*."

"They're...watching us right now?"

"Well, there's almost a billion people on this planet, and God knows how many umpteen-million AIs. I'm sure *somebody* is picking up some small part of this, yes."

As I watch, she seems to shrink a bit into her wrappings, becoming even more willowy and small in her startled expression of rapt vulnerability. She is at once a child. The blanket has slipped from her shoulder, exposing a tiny, sexless, gravity-defying breast. "But I don't want anyone to find me," she whispers after a long moment. She looks up, and her eyes are brimming with tears. "I've run away."

Knowing how to play the streams means knowing how to get your meme transmitted. It means having an instinctive knowledge of what environments are conducive to showcasing your content, and what environments clog the pipes with noise and distraction. To use this knowledge in reverse titillates me.

Sadira and I are in the ship's adult bath-house, wrapped in towels, sitting on cool porcelain steps, sipping cold champagne. We are surrounded by a sea of heaving, groping, gyrating nudity, the air suffused with splashes, moans, cries and the sounds of wet meat. We are an isle of stillness at the junction between two pools, and our conversation is essentially private. The thought of this gives me a lascivious thrill, enhanced by the drink.

"Tell me about where you're from," I've asked her.

She tells me about a place called Estercamp, where she grew up. She fondly remembers goats and chickens walking the streets of the camp untethered, congregating near the locks as if drawn to the world out-of-domes, no matter how hostile. She remembers running in the rusty snow, and being punished for killing an ant on purpose, and marvelling at Justice Day fireworks each spring in celebration of the Earth's defeat.

"When I was first rotated for soil recovery, when I was twelve, I knew it right away: I'm not a rural girl." At sixteen she ran away from home, to try to make it as an actress in the big camp. "Your parents didn't look for you?" I ask, incredulous. Imagine, losing an investment like that!

"Of course they did," she says, shrugging. "But there are a lot of ways to lose yourself in Camp Nirgal."

When the theatre did not pan out for her, Sadira experimented with a slew of odd jobs: bartender, library mapper, chimp-sign teacher, road crew...

"Road crew?" I smirk. "No offense, but aren't you a little bit—dainty, for that kind of work?"

She grabs my arm with sudden and shocking viciousness. "Back home, I wear a Gauge Five Heavysuit. I can break you over my knee." She relaxes her grip, and smiles. "But there's a time and a place for everything."

"You're surprising," I tell her.

"Do you like that?"

"It scares me." I pause. "But I'm liking being scared. So I suppose I do."

She describes a random, directionless chain of passionate reactions to mundane circumstances, a rampage of freedom the likes of which I can barely imagine. She marries an aging university professor, and then leaves him for an adolescent sculptor; she marries a lesbian ant colony engineer, and then leaves her for an ill-tempered, neodil-addicted journalist. It seems unreal to me that there should be a world where a person can make mistake after mistake, and still not end up on the low streets. To Sadira the answer is simple: "There are no low streets on Ares."

"You still haven't told me what it is you're running from," I remind her.

"Isn't it obvious?" She lets her gaze drift over the pawing, panting mounds and folds of flesh at the foot of the steps. "I'm running from the last stage of my life. And I'm running to the next one."

"And what is the next stage?" I ask.

"Who knows?" she shrugs childishly. "Maybe you."

The call has sounded, and we kneel next to one another in the carpeted elevator lobby. The waning sunlight diffusing through the skylights is ruddy and dull. When prayer is done, I see that Sadira has been watching me. Water from the pools drips from her lashes. "You want to come to Ares," she says simply. "I can see it."

"How can you see it?" I ask as I haul to myself to my feet, squinching my toes in the soft floor. I offer out a hand to help her straighten, but she declines it.

"You Earth-people are fogged," she says, gathering her robe around her. "You

spend so long plugged into one another you have no eyes for seeing. You spend so much time chatting with one another you've forgotten how to hear without words." The elevator arrives with a chime and a yawn. We step inside.

"So you're telepathic on Mars, too?" I quip, feeling exposed.

She sniffs dismissively. "Your feelings bleed through your face every time I talk, Slim. The more I say the more I learn about you." I feel a lurch in my belly as the ride plunges downward.

Whispering, I tell her about the Ingersol-Rand bombing. My throat dry and quaking, I tell about the lie I am living out. I try to release the unbearable weight of my moment of invention, but I do not feel any lighter. She looks at me in pity, and sighs. "Earth is a zoo," she says. To my amazement she seems decidedly...undisgusted. "You have to seize the moment," she adds; "because you never know what's going to happen next."

We turn into the corridor to the portside passenger cabins, and I fight the urge for fantasy to overtake me. As we walk she takes my hand in hers, and against my will I am dreaming of a new kind of destiny for myself. Could this mad woman-child actually transport me away?

Cabin P421. Her thumb releases a door, and we step inside.

The sickness hits me like a sack of rocks. I am reeling sideways through a grey haze, bile rising from my twisting gut. Pain cracks and rumbles in sawing waves across my head, and I stagger into the wall, feeling blind and legless. A cry cuts the air: "*Malik!*"

I am bewildered and lost. I claw my way up through the blankness, grasping for sensibility. My vision begins to clear, flagged on all sides by throbbing afterimages and swirling sparks. Across the suite, Sadira has been thrown into a glass table, smashing it loudly. Now her voice pleads: "Malik!"

Network is down. My head is quiet, and my sight plain. The lights are out, but the outage must be local because noise of the ship's engines reaches me over Sadira's sobs. A tall shadow stands over her, and I recognise the angry outlander from the galleria. He barks at her in what I can only assume is Marsgo.

He stops suddenly when he sees me struggling to my feet. "Stay where you are!" he yells, pointing a small device in his right hand at my chest. He has used the back of that hand to strike at Sadira, and the skin is red.

His left hand fondles another device—round, black, featureless.

No network, no subscribers, no witnesses, no help. This Martian animal will be my end. "I'm not making any trouble," I say shakily.

His green eyes are bloodshot and wide. "It doesn't matter. You'll die just the same. You stole Sadira from me, and you're going to have to pay for that, *you Earth shit.*" He backhands me, and I stumble into the wall again. He advances upon me as I slide to the floor, my legs failing.

I become aware that I am going to die like a coward—momentarily. Malik kicks me savagely in the ribs, and I lose control of my bladder.

He winds back his arm to hit me again, and an expression of shock blooms on his face as Sadira grabs it from behind. She wrenches the arm sideways in one smooth motion, and it breaks loudly. The device drops from his right hand, and I dive after it.

I grab it, and recognise it as a sonic pistol. I turn around like a worm on the floor, training the pistol on Malik. His face is contorted by rage and pain, his body pinned cruelly by Sadira. "Kill him!" she screeches, struggling against Malik's strength. "*Kill him now!*"

I nod. Sadira jumps aside. Malik bursts.

Breathing raggedly, I help her to her feet. She stumbles and leans into me. Her legs have been sliced by the broken glass, and blood is slipping out between the shards. I lean down to kiss her sweaty brow, but she drops to her knees and begins to paw through the wet remains of Malik. "What the hell are you doing?"

"The dampener...we need to turn off the dampener," she says. I spot the small black device by an overturned chair, and pick it up. "Ah!" she says. "Give it to me."

I run my fingers over its smooth surface, Malik's greasy print still evident on the contact. A dampener! I marvel. A blackout in your pocket...

A banging sounds at the door. Muffled voices shout. Sadira stares at me. "They can't get in—you need to let the power come back on," she says huskily, clutching her leg.

I consider my urine-soaked pants, and the scene of mayhem around me. Transfixed, my gaze is drawn back to the tiny black dampener. "What happened here?" I hear myself ask airily. What a magical question!

"What do you mean what happened here?" Sadira's eyes are wide and scared.

I lick my lips slowly, fondling the dampener all the while. "What happened here..." I repeat, looking down at Sadira bleeding on the floor. "What happened here is that I tried to save you from him, but I was too late. I killed him, but you were also lost."

"I—" she begins, but her voice fails. The colour drains from her face. The banging against the door is redoubled, and I hear the sound of tools.

"I'm sorry, Sadira," I say, raising the sonic pistol. "But catch as catch can."

I love Stockholm.

I love the red rooves and the crisp air and the dimpled smiles of the buxom women, each two Martians wide. I love being treated to bubbling drinks and hearty eats, being patted on the back, and being recognised in the street as the hero who killed the rampaging outlander who came to Earth to murder his wayward Aresu floozy.

The nights are cold but the local Ingersol-Rand hotel has a Gap fireplace in every suite. I watch the flames swim upward. Wood pops. I sip my wine, and gently pat the hair of the sleeping room-service girl beside me. I tuck a tip into her camisole, and wander over to the window.

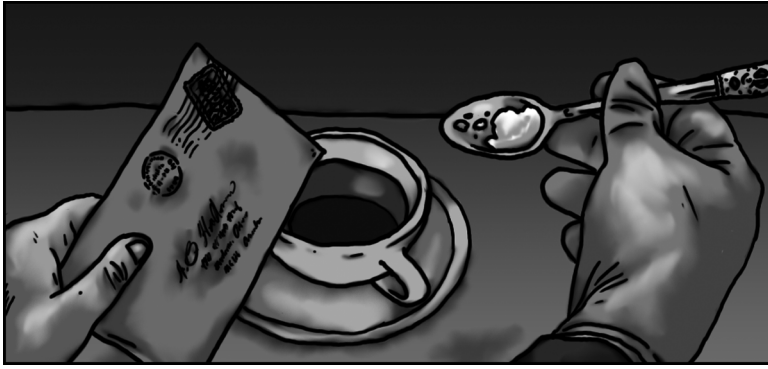
The city glitters. The undersides of the clouds glow dull orange in reflection. In the distance, music warbles and drums strike tinnily. The last voices of evening revelry are dying away as morning threatens the horizon.

I wonder: which block might I make dark?

In the pocket of my monogrammed robe I touch the dampener, ever securely wrapped in a blood-stained handkerchief, ever hidden from the watchful eyes of every thing I own, and everywhere I go. I have memorised every contour of the touch of the device. Gently, sensually, my thumb lingers over the edges of the contact.

Two moments of invention, and I am addicted. Where will I strike next? I giggle quietly to myself, fogging the cold glass. Where next will I replace a slice of public history with cunning private opinion?

Mars on Earth! I will be the hobo king.



LESLIE AND THE POWDER

1.

Leslie wanted to go faster, but the car was reluctant.

As he flattened his foot against the pedal the engine chortled unhappily, the sway from the unbalanced tires becoming violent enough to threaten to upset the wax-paper cups of Coca-Cola Leslie and his son had jammed into the shallow, sticky-bottomed cupholders on the dash.

"Jesus Dad, I'm going to puke," said his son, Angus.

"I'm just trying to get us there, alright?"

"Car's going to fall apart."

"Then we'll get out and walk. Until then, spare me the commentary."

Angus sneered and turned away from his father, eyes nailed at the brown and yellow and grey smears of the autumn countryside passing outside. He pushed white earbuds into his ears and proceeded to tap a frenetic tattoo against the armrest in time to whatever angst-ridden crap he was into listening to these days. Leslie tried to ignore the boy.

"There *is* a radio, you know. Why don't we put on something we can both listen to?" he asked finally after waving for Angus' attention, his nerves rubbed raw by the incessant finger-drumming.

"Because everything you like sucks," replied Angus loudly without removing his earbuds.

"That isn't a very civil way to behave."

"Maybe people would be more civil to you if you weren't always such an asshole," opined Angus. "There's one to grow on, Dad. Think about it."

"I don't know where we went wrong with you..."

"Oh not *this* crap again," grunted Angus, increasing the volume on his music player until the tinny, muted thumping and bleating noise became an insurmountable obstacle to any further discussion. He leaned his head against the window and closed his eyes.

Leslie swerved the car to the edge of the lane briefly and then tugged it back hard. Angus' head knocked against the glass with the inertia. "What the *hell*?" he bellowed.

"Smarten up," said Leslie darkly, eyes on the road.

"You don't like what people have to say so you try to cause an accident? What

the *bell*, Dad? Jesus!”

“There’s an expression,” said Leslie tonelessly, “that says, ‘don’t bite the hand that feeds you.’ You ever heard that before, Angus? Well, *that’s* one to grow on. Think about it.”

“*You* think about it,” spat Angus.

“Witty.”

“Leave me alone, you asshole.”

Leslie pushed the car a little harder, the steering wheel wobbling under his white-knuckled hands. He had never wanted a cigarette so badly in his life, but pulling over to buy a pack was unthinkable after the drama that had erupted last week when Angus had been caught smoking.

As if reading his mind Angus said, “Have a smoke if you want to. I already know what a hypocrite you are.”

“I don’t smoke, Angus.”

The teenager chuckled derisively and turned back to the window, casually rubbing at the corner of his eye with his middle finger.

The aging Taurus shimmied as Leslie let off the gas, realizing that his turn was approaching. He consulted the piece of notepaper stuffed under the visor again and then squinted at the approaching signs. Twenty minutes later he decided he’d missed it and pulled over at a gas station to ask directions.

Behind the counter inside the cramped, snack-stuffed booth was a gum-chewing girl with a raccoon-like application of blue eyeliner, reading a dog-eared pulp with a half-naked corpse on the cover. “What pump youse at?” she drawled without looking up.

“Um, I’m looking for Baynard Trail North,” said Leslie, peering at the folded scrap of notepaper on which he’d scrawled himself a map. “Do you know if that’s west of here, or did I pass it back further east?”

She chewed her gum pensively. “Did you come from left or right?”

Leslie blinked. “Um, right now I’m going westbound.” He pointed out the window to the highway.

“Yeah, no,” she confirmed cryptically. “It’s probably back right more.”

“About how far?”

She shrugged. “Five minutes?”

“Okay, okay thanks,” said Leslie, putting away his map. “Um, is there a washroom here I could use?”

She glanced at the till’s readout with heavy lids and yawned ponderously, exposing her fillings. “Youse have to buy something before I’m allowed to give you the key.”

“Fine,” said Leslie absently, patting his pockets. “Whatever.”

He bought a pack of DuMaurier Lights, the red box emblazoned with a graphic photograph of diseased lungs, and then let himself into the grimy washroom to take a leak. He lit one of the cigarettes while he peed, looking sideways into a greasy mirror, chagrined to see how haggard he looked—pasty skin, thinning rust-coloured hair, watery eyes, softening jowls...

“Christ I look like shit,” he mumbled around the cigarette.

The smoke made him feel dizzy and sick so he threw it in the toilet and washed his face until it turned pink. He still had to face two days alone with a son who hated him, sorting through the belongings of a dead uncle he could only recall ever having met once or twice—at funerals or weddings.

His pocket rang. With difficulty he extracted a telephone with a cracked face and flipped it open. "Hello?" he said wearily, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Where are you?" asked his wife.

"Hi honey," said Leslie. "We're just on the highway still—"

"Shouldn't you be there already?"

"Well, I think we may have missed the turn-off but we're back on track—"

"Jesus, Les. I should've known. I *told* you to buy a new Perly's."

Leslie's jaw tightened. "My map is *fine*, Margaret. I just missed the turn, we're five minutes away now—we're going to be there in five minutes, okay?"

"It's getting dark."

"Like I said, five minutes."

"I don't want you drinking in front of Angus. You know how you get."

"Shit Margaret, I think I can handle two nights without a consultant, okay? Lay off. Everything's fine. We'll be there in five minutes. I'll call you in the morning. Okay?"

She sniffed. "Don't overpack the car."

He hung up on her, pushing his way aggressively out of the washroom and tossing the key on the counter, startling the pulp-reading girl. As he stalked back to the car he wondered whether it were possible that he was, in fact, the most miserable loser in all the world.

Thus, he was not taken completely by surprise when the Taurus wouldn't start.

"*Fuck!*" yelled Leslie.

"Chill," recommended Angus dully.

Leslie leaned his head against the steering wheel and closed his eyes, flexing his hands against the grip rhythmically. Though he did not know precisely what had been willed to him by his uncle, he suspected, given his luck, that it would not turn out to be a new car or a pot of gold.

What Leslie really wanted was a magic bullet—something that would sweep through his life and make everything right again.

"Dad?"

He looked up slowly, blinking. "What is it, Angus?"

"You totally reek of cigarettes, hypocrite."

Leslie sighed.

2.

Leslie's uncle's house was a palace; a palace left to wilt, the furniture mourning under sheets, the curtains moth-eaten. The dust denied any ability to stop sneezing.

He uncovered a giant, sun-faded oil-painting of his uncle's long dead second wife and regarded dolefully the handsome, unsmiling girl trapped inside. He sneezed four times in rapid succession and rubbed his eyes. "Thanks Unc, I know just where I'll hang it," he muttered, thinking of his basement.

With a grunt he dragged the portrait into the hall and leaned it up against the rest of the inherited kipple in a pile meant for Angus to load into the Taurus. Despite bellowing at the teenager to get out of bed half an hour earlier the pile had not yet been touched. Leslie sighed and leaned on the banister. "Angus!" he called. "It's nearly noon for Christ's sake—get down here already!"

Angus stuck his head out of a bedroom. "What?" he mumbled blearily, pushing strands of long, lank hair out of his face.

"You have to start taking this stuff out to the car. You said you'd be up at ten."

Angus blinked. "What time is it?"

"Twelve."

The boy scoffed. "It's only like eleven forty-five."

"Doesn't really change anything, does it?"

"Whatever," grumbled Angus. "I have to take a shower."

Leslie ran his hand down his face wearily. "Let's just skip the shower and get on with this, okay? There's no girls here. Nobody cares if you smell."

"I don't smell," snapped Angus defensively.

"All the more reason to hop to it."

Leslie went back to the mouldering drawing room and consulted again the manifest of decaying possessions of which he was entitled to take custody: an antique grandfather clock in need of repair, a slightly cracked set of intricately hand-brushed fine bone china, a series of tarnished military medals awarded for killing Korean communists, presumably in the context of a war.

Leslie sneezed.

At the bottom of the list was a rather cryptic item specifying only the contents of Uncle Weldon's private study *in toto*. "I hope it's nothing too big," he sighed. "Or too worthless," he added.

After trudging up to the third floor he discovered the study and found the door locked. He slipped out the envelope given to him by the executor, his officious cousin Leon, and fished out the key that had been included without explanation. He fitted it into the heavy oak door and turned the lock free.

The door swung open with a long creak, releasing a bloom of dust. Leslie sneezed again, six times, leaving him winded and his forehead covered in a thin sheen of perspiration.

The little room was empty.

"Nice," said Leslie darkly.

He wandered inside, the floorboards whining petulantly under his feet. He turned around and saw that there was a closet, and affixed to the narrow, scuffed door was a manilla envelope that bore his name in an old man's looping and elaborate but shaky hand: *Attention Leslie Carstairs: Private & Confidential*.

Leslie plucked it free, blew open the end, and leaned against the wall by the small, vine-choked window to read. The first item to drop out was a short letter on his uncle's personal letterhead. It was dated just a couple of weeks before Weldon had passed away. Leslie squinted.

Dearest nephew,

I have never had much truck with words. Thus, I direct you to my grandfather's own notes as they were delivered to me so many years ago. Read carefully, and be sure to heed his advice in all matters relating to this gift. Welcome to a better life.

Sincerely, W.

Leslie blinked, then sneezed. He wiped his snot off the letter carefully and then refolded it and exchanged it for an age-yellowed envelope bearing postmarks from Auld Scotland. Inside was a thick folio of papers bound with a leather string. The pages were encrusted with line after line of tight, old-fashioned cursive in brown ink.

Leslie looked across the room to the closet and furrowed his brow.

With the unread folio still clutched in his hand he shuffled across the floor and twisted the dented brass knob. The closet yawned open. His eyes strained against the

gloom.

Inside the closet was a bird cage covered in a swath of linty black velvet.

He reached out to pull away the drape but hesitated when something inside the cage shifted audibly. Leslie frowned. He backed out of the closet and untied the leather string around his great-grandfather's folio, holding the faded pages close to his face. He settled on a random passage and read:

The creature requires very little in the way of sustenance but will offer lower yields if not supplied with fresh water. Each fortnight the creature will consume 4 to 6 grams of insect matter with a distinct preference for beetles & a matching reluctance for flies.

NB: for maximum efficacy the feed should be live when introduced to the cage.

Leslie decided that whatever exotic bird or lizard he had been bequeathed had probably already died from lack of attention, and that the sound he heard had likely come from a leftover insect. He shuddered, wondering what kind of rotting mess lay in wait beneath the velvet.

He strolled into the closet, tugged off the drape, then leapt back and preemptively covered his nose from whatever odious smell might be released.

Inside the dark closet, the cage rattled. Leslie bit his lip. He looked down at the folio pages again.

As the creature is nocturnal by habit it is best to harvest during daylight hours to take advantage of a certain natural lethargy. This lethargy is not alone sufficient to ensure safety however it does substantially mitigate the dosage of ether necessary to perform the act.

Leslie sniffed experimentally. Indeed, at the edge of perception he could discern a faded funk of ether gas. Resting on a shelf in the closet was a series of flasks and tubing beside a box of disposable rubber gloves and a pair of metal tongs. He frowned. "What the hell *is* this?" he wondered aloud, flipping over a page to find the reverse face covered in even more notations.

The cage rattled again. Leslie looked up.

Almost without volition he stepped gingerly forward and reached out for the hanging corner of the black velvet drape, then decisively whisked it off. The cage sang briefly like a harpsichord. He leaned in close, probing the shadows with wide eyes.

Inside the cage was a tiny woman.

She was about four inches tall, naked and pale. She crouched on a bed of shredded newspaper, looking back at Leslie with eyes as black, shiny and inscrutable as a bird's. Except for a tangled bramble of matted red locks on her head she was hairless, her breasts and hips subtle like a girl just barely beginning to bloom. From her back rose four wings like those of a butterfly, translucent and run through with fine veins.

"Jesus Santa," whispered Leslie, the folio dropping out of his hand and scattering on the floor. His knees felt weak so he sat down, back to the closet. "Christ, Christ, Christ," he said.

He looked back over his shoulder: the tiny woman was still there, her pinched little face pointed at him, watching silently. She blinked.

Leslie had never left a room so fast. He staggered down the staircase to the second floor, grabbed his coat from the bedroom and frisked it until he found the red box of DuMaurier Lights, his breathing quick and ragged. He jammed one into his

mouth and lit it, pacing around the musty bed he'd slept so badly in.

"Holy God, Holy God," he mumbled, smoking.

He wandered aimlessly downstairs and pushed into the diningroom, eyeing the liquor cabinet. It was black, oriental, painted with scenes. He unlatched it and opened it up, peering at the rows of dusty bottles. He was about to select an Old Mull when he heard a noise from the kitchen. "...Angus?" he called.

"What?" snapped his son.

Leslie walked into the kitchen. Angus was sitting with his feet up on the table, unwrapping a sandwich from the cooler and examining the filling critically. "What are you doing?" asked Leslie.

"Having breakfast, obviously."

"It's lunch time."

"So I'm eating lunch. Who cares?"

"I care since I'm waiting on you to load the car, like you promised."

"I didn't *promise*, I just said I'd do it."

"So why aren't you doing it?"

"I'm hungry. I'll do it in like five minutes."

Leslie was quiet for a moment. He watched the boy bite into the sandwich. Then he surged forward and slapped his feet off the table. Angus dropped the sandwich and swore, glaring at his father. "What the *hell*?" he shouted.

"Now, Angus. Get your ass off that chair and load up the car. Now. Do you hear me? *Now*."

Angus sneered. "You know, people would be more willing to do favours for you if—"

"Just cut that shit out!" bellowed Leslie, striking the table top with a clenched fist. "You're always talking about *people* when what you really mean is *you*. Why can't you even take responsibility for yourself in your own statements? Is it some kind of goddamn *brain damage*?"

Angus was stunned. "You cracked the table, Da—"

"*Shut up!*" cried Leslie. "Sixteen years old and you *still* don't know when to keep your fucking mouth shut. It's amazing to me. I have no explanation. Maybe your teachers are right after all: maybe you're just not very bright."

They stared at each other. Angus' face twitched. For a second he looked like he was going to cry before he suddenly kicked over his chair and stomped out of the kitchen.

Leslie leaned against the counter and closed his eyes, hating himself.

After a moment he lit another cigarette, his hands shaking. He heard scuffling sounds as Angus started dragging the first items out to the Taurus.

They didn't speak to each other for the rest of the day. Leslie kept busy, and kept away from the third storey. He ordered a pizza at twilight. Angus loaded half of the slices onto two paper plates and walked away, then returned a few minutes later and took away a can of pop. Even sitting on the far side of the kitchen Leslie could hear the music thrumming through the boy's earphones, excluding everything.

Leslie didn't eat much pizza. But he did taste the Old Mull.

He was wagging a second bottle of the fine scotch in his hand as he shuffled into his uncle's third storey study an hour later. He snapped on the overhead light—a dim, amber lozenge hanging from a chain—and kept his back to the closet as he knelt down to collect the fallen folio pages.

Sparing use of the extract is recommended for a host of reasons including but not limited to: risk of exposure to & igniting the jealousy of greater authorities; risk of exposure to & exploitation by nefarious players; risk of exposure to & vengeance from the kingdom of the creature's origin; risk of losing sight of Christian propriety & becoming depraved with avarice & ill passions.

Leslie looked up at the small, dark window. In the reflection he could discern the open closet behind him as a warped rectangle framing his head. "Extract?"

He took a swig of scotch and turned the pages over, looking for something resembling an introduction or overview. Instead what he found were step by step instructions for gassing the creature with ether, grasping it with tongs, and shaking off a sprinkling of powder into a paper cone. The instructions mandated the use of rubber gloves and the donning of a gas masque. Everything was specified in neat tables: seconds, ounces, inches.

Leslie sneezed, and then drank. And then he did it.

He sweated as he did it. He worked hard to keep his hands steady and obedient as he rapped the tongs against the mouth of the cage's opening, the limp little body clasped between its tines quivering. Each oscillation left in its wake a few specks of twinkling, fine sand that danced like snowflakes as they swirled into the paper cone held beneath...

He didn't want to be around when it woke up again so he folded the paper cone according to his great-grandfather's diagram, stuffed everything into the manilla envelope and then locked the study door behind him.

It is essential to understand that the principle upon which the extract functions is a moral fulcrum with as its engine an algorithm to optimise the state of justice in a target object with the degree of resulting change measured in strict proportion to the quantity of application. In short: it makes things better.

"Better, eh?" said Leslie, swinging by the liquor cabinet to pick up another pick me up.

He lit a cigarette and wandered out the front door, kicking pebbles in the circular driveway. He sauntered over to the Taurus and examined the half-assed, slap-dash job Angus had done loading it up. The slightly broken china set now appeared to be more generously damaged. The grandfather clock had been strapped, uncovered, to the luggage rack with only a single bungee cord. "Jesus, Angus," muttered Leslie aloud.

With tipsy enthusiasm Leslie hopped on the rear bumper and hoisted himself up to the clock's level, reflected stars glinting in the cracked glass of its face. Suddenly, he had an idea.

He took out the paper cone, unfolded it, and tapped a few grains of the powder upon the grandfather clock.

The cigarette ran down to the filter and threatened to burn his fingers so Leslie hopped down off the Taurus' rear bumper and tossed it into the gravel. He shoved the paper cone into his pocket, took a haul of scotch, then tried to hop back up. Instead he barked his shin on the tow-hitch and spent a moment swearing with sacrilegious vigour.

When he quieted he was surprised to hear the crickets ticking.

He frowned. Crickets don't tick.

The grandfather clock struck eleven bells. The magnificent peals cut the night, reverberating dully against the car's metal roof and sending a chill slithering along

Leslie's back. Birds swept out of the nearest trees.

"Holy God," whispered Leslie. "It's better."

He went inside and ate a slice of cold pizza while staring at the wall, his sluggish, drunken mind feeling to him as if it were racing. He tried to read more pages of the folio but could not focus on the miniscule words. He turned instead to the problem of placing the contents of the folded paper cone in a housing more in line with the awe it now inspired.

Despite Leon's pointed prohibition against taking possession of non-specified items, Leslie decided the estate could spare a latched jar. There were a row them on the counter labelled in faded stencil: flour, salt, labeled, sugar. Leslie chose sugar. It wasn't exactly the Ark of the Covenant but it was more dignified than folded paper.

He snapped the latch closed on the sugar jar, then pushed it across the kitchen table and stared it down.

"I can make things *better*," he bumbled reverently, head lolling.

Leslie fell asleep, half spilled out of his chair, half splayed across the kitchen table. He dreamed of genies and lamps, miracles and Tinkerbell, blowjobs and Big Rock Candy Mountain.

He snored.

3.

Leslie awoke with a start.

The kitchen was sunny. The light made his eyes burn. He knuckled his sockets groggily and tried to move, discovering simultaneously several zones where his body was voicing rabid protests over his sleeping position. He groaned, aching.

Across the cracked kitchen table was the latched sugar jar.

As Leslie's brain sluggishly booted up memories of the previous evening's activities dribbled back into his consciousness and found their proper order: Old Mull, the grandfather clock, ether and extract, the tiny woman in the bird cage.

"Jesus Christ," murmured Leslie, his mouth dry and pasty.

He stood up and then paused a moment to let his bearings catch up to him. Stifling the urge to vomit, he looked out the wide, bay windows and was surprised to see Angus sitting out in the yard on a small rise under a sapling, a mug of coffee in the grass beside him.

Leslie checked his watch, then furrowed his brow. Angus up and about before noon?

He pondered that strange turn of events as he trudged up two sets of risers to the third storey. Uncle Weldon's private study was silent. Leslie cautiously opened the closet door and looked in, standing to one side to let the sunlight by.

The tiny woman lay on her side in the shredded newspaper, her miniature ribs rising and falling slowly with laboured breath. Her head rose slightly as she glanced at him, then let it drop feebly back down.

Leslie gasped. He'd forgotten the water!

He returned to the study moments later with a shallow soap dish from the upstairs washroom sloshing with tapwater. He hesitated at the closet's threshold. Was he supposed to gas the thing before he opened the cage door?

Ultimately driven by the creature's weak, pathetic respiration Leslie decided to broker no delay: he snapped open the little wire door and carefully manoeuvred the soap dish inside, placing it gingerly beside the tiny woman. She took note of it and then crawled to its edge and began immediately to drink.

Leslie stood back and watched. "There, there," he whispered. "Go on, get your fill little lady."

After drinking she sat back down in the newspaper nest and washed her face by licking her hands. Leslie thought he should refill the soap dish so he reached in the take it. Her head turned and her dark eyes flashed.

Leslie hesitated. "You don't want me to take it away, huh?"

In less than the blink of an eye she was attacking him, repeatedly biting into his fingers with savage zeal, tearing free slivers of flesh and raking at the wounds' edges with her sharp fingers.

Leslie howled and fought to pull out of the cage. He dashed his hand against the side of the cage, knocking her loose as the bars sang. He slapped the door shut with his good hand and then spilled backward out of the closet, landing on his haunches.

"Holy shit," he said raggedly, clutching his injured hand to his chest.

The tiny woman stared at him through the bars, black eyes narrowed, needle-like teeth bared over her blood-smeared chin.

Leslie kicked the closet door closed, then shambled to the washroom to run his hand under the tap. He sighed, leaning against the mirror and feeling out the extent of his headache. The basin turned pink. He withdrew his hand and examined the slices critically, then wrapped a towel around it.

Back in the kitchen he found his great-grandfather's folio pages folded roughly under the table. He snatched them up and smoothed out the top face with the heel of his good hand.

It is essential not to underestimate the creature. Given any opportunity it will murder you. There is no quantity or quality of compassion sufficient to mollify its malice even an iota. Make not the mistake of grieving for it, for doing so would surely be your final error.

Leslie snorted. "This is insane. If I can never let her go, who's the real captive?"

He decided that it was all too weird and dangerous for the likes of him. He would collect Angus and they would drive away from this house and Leslie would never let his thoughts stray to the caged woman again. Let some other fool die releasing it, or spend his life in fear of same.

The folio he would burn.

He decided not to wait. He folded the pages in half and strode into the drawing room, tossing them into the hearth and then hunting around for something to get the fire going: kindling, newspaper, cardboard, garbage. He returned to the kitchen to grab the Tim Horton's bags and the pizza box but was interrupted as Angus walked in from the yard, cradling his empty coffee mug with a faraway look in his eyes.

"Dad, you're up."

"Um, yes."

"Could we...do you think we could sit down and have a talk?" The boy swallowed awkwardly. "About yesterday?"

Leslie hovered. "I'm sort of in the middle of something here, Angus..."

"Why do you have a towel wrapped around your hand?"

"Um," said Leslie, looking around and blinking. He teased a chair out with his toe and then sat down heavily. "Yeah, sure. Let's talk. Sit down."

Angus took his mug to the sink and rinsed it, then sat down across from Leslie

and casually pushed the latched sugar jar out of the way. Leslie's eyes flicked to follow it. Angus sighed and played with his hands, looking at his lap. "The thing is..." he started quietly.

The boy was very serious. Leslie grew concerned. "What's on your mind, Ang? You shouldn't be too bent out of shape about yesterday. It was my fault. I'm...under a lot of stress. I should probably say I'm sorry for how things got crazy."

Angus shook his head. "No, Dad—I'm the one who's sorry."

"What do you mean?"

"If I look at just yesterday by itself then, yeah, right, maybe you look like the big asshole. But, you know, if I look at *everything*—like, how things have been for the last while and my trouble at school and stuff—if I look at everything all together it kind of looks like I'm the asshole."

Leslie bit his lip. "You're not an asshole, son—"

"No, I *am*," Angus replied quickly. "I'm not looking for sympathy here. It's just that I've been doing some thinking. I've been thinking about a lot of stuff, like about me and about you and Mom, and school and whatever." He looked up into Leslie's eyes, his own welling with earnest emotion. "I've been thinking about how I must seem to *you*, you know, if I look at from your point of view."

"How does it seem to you?"

"It seems stupid for somebody who's totally screwed up his own reputation to keep complaining about not having your trust," Angus said sadly, his expression open and frank. "I don't know why I never thought about it like that before, but it's true. How *could* you trust me? I've screwed up so much lately."

"Hey, everybody screws up. Especially when they're teenaged."

"Yeah, well, I guess it's time I stopped feeling sorry for myself about it. It's stupid. I mean, you're not psychic. You don't know what's in my head. You can only react to what I say and how I act, and the things I've said and shit I've done has been...so stupid."

"You're not stupid," insisted Leslie, his heart aching.

"I know you love me," replied Angus, surprising Leslie with his unflinching candor. "And I love you too, Dad. And I want you to know something: I'm going to show you what kind of a person I can really be. I don't expect you to believe my promises—I'm just telling you that things are going to change with me, and I want you to pay attention. Watch for it. And one day I'll earn your trust back, I totally swear."

Leslie got up, walked around the table, and embraced his son tightly. He tried not to cry because he thought it would embarrass them boy. "You're a good kid, Ang. You've always been a good kid. And I have faith in you. And...and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for telling me how you're feeling about all this, okay?"

"Yeah," said Angus. His nose was running.

Leslie straightened and wiped his eyes. "Now let's get our stuff into the car and get the hell home, huh? What do you say?"

"Alright, Dad."

When Angus left the kitchen Leslie turned his attention to clearing up the mess they had made, his heart feeling buoyant for the first time in a long, long stretch. He'd been telling Margaret for months that one day Angus would "just get it" and grow up a notch; she'd argued that was just Leslie's rationalization for piss-poor parenting and yet and here he was, vindicated.

His feeling of vindication faltered as he arrived at the kitchen sink and noticed Angus' mug, courteously rinsed out and placed on a paper napkin to dry.

Beside the sink lay the crumpled paper bag filled with road-side condiments in plastic or paper sleeves: ketchup, salt, vinegar, pepper. The fact that they had forgotten to grab some sugar had forced Angus to refuse coffee yesterday morning.

Leslie looked slowly from the mug to the bag of instant coffee on the counter to the latched sugar jar sitting on the corner of the table. He paled, realizing what had happened in a dizzying flash.

Angus was *better*.

Leslie sat down again and smoked a cigarette, deeply conflicted. Was his son now somehow brainwashed to act better, or had some better thing truly happened inside of him? Was it his son talking, or the powder? Had Leslie just *drugged* his only child?

But it wasn't a drug, was it? Grandfather clocks didn't get high. Narcotics didn't make things *better*.

Leslie rushed out to the Taurus and hopped up on the rear bumper to take a good look at the grandfather clock. It remained repaired. Against all reason it continued to tick despite the nearly flat angle of its pendulum. It looked brand new, but it was the same clock—cleaner, highly functional, unscuffed—but basically itself.

He jumped down and brushed his hands on his slacks. Angus came out of the house with his knapsack and tossed it in the back seat. "You feeling okay, Ang?" asked Leslie.

"Yeah, actually," Angus replied, closing the car door. "I feel pretty good today, Dad. Why?"

"No reason. Just let me know if you start to feel any different, okay?"

"How come?"

"Um, that pizza seems to be backfiring on me a bit. I'm worried some of the meat may have been off."

"Honestly Dad, I feel great."

"Okay."

Twenty minutes later, as they were about to leave, Leslie ran upstairs and returned with a bird cage covered in a black velvet drape, a rattling and clinking cardboard box under his arm. He carefully sandwiched the cage between a box of family albums and a dresser in the trunk, wedging it firm with the box. Angus hopped down from retying the grandfather clock. "What's that?" he asked.

"Antique bird cage," said Leslie quickly. "Is that clock good to go now?"

Angus nodded, tugging on the bungee. "It isn't going anywhere except wherever we drive."

"Good job."

They hit the road. Leslie invited Angus to plug his music player into the dashboard and together they rocked to the earsplitting strains of some awful, angry band. Uncle Weldon's decaying estate disappeared behind them. After lunch they switched spots and Angus drove the car under his father's watchful eye, sweating as he concentrated on keeping centred in the lane. "Watch your speed there," warned Leslie.

Angus checked the speedometer and eased off the gas. "Sorry."

"No need to be sorry. You're doing fine. You're doing *great*."

The teenager smiled. Leslie smiled, too. He hadn't felt so at ease with his son since before the boy hit puberty.

Come down they switched spots again, and after a cheeseburger dinner Angus fell asleep in the passenger seat. Leslie allowed himself to tenderly touch his son's cheek, and the pliant, smooth warmth made tears come to his eyes. With all the tension

he hadn't realized just how much he *missed* Angus.

He considered calling Margaret but he'd forgotten to charge his telephone. He couldn't even get the screen to light up.

When he shifted against his seatbelt he heard his great-grandfather's folio crinkle in his jacket pocket. He yearned to read more, but knew he would get no opportunity until they reached the city again. He wanted to know everything there was to know about his pet and her wondrous extract. He burned to know how he could make more things better.

The glow of Halifax grew on the dark horizon. Leslie couldn't help but whistle a jolly tune.

4.

Leslie sent his son to bed and bent to unpacking the contents of the car into his garage. "Do you want some help?" asked the boy groggily, stretching.

"Nah," said Leslie. "You've got school tomorrow. Go on to bed. Thanks, though."

Angus waved vaguely and shuffled into the house.

Leslie surprised himself by failing to break the grandfather clock as he hefted it down over the hood and eased it upright by the front bumper. He ran his hand over the ornate curlicues carved into the mahogany—mahogany that had before last night been pitted and scraped, nicked and sun-bleached. Now the clock looked as pristine as it must have on the day it was built.

It struck twelve bells magnificently. Leslie grinned.

"Lord Jesus," said Margaret, standing in the doorway. "What's all *this*, then?"

"It's a grandfather clock," said Leslie.

"I'm not blind."

"It's quite lovely, don't you think?"

"It's junk. With a house this small do you imagine I'd welcome more crap to stuff in? Honest, Les, *honest* to Jesus you're a mess of a man." Margaret wrinkled her nose. "Is that it, then? That's our grand inheritance?"

"Um, there's more."

Leslie watched mutely as his wife—whom had once been tall and willowy but was now fused by aerobic tension into a hard streamline—strode across the garage and haughtily retied her robe before swinging up the Taurus' tailgate and casting a critical eye on the contents. She shook her head and turned to him, frowning. "Well, garbage day is Wednesday. See that it all gets out."

"It's not all garbage," he protested. "If we wanted to I bet we could get quite a price for the clock."

"I won't hold my breath," she muttered, poking back into the car. "What else did you drag home? A musty painting of some trollop?"

"That's Aunt Diana."

"She's not your real aunt."

"True."

"Garbage." She reached in and sighed with exasperation as she pulled out a sheaf of family albums. She flipped through one quickly. "Photos of the dead. Great. Where were you planning on keeping these?"

"In the laundry room?"

She dumped the box of albums on the garage floor. "There's no space. And what's this? A bird cage? Jesus Les, we don't have a bird—and we're not getting one,

either. You'd better disabuse yourself of the notion of our putting up any pets in this house, and fast."

Margaret hauled out the cage and tossed it carelessly into the corner. "Hey!" yelled Leslie indignantly. "Careful with that, you idiot!"

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't you start calling me names, Leslie Carstairs. Have you been drinking again? Let me smell your breath."

Leslie pushed past his wife roughly and knelt down next to the cage, righting it gingerly and tugging the velvet drape back into place. "You could have broken this," he said quietly.

"Watch me lose sleep over a broken piece of trash," she snapped. "I shouldn't have let you go. I should've gone myself, obviously. You're hopeless, Les."

Leslie straightened, his face colouring. "Just cut that crap out!" he shouted, startled by the intensity of his anger. He fought to keep his clenched fists at his sides. "I'm not your goddamn *child*, Margaret. I'm a grown man. It wasn't up to you to decide, and it still isn't. We live in this house together and if I want to find a place for this clock, I fucking well will do so."

"Such language, Les! The last refuge of a poor argument."

"You want to see a last refuge?" he challenged, leaning in close to her face. "*Bigger off*. Do you hear me? There's *your* marching orders. Leave me the hell *alone*, shrew."

She hardened her pose, looking down as she retied her robe tighter again. "Barking orders at me will only get you the opposite, I'm afraid."

Leslie chuckled darkly. "So you're going to stand in the middle of the garage all night just because I told you to leave? That's pretty unbelievably bloody childish, Margaret."

"No," she simpered with simulated sweetness, "calling me names and swearing to defend your pile of trash is childish, Les."

Leslie regarded her fixedly for a long moment, neither of them moving. Then he broke the contest and rummaged in the back of the Taurus until he found one of the bottles of Old Mull he'd elected to take away. "Well, I'll drink to that. To childhood regained!" He unscrewed the cap and took a messy swig, scotch dripping from his chin.

"You're a pig," said Margaret.

Possessed of a sudden inspiration, Leslie fished out the sugar jar, surged forward as he unlatched it, and then upended it over her head. Margaret stumbled backward, coughing and confused.

Leslie stood his ground, hands on his hips, licking the taste of scotch off his lips.

Margaret brushed the sparkling dust out of her black hair, frowning at it as it glistened on her palms. She opened her mouth to speak but then closed it again, a thoughtful veil pulled over her eyes. She sat down on the cement floor, her brow furrowing.

"Feeling any better?" challenged Leslie.

She looked up at him, her face as open as a child's, her grey irises shining in a way he'd forgotten. "Leslie Donovan Carstairs..." she said slowly, carefully.

"Yes?"

"...I'm leaving you."

Leslie was startled. "What?"

Margaret got to her feet again, a little smile blooming on her thin lips. "I'm leaving you, Les. I really am. God, I've been thinking about it and thinking about it for

so many years—and now I'm really going to do it. I don't know why I didn't do it earlier. It's so clear to me now. I'm leaving you. I'm leaving you tonight."

Leslie blinked, paralyzed. "What?" he said again.

His wife nodded to herself, rubbing her chin. "I'll go to my sister's. I'll pick up Angus after school tomorrow. Have him pack a bag. Lord Jesus, this always seemed like such an *ordeal* to me before, but now I realize all I needed was a plan."

"Plan?" Leslie stammered.

She looked him in the eye steadily, her expression thoughtful. "There's a parent-teacher conference with Angus' home-form teacher tomorrow at eight o'clock. You can take care of that for us. Room four-eleven. Don't be late. They already think we're rotten parents as it is."

Leslie said nothing. He just stared.

"I'm sorry, Les, I really am. I've had nothing but piss and vinegar for you for so long after so many years of taking your crap. That's over now. Let's be adults about this. Promise me you'll make it to the conference. It's important. It's for Angus."

"I...promise..." said Leslie, his mouth dry.

She smiled wanly, reached out and touched his cheek with tenderness. "You used to be a good man," she told him, then turned on heel and left the garage.

Leslie sat down heavily on the rear bumper and drank generously from the bottle of Old Mull. He patted down his pockets until he found the cigarettes and lit one up. Finally, he slipped his great-grandfather's folio out and unfolded the pages, rifling through them to find something to make some sense of what had just happened.

The extract is not capable of granting wishes or realizing fantasies. It must be understood that the effect is to improve the target however such improvements may not necessarily be aligned with one's desires. For example were one to affect a thief with the extract he would be more likely to confess his crimes to the proper authorities than to become more adept in his immoral craft.

"So how is it morally better for my wife to leave me?" he asked aloud, frustrated. He took a hard haul off the cigarette and chased it with scotch. "Damn," he added absently.

This principle is the basis of the prime & paramount interdiction with regard to the extract: that self-administration is forbidden. Should one err in this respect the repercussion is a sentence of death for one would find oneself compelled to immediately undo the greatest injustice one in such a condition must inevitably carry which is aught else but the imprisonment of the creature itself.

"Damn damn," breathed Leslie, looking up. "If I take the powder myself I let the thing go and it kills me. Terrific."

He thought about closing the garage door and running the engine and going to sleep forever. He drank instead. He heard the screen door slam; Margaret left in yellow taxicab. The only thing that kept him pegged to Earth was the knowledge that Angus was asleep inside the house. The only thing that gave him hope was the damned powder.

Recklessly, tipsily, he found himself unwilling to face another bad news parent-teacher conference without arming himself with the extract. It would cut his way! He lurched off the bumper and set to preparing the dosage of ether, snapping on his rubber

gloves.

He peeked under the velvet. The tiny woman watched him with black eyes, quivering slightly, hugging her own thin shoulders. "I'm sorry about this," mumbled Leslie. Then he gassed her. He heard her body drop into the bed of shredded newspaper.

He tried not to watch while she flopped around like a doll in the tongs, but he had to or he lost too much powder outside the paper cone. A number of grains landed on his rubber glove, which became increasingly comfortable and faintly strawberry scented.

A moment later he was peeling off his gas masque and transferring the contents of the paper cone into the sugar jar, latching it firmly. The jar had become both lighter and stronger than it used to be, and it now gleamed as if constantly polished. By constant exposure to the extract it had become a more worthy vessel.

Leslie cackled to himself, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "I have a feeling things at Angus' school are about to get...better," he told the grandfather clock.

It struck one.

The tiny woman in the cage stirred. She blinked and lifted her head, the shredded newspaper crackling. One wing twitched. Leslie raised the bottle of Old Mull in salute and polished off its contents.

"Here's to you, little lady," he grunted. "Here's to a better life."

He staggered off to bed.

5.

"Mr. Carstairs?"

Leslie stepped into the classroom. It smelled like disinfectant. A young but very severe woman sat behind a much-abused wooden desk, her hands folded on a blotter that only half-covered the gouged graffito *MR. ROSS IS A GOAT-FUCKER*. The teacher's nearly colourless hair was pulled into a bun so tight it seemed to stretch the edges of her pale, unpainted face. "I'm sorry I'm late," said Leslie. "Miss..."

"Groverston. Sit down, Mr. Carstairs. You'll understand if we have to rush—class begins in twenty minutes."

"I'm sorry," he mumbled again, pulling up an orange plastic chair and sinking into it. He rubbed his throbbing temples ruefully.

Miss Groverston levelled a steely stare at Leslie, making him feel as if he were back in school himself. He squirmed in the uncomfortable chair. She said, "You are aware, I hope, that this is not the first incident involving Angus this term."

"Yes," agreed Leslie. "He's been going through a lot, lately. You know—teenage stuff. But I have to tell you that Angus and I just spent the weekend together and we had some very good chats. He's made some breakthroughs and I think you're going to notice a big improvement in him."

Miss Groverston smiled without humour. "Indeed. While that remains to be seen we are still obliged to respond to the incidents that have already happened. That is why you are here today."

"Sure."

"Are you aware, Mr. Carstairs, that Angus has amassed to date zero marks for homework completion?"

"Zero?"

"Zero."

"That's not too good."

"No, Mr. Carstairs, it is not. In fact, that alone is enough to jeopardize his year. When I questioned Angus about his performance he told me what did or did not happen in his own home was not my affair."

"I see."

"I directed him to discuss the matter with our vice-principal, Mr. Watson, but Mr. Watson tells me that Angus did not make his appointment on Friday afternoon."

"Oh," said Leslie, "well, actually, he had to leave early because we were driving out to my uncle's house. You see, he recently passed away and—"

"Indeed, Angus did tell me he *could not* stay, and I informed him that his school commitments must come first lest he risk fouling his academic career."

Leslie frowned. "You told a teenager he was fouling his academic career by seeing to his family commitments? What kind of response did you expect to that?"

"His comments were disrespectful."

"That's what *I'd* expect."

She pursed her lips in another humourless smirk. "I can see that you too are having difficulty appreciating the severity of your son's situation, Mr. Carstairs."

Leslie shook his head and wiped his bandaged hand down his face. "You're asking a kid to choose between getting in trouble at school or getting in trouble at home, and you expect him to smile and toe the line? With all due respect, Miss Groverston, that's ridiculous."

Her icy eyes flashed. "The other students do not seem to be sharing Angus' difficulty in maintaining an appropriate level of respect."

"Well, like I said, Angus has been doing a lot of thinking. I don't think you'll have this kind of a problem with him in the future. Really. He's changed."

"Be that as it may, we still have to deal with this incident."

Leslie was becoming impatient. "We're running in circles here. What is it exactly you propose, Miss Groverston?" he snapped.

"At this juncture I am recommending expulsion," she replied coolly.

"Expulsion?"

She nodded primly. "I frankly see no alternative."

"If you don't see any alternative, what exactly are we supposed to be *discussing?*"

"I am obliged by board policy to solicit your feedback."

"You want feedback?" Leslie stood up from his chair and paced a quick loop in front of the desk. "Here's my feedback: you've got a bright, sociable kid who's been having some problems lately; a concerned parent comes in and tells you the kid has just turned a major corner in his maturity, and that things will be different from now on; and the *best* you can up with—at this *juncture*—is to kick him out of school?"

Miss Groverston said nothing, her lizard eyes locked on Leslie's face expectantly.

"Go to Hell, lady," he concluded lamely. "That's my feedback. If this is the level of understanding you bring to bear on my son's education I'd just as soon he go somewhere else than suffer under your thumb."

She raised one eyebrow. "Many institutions will not accept students who have been expelled. You may have to consider private school." She stood up abruptly, her shoes clicking on the linoleum. "I wish you the best of luck in this matter, Mr. Carstairs. Now I would thank you to leave."

"I'll leave when I'm done saying my piece."

“Do not force me to call the police, Mr. Carstairs.”

“The police?” he echoed incredulously. “You drag me down here so you can preen over your decision to kick my son out of school, and now you’re threatening to call the cops when I have something to say about it?”

“This conference is over, Mr. Carstairs.”

“Lady, you’ve got to be the *worst* teacher in all of Nova Scotia.”

“This is your final warning, Mr. Carstairs,” she said crispy, her hand hovering over the ancient, flesh-coloured telephone on the corner of her desk.

Leslie reached down and picked up his briefcase, then unzipped the top and pulled out the sugar jar. He slammed it on the desk, making the officious marm jump. “Know what this is?” he asked softly.

She shook her head, frowning. “Mr. Carstairs—”

“It’s sugar and spice,” he told her, opening the lid and hefting the jar from one hand to the other. “And everything nice.”

He launched the entire quantity of powder directly at her face—everything he had extracted from the limp little animal the night before. Miss Groverston threw up her arms in alarm and fell backward off her chair with a plaintive yelp. Leslie stood at the edge of the desk, watching her turn over and brush the sparkling residue from her face. “I’m calling the police,” she said through clenched teeth. “You’re some kind of maniac.”

Leslie said nothing. He simply latched the jar closed and replaced it inside his briefcase, zipping the top with a flourish.

Miss Groverston watched him carefully like a cornered animal as she picked herself up and started reaching for the handset. “I’m warning you...” she said, flinching every time he shifted his weight.

Leslie cleared his throat.

Her hand hesitated, barely brushing the receiver. She took a step back and touched her forehead, blinking.

“Miss Groverston,” said Leslie liltily, “are you feeling quite alright?”

She smiled uncertainly. “Yes...” she said after a moment. She let her hand fall from her forehead, lightly skimming her cheek and neck and finally settling on her sweater between her breasts. “Yes, I’m feeling...very good,” she admitted.

Leslie swallowed and then moved forward impulsively. “Why don’t you let me take you out for a coffee? We can talk things over, see if we can’t reach an understanding about this whole situation.”

She licked her lips. “Why did you...throw sugar at me?”

“I’m sorry, I lost my temper.”

“Yes...yes I can understand that. I suppose I have taken rather a hard line with your boy, haven’t I?”

“A bit, perhaps.”

Miss Groverston smiled warmly, her blue eyes vivid. “I really should apologize. It can be so stressful sometimes, dealing with each student’s unique situation. I suppose it can be easy to lose perspective.”

“Naturally. It isn’t an easy job.”

“I’m so glad you can appreciate that, Mr. Carstairs.”

“Please, call me Leslie.”

She giggled. “Leslie’s a nice name.”

“Thank you. About that coffee...?”

“I have a class to teach.”

"Of course. Don't let me take up any more of your time. Thank you, Miss Groverston."

"Karen."

"Karen," echoed Leslie, grinning. "That's a nice piece," he added, pointing to the polished and immaculate surface of the exquisite wooden finish on her desk. Whether or not Mr. Ross was a goat-fucker was now a mystery left for the ages. "We'll talk again," Leslie promised, heading for the door.

"Wait," called Karen Groverston, holding up a hand. "Let me just arrange for a supply. It won't take a minute. I'll say I'm sick."

"Great," said Leslie.

While Karen bent over her handset Leslie fumbled out his own telephone and called the office, telling them he would be getting back to the city a day later than anticipated. "Death in the family, lots of stuff to take care of, you know how it is," he said to the human resources manager, telling her how it was. "Tell everybody I'll see them bright and early tomorrow, mkay?"

Karen glanced at the clock. "Ready?"

"Ready."

Leslie drove the Taurus fast, barrelling into the parking lot of the nearest Tim Horton's. Karen laughed. "You're a bit wild," she told him not unkindly.

"Sometimes life calls for a little bit of wild," he opined. He got out of the car and walked around to open the passenger door for her, his eyes lingering over just a hint of nicely shaped leg showing at the bottom of Karen's long skirt and she stood up. "Wouldn't you agree? A little bit of wild makes you feel alive."

"I *do* feel alive," she agreed, taking his arm. "I've never done anything like this before."

"What? Cut work?"

She blushed. "Never."

"Does it feel good?"

She grinned. "Yes, it really, really does."

"I knew there was a woman inside there, yearning to bust out."

"I'm a very contained person."

"Not today."

They walked right past Tim Horton's and Leslie steered them into the pub next door. Karen didn't object. They found a cozy booth near the back and ordered a couple of glasses of wine. "I'm not normally much of a drinker," Karen told him earnestly, "especially during the day."

"It's okay to let loose sometimes. It's good for the soul."

She nodded and then reached up to her bun and let her blonde hair fall around her shoulders, shaking her head to fan it out. Leslie's breath hitched in his throat upon recognizing just how ravishing she truly was. "That's better," she said.

"Yes."

She sipped her wine. "I never wear my hair down. I don't know why."

"Because it frightens you to be perceived as a sensual creature," replied Leslie lightly, watching her.

She met his eyes, nodding slowly. "That's...probably true. How did you get inside my head, Leslie?"

"Just chemistry, I guess."

"Can I ask what you do for a living?"

"Sure. I do nothing at all. I go to meetings and play Solitaire in my office."

"Is that rewarding?"

"No. But I'm thinking of quitting. Is it rewarding to teach?"

She shrugged. "If you had asked me that yesterday I'd have said yes."

"Not now?"

"I think I just like to be in control. Like my father. He's a pastor. He works his congregation like a puppeteer, extorting them to fear to make himself feel important."

"Is that how you see yourself?"

"Maybe," she admitted. "I can't believe I did this. It's highly inappropriate for me to socialize with a parent. Frankly, it feels inappropriate to socialize at all."

"You're a solitary person."

"I am," she said, nodding. "I'm very focused on my career." She paused, looking into the space over Leslie's head. "Perhaps for the wrong reasons." She blinked and smiled nervously. "I don't even know why I'm telling you this."

"Because it feels good to let it out."

"You're right again. You're an insightful man, Leslie."

He snorted. "I'm a moron. But I'm a good listener."

"Why do you carry sugar in your briefcase?"

"It's a long story."

"I feel very at ease with you."

"It sounds like you've been ill at ease for a long time, Karen."

They ordered another round of drinks. Karen unbuttoned the top of her sweater, exposing a creamy white breastbone bridged by the grey strap of a heavy brassiere, crossed by a golden crucifix. "This should make it a little easier to breathe."

Leslie nodded. "It's stuffy in here."

"Can I confess something to you?" she asked, chin resting in her palm carelessly as she twirled the end of her hair with the other hand.

"Anything."

Karen looked down at the table, chewed the inside of her cheek. "I've spent my whole life fighting against my...feelings. I've spent my whole life making everything fit into a little box, being more serious than anyone else, keeping my nose to the grindstone, suppressing my appetites. I always felt so wrong for even having those appetites."

"What appetites?"

"To be close."

"That's natural."

She blushed and dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Leslie, I'm a virgin. Can you believe that? Twenty-six years old and I'm still a virgin. I preferred to be a virgin rather than...give in."

"Finding balance is hard," said Leslie philosophically.

She took another sip of her wine, licked her lips again. "I feel like telling the truth today."

"So tell me the truth, Karen."

"I feel a connection with you."

"What kind of a connection?"

She looked away. "I feel stupid. Maybe I'm drunk. I never drink."

"Don't feel stupid. Tell me what you're thinking, Karen."

"I want to touch you."

"To touch me?"

She sighed, and grasped his hands across the table. He could feel her heart

beating through her moist palms. "I don't want to be locked up inside myself anymore, Leslie. I want you to help me. I want you to want me."

Leslie blinked, then waved his arm in the air and called out, "Cheque please!"

Her apartment was small and neat, like a display at Ikea. With regard to decor she favoured a cat motif. Her bed was edged in frill and lace like a grandmother's, a looming portrait of a nailed up Christ haunting the space over the headboard. Leslie tried not to look at it as he thrust himself against Karen's lithe pelvis, a sheen of sweat glistening on his brow.

She didn't climax, but she came close. Leslie apologized.

"Are you okay?" he asked, panting.

"Yes."

"I don't think you bled much. Do you hurt?"

"No. It doesn't really hurt. I've...been touched there before. I bled then." She sat up in bed, pulling the frilly comforter up to her neck. "I guess that makes me a fake virgin, doesn't it?"

"Not if you haven't made love before."

"He used his fingers," she whispered, then added, "My father, that is."

Leslie gulped. "Your father the pastor?"

"He's a good man, really," she said, looking out the window. "But he was sometimes tempted, and he wasn't always strong."

"Jesus Christ, Karen. I'm so sorry."

She held her arms across her chest, hugging the comforter to her. Leslie frowned and touched her forearm gently, tracing the edges of a series of fine scars arrayed in ridged, purple sets over her skin. She brushed his hand away. "I don't do that anymore," she told him.

"Don't do what?"

"Cut myself. I found other ways to feel proper."

Leslie moved across the bed carefully and put his arms around her. She hesitated, then let her head droop on his shoulder. "You don't need to feel that way anymore," he said softly into her ear. Karen cried. Leslie held her tight while the sobs wracked her frame. His heart ached. "You're free now," he told her.

She fell asleep. Leslie slipped out from her embrace and went to the kitchen. He picked his pants up from the floor and found the DuMauriers. He couldn't find his matches so he lit it off the stove, the gas igniter clicking.

It only took him a haul or two to decide the cigarette made him feel worse, not better. He stabbed it out, crumpled the box, and tossed the whole pile into the trash. A man of his luck and power didn't need that kind of crutch.

He had transformed a marm into a vixen by introducing the powder that undid the bonds her father had tied around her soul decades ago. He could see the good in it, unrepentant carnality aside. He figured he was finally getting a grasp on how the powder operated.

As its agent he was a dispenser of justice. He made things better, for himself and for others.

Leslie decided his inheritance was truly a blessing.

6.

On Tuesday morning Leslie drove to the office. Instead of taking his usual nip of drink he threw the tin flask out the car window as he turned into the parking lot, hearing it clang on the asphalt behind him.

In the elevator he caught himself humming.

He was early. The place was nearly abandoned. He nodded in a friendly way to the girls in the secretarial pool as he slipped into the kitchen. He made straight for the coffee machine as he pulled on his rubber gloves. He opened the tin of grounds, dumped a load of extract into it, and then mixed it thoroughly before putting on the day's first pot to brew.

The coffee machine began to chortle.

He went into his office and sat down, opening the lower drawer and withdrawing his emergency stash of booze. He dumped it in the garbage can, the bottles clinking. "It's a better world now," he told the bottles. "I don't need you anymore."

While he waited for his computer to boot he took his great-grandfather's folio out of his briefcase.

Predicting the effect of the extract presents an incalculable challenge as unintended consequences can be generated from the most seemingly innocent situation. A specific caution is called for with respect to commercial enterprises as their connections can be far-flung & difficult to foresee. By way of example I once treated my favourite handkerchief with the intention of restoring its original lustre & softness only to have it unravel into thread in my hands. Subsequent investigation revealed that the factory in which the product was woven had been a bastion of brutal forced labour by children until it burned to the ground on the same date that I treated my cloth.

Leslie sniffed. Did he smell smoke? He decided it was his imagination.

Mitchell Green wandered by, leaning in the doorway of Leslie's office as he usually did, making his social rounds and telling off-colour jokes between brief bouts of returning to his own office to browse pornography. "Morning, Les. What's shaking?"

"Morning, Mitchell. Nothing much."

Mitchell pestered him about a bunch of melodramatic television shows Leslie didn't follow. "I can't believe you don't watch *Sopranos*," said Mitchell, cradling his coffee mug. "It's totally excellent. But *Lost* is good, too."

"I only get the low channels," shrugged Leslie apologetically.

Mitchell got bored and wandered away to bother somebody else about television. Leslie wondered for perhaps the hundredth time why nobody ever seemed to notice that Mitchell hadn't done an ounce of work for years. He was a professional coffee drinker and Web surfer, paid to disrupt others.

On his way to the morning meeting Ranjana from reception asked Leslie if he wanted a coffee. "No thank you," he said.

The meeting began predictably enough: a run down of current initiatives with brief status quacks from whomever was perceived as being on point. People mumbled over their coffees, eyes on the agenda. Time seemed to come a stop. Leslie burned to have a drink but fought down the urge.

"Everything on track with the budget review, Carstairs?" asked his boss, Mr. Feldman.

"Yes, we're in good shape," replied Leslie. "I have accounting sourcing those third quarter numbers now."

The meeting moved on. Leslie glanced at his watch. When he looked up again he noticed that Mr. Feldman was having a difficult time focusing his attention. Though he'd just asked a question of the vice-president to his right he was now searching the left end of the table distantly, his lips twitching slightly. The vice-presidential mumbling

ran down and gradually all eyes turned to Mr. Feldman.

Mr. Feldman played with his pen idly for a moment, then looked up and flashed everyone a disarming smile.

"There's something I'd like to share with you all at this time," he pronounced carefully, putting aside the pen and folding his hands on the table before him. "The fact of the matter is that I have been personally embezzling tens of thousands of dollars from this company each month for the past fourteen months."

Sharon from marketing began to emit a friendly chuckle of joke appreciation but cut it off as she saw the hurt look in the Mr. Feldman's eyes.

"I'm serious. I feel really badly about it," said Mr. Feldman. "I am crippling this company financially in order to feed my cocaine habit. Also, I bought sportscars for both my mistresses." He coughed awkwardly. "And last week I groped Bernice Chisholm's breast and told her that if she ever told anybody about it she'd be fired."

All eyes turned to Bernice. She nodded mutely. Someone gasped.

"We really appreciate your candour, sir," said Leslie encouragingly.

Chad from IT nodded, his jowls quivering. "Last spring I stole a DVD player from the AV room and took it home for my kid. And...I want to pay the company back. Can someone source a cost on that for me?"

Sharon wrung her hands. "I drive around parks at night looking for people having sex in cars and then call the police and report them for incident exposure."

Ranjana topped up everyone's coffees and then stood at mid-table, holding the pot and looking around with a pained, nervous expression. Finally she said, "I think I'm gay."

"Super," said Leslie. "More power to you, Ranjana."

"Right on, sister," said Sharon.

"That's hot," said Mr. Feldman.

Leslie met Karen for lunch at the Seahorse. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a loose T-shirt, which she showcased for him by spinning on the spot like a runway model. "What do you think? I feel like one of my students," she said.

"Carefree and gorgeous," said Leslie.

She leaned in close and whispered, "I'm not even wearing a bra!"

"You're out of control," joked Leslie.

"I do feel a little all over the place," she admitted.

"I'm kidding. You look great. What are you going to eat?"

"Poutine."

"You're crazy. That stuff'll kill you."

"Maybe," she agreed with a toothy grin.

The food arrived in a haze of steam. Karen dug in with relish. Leslie smiled as he watched her, swirling the end of his beer around in the glass before draining it. "How's school?"

"Easier. I hadn't realized what an atmosphere of confrontation I was fostering by trying to keep them all hemmed in close to the line. We had a class discussion about the war that was really amazing—even the quiet ones had something to say once they realized I wasn't going to bite their heads off for saying the wrong thing, or saying it the wrong way."

Leslie couldn't help but ask after Angus. "Did you notice a change in him?"

"I sure did," she told him, nodding over a stringy forkful of poutine. "He told me he's thinking about running for council president next year. Wouldn't that be great for him?"

"I'm stunned. I'm pleased."

She put down her fork and looked at him levelly over the table, biting her lip playfully. "Can I ask you something, Leslie?"

"You can ask me anything."

"Do you promise not to laugh?"

"Yes."

"Do you promise to tell the truth?"

"I do."

She raised her brow and leaned in closer. "Did you drug me?"

"What?"

"You heard what I said."

"Why would I drug you?"

"That isn't an answer."

"Do you mean like a date-rape drug or something?"

"Yes, no—I don't know."

"Karen, Karen..."

"I'm being serious. Think about it, Leslie. For years I've been coping with...my problems—in my own ways. Maybe they weren't great ways but they were my ways. And then suddenly I meet you and I feel it all fall away, like a suit of armour collapsing at my feet. But instead of feeling vulnerable I feel tall. Instead of feeling naked I feel strong." She smiled resignedly and sat back in her seat. "Maybe you're right, maybe it's chemistry. Maybe I've been waiting a long time for somebody like you to come along. But...well—don't take this the wrong way..."

"I couldn't take anything you say the wrong way."

"...Well, you're nothing that *special*, Leslie. Don't misunderstand: I think you're a great guy; I think you're attractive; I think you're smart, and sensitive and funny. But you're just some guy. Do you know what I mean? Why do I feel this *connection* with you?"

"I don't know," claimed Leslie.

She chuckled, shaking her head. "As stupid it might sound, I keep coming back to our conference yesterday when you threw sugar in my face. Maybe it makes me sound paranoid, but I can't stop wondering about it. It was right after that...that's when—I opened."

"Maybe somebody should've thrown sugar at you a long time ago."

"You think it would've helped?"

"How did it make you feel?"

"Humiliated, angry, shocked, confused..."

"You see? You needed to be snapped out of your scaffolding of dignity. You needed to have someone freak out on you—someone you couldn't dismiss or punish. A wake up call."

She considered this and ate a gravy-soaked chip. "Maybe," she said, chewing. "Still, why *did* you have sugar in your briefcase?"

"They only have brown sugar at the office. I prefer white."

"That isn't a long story."

"No, it isn't."

"You said it was a long story."

"I guess I was using long as a euphemism for dull."

Karen laughed. "I think my life up until this week felt both long *and* dull."

"You're the furthest thing from dull, Karen."

"You're buttering me up."

"Are we still telling the truth? Yes. Yes, I am buttering you up. I'm hoping a girl as fantastic as you doesn't come to her senses and leave an aging dolt like me in the dust. Because if I don't get to touch you again I may go crazy."

"That's a lot of butter."

"Dairy is an important food group."

"Are you coming over tonight?"

"I sure hope so. Are you inviting me?"

"Yes."

They kissed. Back at the office Leslie tossed his overcoat in the corner and sank into his chair, eyelids heavy from the beer. He slapped the spacebar on his keyboard until the screen lit up, then grumbled when he found he was unable to open a connection to the central server. He called Chad's extension but got only voicemail.

Mitchell passed by in the corridor. "Hey, Mitchell!" called Leslie.

"What's up?" asked Mitchell, sticking his head in the door.

"Do you have any idea if Chad's around?"

"Chad quit."

"Chad *quit*? Why?"

Mitchell shrugged. "I don't know. He said something about going to Africa to help build infrastructure for impoverished communities."

"What?"

"Listen Leslie, I've love to hang around and talk about this but my schedule's just choc-a-bloc this afternoon. I have to run to legal."

"Oh—er, don't let me hold you up, Mitchell."

Leslie shook his head wonderingly as Mitchell jogged off with purpose, calling for someone up ahead to hold the elevator for him. Leslie had never seen Mitchell move so fast.

What incredible potency of influence must it take to so thoroughly blind one whom the extract has affected that they will blithely sail through the transition of personality without substantive remark? As far as I have been able to discover there is no charm or agency of bemusement at work beyond the amazing but familiar powers of self-delusion possessed by all men.

Leslie wondered if Mitchell's wife would find the revision in his character as smooth to swallow as Mitchell had. He wondered what Mr. Feldman would tell Mrs. Feldman. He had no doubt that many of his colleagues would be having interesting encounters with their spouses tonight.

Nothing can be rationalized with fainter strain than a change in oneself. To each of us it is obvious that a better man lies just beneath the surface & very nearly realized; to each of us it is easy to defend a better version of ourselves as inevitable & authentic.

That passage left Leslie with a strange, bitter taste in his gullet. Was there *not* a better version of himself lying in wait beneath his foibles? Was it possible without self-administering the extract to find out?

He jumped as someone rapped on the open door. He looked up and furrowed his brow. "Angus?"

"Hi, Dad. Can I talk to you for a sec?"

“Um, of course—come in, come in.”

Angus closed the door and took one of the grey, sorry-looking chairs across from Leslie’s messy desk. He let his knapsack slide to the floor and launched into his piece immediately: “Mom didn’t send me,” he said, “but this is about Mom.”

Leslie swallowed. “There’s a little fridge full of pops over there. Do you want a can of pop?”

Angus shook his head, then tucked his hair behind his ears and looked Leslie in the eye. “Dad, I think you probably only have a short time to fix all this easily. After that it’s just going to get harder and harder. Or impossible, I guess.”

“Did your mother tell you to tell me this?”

“You’re not listening, Dad. What I’m saying is that you have to decide sometime in the next day or so whether your marriage is something you’re letting go of or holding on to. Mom is...Mom still hasn’t made up her mind yet. You have a chance.”

“It isn’t always so simple...” began Leslie.

“I just thought you should know,” finished Angus. He scooped up his knapsack and stood. “I’m going to miss my bus unless I hurry.”

Leslie stood up awkwardly. “Um, I could drive you to the stop.”

“It’s cool,” said Angus. He left.

Leslie sat down again.

He swivelled in his squeaky chair and watched the sky darken over the city’s core as the evening’s lights winked on one by one, the traffic in the harbour unidirectional as everyone motored home for supper.

Without cigarettes or liquor he had no alternative but to actively feel sad and to sit with it. Without distractions he had no choice but to consider how to make things better.

The building emptied around him. Everyone but Mitchell Green and Mr. Feldman went home early. Then even they left, and the janitor arrived and nodded in a friendly way as he bent between Leslie’s knees to retrieve and empty the trash can and recycling bin. Leslie was late to meet Karen. His pocket rang a couple of times.

“Hey, Sergey. You married?”

“Married? Yes I am, for sixty year.”

“You mind if I ask you something?”

“Of course. Ask me anything, okay.”

“What’s the number one rule for a successful marriage?”

Sergey rubbed his chin as he screwed up his mouth, considering the matter. “Number one rule? Okay: I have to say apology. You always have to make the good apology when bad things happen, okay? It takes a big man for apologize.”

Leslie nodded to his reflection in the glass. “That’s good advice, Sergey.”

Sergey grinned and raised a second finger as he leaned into his cart of cleaning products. “Okay: number two rule? Make her the orgasm—not just for you.”

“Um, thanks.”

“Number three rule? Use thumb for—”

“Thank you *very much*, Sergey.”

“Okay.”

Leslie heard the cleaning cart wheeled away. The sky had turned brown, the city gold. Rush hour was ending, the last brake lights trailing away. His pocket rang again.

He came to a conclusion. He snatched up his jacket and left.

The rain was cruel—pointy, cold, incessant. Leslie tried awkwardly to shield the bouquet of roses in his arm as he leaned in to ring the bell, rain dripping from his nose.

The door opened. “Oh. It’s *you*. What do *you* want?”

Leslie tried to smile. “Hello Molly. Is Margaret in?”

“She’s just finished crying her eyes out over you and your antics. Why should I let you in to peck at the wound and get her all worked up again?”

Leslie’s smile did not falter. “Would you please tell her that I’m here?”

Molly glanced down. “It’s flowers, is it?” she sneered. “*That’s* sure to make up for twenty years of grief.”

Leslie simply waited expectantly. Molly murmured something unkind and shut the door. He could hear her bellowing for her sister inside. He shifted from one foot to the other and cleared his throat. The rain beat a sad tattoo on the flowers’ plastic wrapping.

The door opened again. Margaret said, “Come in before you catch your death.”

They sat down in the kitchen, Leslie’s clothes dripping on the scuffed tiles. Margaret put the kettle on and took a seat opposite him. Her expression was hard but it softened for a second as she noted the bouquet. “Are those for me or for your girlfriend?”

“They’re for you. They’re roses.”

“I can see they’re roses, Les.”

“I know you like roses.”

“Every girl likes roses,” she muttered, then added more kindly, “Even me.”

“There’s chocolates, too.”

“Well Leslie Carstairs, you’re certainly working hard to butter me right up, aren’t you?”

Leslie winced. “I didn’t come to have roses or chocolates do my work for me. I have something to say, too.”

Margaret leaned back in her chair, frowning slightly. “You’d best get on with it, then. And you’d best make it quick—Molly’ll be back here in a moment to brain you with a pan if she has her way.”

“She’d be right to do it,” noted Leslie.

Margaret looked surprised. “I think that’s the closest you’ve ever come to saying something nice about my sister.”

“She’s trying to look out for you. I can’t fault her for that. I should take a lesson. Looking out for you is something I should do more of myself.”

“Is that a fact?”

“It is. Yes, it is. For a lot of years I’ve been a lot more consumed with my own feelings than with yours, and let’s neither of us pretend that’s news to you. It isn’t news to anyone except me, and it’s only news to me because I’m a moron.”

“So far we’re in total agreement,” she said lightly, reaching to the shelf and grabbing a white pack of Players. She knocked one out and rattled the box at Leslie invitingly. Leslie shook his head. Margaret lit her cigarette and drew on it, watching him through the smoke.

“For a long time I’ve felt like I live in a cage.”

“A cage?”

“A cage made of crap—life crap: bills, work, Angus. I felt sorry for myself.

And instead of feeling sorry for you, I came to think of you as one of my wardens. And that's worse than unfair because you don't want to live in a cage any more than I do...but unlike me you were always willing to do whatever it took to make it work, cage or no cage."

Margaret looked down, blinked. "Les, that's very—"

"Let me finish. The first thing I want you to understand—flowers and chocolates and everything aside—is that I respect you. I respect you, Margaret. You're a stronger person than I will ever be, and I can't express to you how sorry I am for making you feel badly about that instead of proud."

"You're going to make me cry."

"Ash your cigarette before it falls on your sweater. The point is, Margaret, that there has been a better Leslie lying underneath and I think I've finally realized what I need to in order to let him out. I just didn't know how to *change*."

She sighed, took a drag, wiped her eyes. "But now you do?"

"Yeah," he said firmly. "Yeah, I do."

"What happened?"

Leslie ran a hand through the remains of his rust-coloured hair. "I saw a lot of people change around me, and I saw what made them different. I realized it doesn't take much—just a tweak of attitude, really." He smiled self-effacingly. "I realized all I needed was a plan."

Margaret chuckled ruefully. "You're making fun of me."

"I'm not. I'm not at all." He put his hands on hers across the table. "I'm *apologizing* to you, Margaret."

Her eyes welled up. Leslie's breath caught in his throat. He came around the table and hugged her despite his damp clothes, tears running down his cheeks. She hugged him back tightly. He smelled her dark hair, and luxuriated in it.

The kettle whistled.

They talked for hours. Leslie felt transported back in time, back to the years when they were tender rather than bitter. Deposits of spite melted and washed away, and their eyes shone at one another. For the first time in a long time Leslie felt like a man, and looked upon his wife as a woman.

Come midnight he kissed her on the forehead and told her he'd come around after work tomorrow to take her and Angus back to the house, if that's what she wanted. She did. "I didn't know you could still surprise me," she told him softly. "I do love you, Leslie."

"I love you, too."

He left her in the kitchen picking at chocolates and staring at the black beyond the windows. In the hall Angus was loitering on the staircase. He smiled at his father. "Good work, Dad," he whispered.

"Good work, son," Leslie said to him, squeezing his shoulder.

Angus pulled him into a hug.

The rain had stopped. The night was strangely warm and a mist was rising from the empty streets. Leslie lowered himself into the Taurus and flipped open his telephone, thumbing through his contacts until he found the address he was looking for...

He drove slowly. He was at ease. He left arm still smelled faintly of roses.

A quarter hour later he was keying in the code for Chad's apartment, the security camera behind him buzzing quietly as it panned back and forth across the lobby. The intercom clicked. "...Hello?"

“Chad, it’s Leslie Carstairs—from the office.”

“Oh—uh, hi Mr. Carstairs.”

“I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“Uh, no. Can I help you with something or something?”

“Yeah. Do you mind if I come up?”

“Uh, sure. Hold on. I’ll buzz you through.”

The corridors of Chad’s apartment building smelled like fresh laundry. The patterned carpet and ornate lighting fixtures made the place look like a hotel. Leslie found himself wondering how much IT guys got paid. He knocked on Chad’s door which cracked open instantly and released a rich, skunky aroma.

Chad’s eyes were bloodshot. “Are you okay Mr. Carstairs?”

“Call me Leslie. Can I come in?”

“Okay. Uh, please excuse the mess.”

Chad’s livingroom was a sea of empty pizza boxes, wrappers, DVD cases and dirty clothes amassed around several mounds of wire-entangled electronic devices: computer monitors, videogame consoles, stereo equipment. Chad waded into the midst of it and brushed a slurry of kipple away to free up one of the chairs, then gestured at Leslie to take a seat. Chad himself settled into an ample ass-shaped dent in the sofa and looked at Leslie expectantly. “So, what can I do for you Mr. Carstairs?”

“Please, call me Leslie. I heard you quit.”

The chubby techie nodded. “I’ve sort of been re-evaluating my life priorities a bit, you know?”

“Are you really going to Africa?”

“I might be going to the Congo, uh, to help out there and stuff.”

“That’s very commendable.”

“Thanks, Mr.—uh, Leslie.”

There was an awkward silence. Leslie leaned forward in his seat, the garbage under his feet crunching. “I’m wondering if you can do me a favour before you go. When’s your flight?”

“I’m still working out the details.”

“Okay, good. I have a bit of a project I need some help with. You originally went to school for engineering, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, at TUNS.”

Leslie licked his lips. “I need you to build me a device.”

“What kind of device?”

“I need a device that can be triggered from a distance.”

“How big a distance?”

“At least a couple of miles.”

“And what does it do when you trigger it?”

“It opens a bird cage.”

Chad blinked. “Is this for like a magic trick or something?”

Leslie considered this. “Yes, I suppose it is. A very dangerous magic trick—hence the distance requirement.”

“Let me think...”

“I can pay you for your time, of course.”

Chad dismissed the last statement with a wave, the beady eyes in his doughy face defocusing at the wall. His lips twitched and his fingers moved. He frowned briefly, then seemed to come to a conclusion. “That shouldn’t be too hard. We could use a radio relay, maybe trigger it through a cell phone. Is the cage door resistance- or latch-

based?”

“Both.”

“Probably need a pretty hefty battery to give us the power we’ll need to pop it open.”

“I can pick one up at Canadian Tire tomorrow morning. And anything else you need. Just write it out. Make a list.”

Chad held up a pudgy finger. “Wait!”

“What?”

“Wait!” Chad repeated, getting up and thrashing his way over to a far corner of the livingroom. He dug in the trash until he came up with a remote control 4x4 truck which he presented to Leslie triumphantly. “Ah-ha!”

“Ah-ha?”

“Powerful little motors in here,” explained Chad, prying at the plastic chassis which was covered in banana stickers. “It’s already wired for remote control. All we have to do is boost the range and find a way to rig the motors to the cage door. Presto!”

“You’re a genius.”

Chad snorted. “I’m a fat fuck who smokes too much weed, but I do like a challenge. When do you need this?”

“As soon as possible. Tomorrow?”

Chad nodded as he lowered himself back into his dent on the sofa. “Shouldn’t be a problem. What about the cage?”

“What about it?”

“Did you bring it?”

“Um, no. I’ll bring you a test cage in the morning.”

“Well, as long as it’s got the same door mechanism that should be fine.”

“Good,” said Leslie, standing up.

Chad opened his mouth, hesitated, then opened it again. “This isn’t...you’re not...”

Leslie grunted. “What?”

“You’re not a Muslim or anything, right?”

“A Muslim?”

“A terrorist.”

“Christ, no. Like I said, it’s a magic trick.”

“Actually *I* said it was a magic trick. *You* said it was dangerous.”

Leslie smirked. “Only to me.”

8.

Leslie wanted to go faster, but the car was reluctant.

He had a plan, but time was his enemy. The plan was worth fighting for. The whole city would be better for it, and Leslie would be free.

When he finally arrived at work Mr. Feldman was waiting in his office, his ample frame propped up against the desk. Leslie dumped the bags from Canadian Tire and Home Depot on his chair with a grunt. “Mr. Feldman, I’m so sorry I’m late. I just had to run a few errands, and—”

Mr. Feldman waved it off. “Don’t trouble yourself, Carstairs. I’ve never been a clock Nazi. I only wanted to make sure you’re alright—I know your son dropped by yesterday, and your wife’s been calling all morning.”

Leslie blinked. “She has?”

“Is everything alright at home?”

Leslie sighed and drew a hand down his face. "To tell the whole truth, sir, the family's been going through a bit of a rough patch lately, but I think we're going to be okay. I appreciate your concern, though."

Mr. Feldman smiled dolefully, his brown eyes heavy. "Things have been a little messy at home for me as well. I understand how it can be. Will you need some time?"

"Actually, I will have to pop out for a spell today."

"Fine, fine. Do whatever it takes, Carstairs. Nothing's more important than family." He eased himself up from the desk, shoved his hands in his pockets and wandered toward the door. "I was worried about you. Your wife sounded like she was under some strain. What's her name again? Colleen? Kristin?"

"Margaret."

"Karen! That's it, isn't it? She asked to speak to me personally. She wanted to be sure you'd be in today."

"Karen..." echoed Leslie dumbly.

"You look tired. Are you sure you're alright?"

"Quite sure, sir. Thank you. Thanks for handling that. Thanks for everything. It's been a tough time but we're all fine now, really." Leslie tried to smile.

Mr. Feldman lingered at the jamb. "The details are none of my business but let me just say this, Carstairs: don't let a good woman slip away. You don't know what you've got until it's gone."

"I won't, sir. Believe you me. I know what I've got and it's damn important to me."

"Good man."

Leslie sat down heavily and turned on his computer. Error messages popped up all over the desktop warning him that his mailbox was full. He clicked open the window and surveyed the list of almost two hundred messages from Karen Groverston: *Where are you???* was the first subject and *Bastard!!!* was the last.

His desk telephone rang. The display said the call was from Angus' school.

"Oh shit, oh shit," moaned Leslie, head in his hands.

He dumped the call to voicemail, grabbed his bags and ran straight back down to the garage. Ten minutes later he jerked the Taurus to a halt outside Chad's building and rushed into the lobby to stab at the intercom. He hurried into the apartment and dumped the bags. "Here's everything," he said breathlessly. "Are we still good to have this together today?"

"I'll have it together before noon," said Chad, squinching out a joint on the glass coffeetable. "I have to, pretty much, because I have to be at the airport at like three this afternoon to catch my flight."

"You're off to the Congo?"

"They're sending me to Cameroon, actually. I'm not going to get into any trouble over this, am I?"

"Absolutely not."

"Do you know anyone who might want to sublet this apartment from me?"

"Sorry, no. Listen, I have to run. You call if you need anything, okay?"

Leslie sped. He was pulled over on Gottingen Street. The cop was nice. He bumped the ticket down so it wouldn't cost him too many points. Leslie thanked him and strained every fibre of his being to moderate his speed until the cruiser was out of sight, then he laid on the gas and pushed the rattling old car to the limit until he was screeching to halt in front of his house, a cloud of burnt rubber stench washing over the car, carried by inertia.

Once inside the garage he panted to catch his breath as he knelt down to flip the velvet drape off of the bird cage. He cast a critical eye on his captive. The tiny woman looked up at him feebly, lying on her side in the bed of shredded newspaper. It had been a long, rough night and the tongs had left purpling bruises on her pale flesh. She quailed at his face.

"I'm sorry about this, I really am," breathed Leslie as he reached for the ether canister. "But I promise you: this is the *last* time."

He didn't get very much this time—not after last night's massive harvest, now secured in a neat row of metal thermos bottles lined on the garage shelf next to a can of paint, a broken fan and a box of sandpaper. Beside the shelf he had pinned a map of Halifax with each of the city's drinking water reservoirs marked by a red push-pin.

He set to his business.

When he was done Leslie released the tiny woman from the end of the tongs and watched her body sink slackly into the newspaper. He pulled off the gas masque and gloves after dumping his scant collection of fresh extract into the final thermos, screwing the cap on firmly.

He sat back on his haunches and wiped his brow. "Okay, okay, okay."

An instant later he jumped to his feet and loaded up the car: thermos bottles, map, gloves, covered cage. He checked his watch.

He went into the kitchen to get a glass of water. The telephone rang. He heard the answering machine click into gear, projecting his own warbly voice muttering about beeps and messages. Then Karen's voice sounded out through the speaker: "I know what's going on here, Leslie. You can't jerk me around. I'm not an idiot and I'm not going to take it. I'm not your *toy*, you bastard."

He fled.

On his way back to Chad's apartment he was pulled over by the same cop, who was this time less inclined to be lenient. Leslie was slapped with a massive fine and docked several points from his license. "Whatever your rush is today, sir," lectured the cop, "it isn't worth dying over."

"No sir," agreed Leslie.

The elevator up to Chad's unit was painfully, tortuously slow. Leslie glanced at his watch and swore. He was supposed to be picking up Margaret and Angus from Molly's house in less than six hours. The elevator chimed and the doors eased apart glacially.

Chad was in the midst of orchestrating a frenzied mission of packing assisted by a couple of friends with oily hair and T-shirts with computer slogans on them. "Chad—please tell me you have good news," begged Leslie.

"No problem, Mr. Carstairs," replied Chad. "Here, let me show you how it works. Have you got the cage?"

"There's no time. Just show me on the test cage. I'll figure it out."

A short nerd hovered at Leslie's elbow. "Dude, can I borrow your PlayStation while you're gone?"

"Yeah, sure," said Chad. "Whatever."

Back down in the visitors' parking lot Leslie yanked open the tailgate of the Taurus and placed Chad's remote opening device inside, beside the cage. As he did so his mobile rang five times in a row. He slammed the tailgate and fished the telephone out of his pocket. He pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath. "...Yes?"

"You bastard!"

"Hi, Karen."

"What the hell is going on with you?"

"I can't explain right now, Karen, but I'm caught up something really complicated and really urgent. I'm sorry I can't say more right now but time is of the essence."

"I've been trying to reach you for two days."

"I know, I know. I'm very sorry. You're just going to have to believe me when I say I'll explain everything just as soon as—"

"Bullshit. Explain now. I'm not waiting on you, Leslie. I'm not some whore you can put aside when playtime is over."

"It's not like that!" he shouted.

"So what is it like, Leslie? Are you going to talk to me now or am I going to have to go down to Mic Mac Mall and ask *Margaret?*"

"You shut your mouth," warned Leslie, his own mouth going instantly dry.

"You can't run, Leslie. I have Angus' student records—contact numbers, work addresses, everything. I know where you *live*, you bastard."

Leslie almost gagged. He took another deep breath. "Where are you? Let's meet. Right now. Let's talk this out." He checked his watch, frowning.

"I'm at school."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

As he drove he tried to reappportion his afternoon: fifteen minutes to the school, fifteen minutes to talk to Karen, twenty-five minutes out to Point Pleasant Park to drop off the cage and set up Chad's device, twenty-five minutes to get far enough away to trigger it, then on to the first reservoir...

Thirteen minutes later he squealed into the school lot. He jumped out of the car and slammed the door, then popped the tailgate and hoisted a thermos bottle. So what if one reservoir got a little less extract? The city would still be better. Besides, Leslie had more immediate concerns.

The corridors were clogged with students changing classes, babbling, laughing, shoving. A squadron of boys ran into him bodily, causing him to drop the thermos. Leslie bellowed "Fuck!" and scampered after it, dashing to his hands and knees to protect it with his body as kids pressed in from all sides.

He got it. He sprinted through the stragglers to Karen's classroom, bursting through the door.

She looked up from her desk. "Where is everybody?" asked Leslie stupidly.

"I have a spare," said Karen, eyes hard.

"You have to understand something—"

"No," she interrupted, standing up. "*You* have to understand something, Leslie. I don't allow people to treat me this way."

"I didn't mean to—"

"What?" she demanded, pushing a blonde lock out of her flushed face. "Didn't mean to leave me hanging after changing my life? Dodge my calls after everything you whispered in my ear? Play bullshit games while you dick me around and dick your wife around so you can have it both ways like some kind of playboy?"

"No, no, that isn't it at all—"

She screamed, "*Don't you lie to me, you bastard!*"

Leslie leaned against the door, closing his eyes. "Karen," he said after a moment, "you're right. I want to be perfectly honest with you."

She stared at him, lips pursed.

Leslie went on, "Margaret and I have reconciled. I have to end this. I'm sorry."

He opened his eyes again. Karen's shoulders were quaking with quiet sobs. She hugged her shoulders tightly, and then her knees buckled and she sat down hard on the floor.

Leslie took a tentative step forward, reaching out. "Karen..."

She looked up, her features puffy and her eyes red-rimmed. Her lips trembled as she began to shake her head slowly back and forth. "No..." she said. "No, you can't do this to me. Not like this. You can't make me feel this worthless and just take off like nothing ever happened."

Leslie moved closer. "Karen—"

"*You can't!*" she shouted, fists clenched. "I won't let you. I won't let you off the hook. I'm going to call your wife and we're going to have a nice, long conversation about *everything*."

"Please—"

"Shut up, Leslie, and get out. Get out of here *now*."

"Karen, you have to—"

"There's nothing you can say. There's nothing you can do. Just *fuck off*, Leslie. Get out of my sight." She picked herself up and wiped her nose. "You had your chance."

She walked over to her desk and picked up the flesh-coloured telephone. Leslie begged, "This is stupid, Karen. Just stop. We can talk about this like adults. *Just stop*."

"No," she said. She selected a line, and then flipped open her daytimer and traced her finger down the page to a scrawled number.

"*Stop!*" howled Leslie, his ears throbbing with heartbeat.

"No," she said again. And then into the receiver: "Is Margaret Carstairs available?"

Leslie's blood boiled, adrenaline igniting his muscles. The stress was too much. He couldn't take it. He had a mission to accomplish. He could broker no delay that would keep him even an hour further from making everything right.

He could not let Karen spoil it. Not after everything he'd been through.

Leslie crossed the classroom in three quick strides and smacked the receiver out of her hand, so she picked up the body of the telephone and hit him across the jaw with it. He stumbled back, seeing stars. He withdrew the thermos bottle from his jacket and wrenched off the cap.

Karen's eyes widened. "You *are* drugging me!" she cried. "Oh my God, you *are!* Oh my God, I knew it! *I knew it!*"

"I can make everything better," whispered Leslie, a line of blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. "Trust me, Karen. I can fix everything. Just let me—"

Karen rushed at him. She pried the thermos bottle out of his hand, loosening his grip by kneeling him in the testicles savagely. Leslie dropped to his knees, straining for breath, his bloody mouth fixed in a circle of shock. He tried to plead but he had no voice.

Karen upended the contents of the thermos over Leslie's head.

They were frozen in that attitude for a long moment, Leslie cowering, Karen standing over him with the empty thermos. It dropped from her hand and clanged to the floor, rolling under her desk. She shuffled backward until she hit the desk, too, grabbing its edge for support. "Leslie?" she whispered.

He looked up. He was weeping.

"Leslie?" she said again.

He slowly climbed to his feet, grunting at the ache between his legs and the waves of pain coursing through his jaw. Tears rolled down his cheeks, slid down his neck, darkened the collar of his shirt. He turned around and reached for the doorknob.

“Leslie, speak to me!”

He looked back over his shoulder sadly. “I...have to go to the car now,” he said, his voice now soft and almost dreamy. He opened the door.

“Leslie, stop! What is it?”

He looked at her again as he stepped outside into the corridor. “I *have* to,” he repeated dully.

The door closed.



THE REAPER'S COLESLAW

In the spring Sarah came home from school.

North of Huntsville the trees became shorter and the train slowed down, collective cue for the passengers to begin gathering their kipple and pulling their jackets from the overhead bins. Sarah jammed a dog-eared paperback into her knapsack and put her shoes back on.

Because they were bored or anxious or just herdish the passengers queued up in the aisle even before the train had stopped. Sarah remained in her seat until she became too annoyed by being clipped by the bags of the careless as they milled, then stood up and wormed her way into the line, leaning impatiently first on one leg and then the other.

In her long fingers she fondled the claim check for her electronics: a Motorola music player telephone and a Casio composer with earbuds.

She looked at her name on the check, mentally obscuring her maiden surname and imagining it already transformed. In less than an hour she would be telling everyone the news: on Mike's last leave they had ducked out to city hall in Toronto and, without pomp or fanfare, she had officially become Mrs. Cuthbertson.

Mom was going to shit.

Sarah stepped out of the car and on to ground which felt faintly as if it were moving. She lugged her knapsack while she used one thumb to tab through her text messages, squinting and tilting her phone away from the glare as she stepped out of the train's shadow.

Like all public spaces, the station was both charmed and eerie by the notably missing demographic of those overseas. They said conscription applied to both sexes equally, but it was the men who seemed to have born the brunt of the vanishing. Or maybe their absence just stood out more.

The crowd was all kids, women, seniors. And students.

Students were still safe.

A whole crowd was waiting for Sarah at home: not just Dad and Hunter, but Jordon and Tabby and Paramjit, too. "Hark! T'is a bachelor of science!" crooned Jordan, pointing dramatically.

Sarah bowed. They laughed. Dad buried her in a swinging hug, Hunter jabbed her in the ribs playfully and then touched her shoulder with a fleeting pat of tenderness.

“Good to see ya, sis,” he said.

“Guess what?” grinned Dad. “As soon as your mother gets home we’re going for a picnic. Gran and Andy are meeting us at the park.”

“Everybody?” asked Sarah.

“Damn right,” said Tabby, her round face beaming. “We pooled our vouchers. It’s going to be a pah-tay.”

“Where’s Mom?”

“At the post office,” explained Dad. “The net’s down again.”

They wandered out to the end of the driveway to wait for her. Across the road the Sashar family appeared to be packing up for a trip, so Dad sauntered over to shoot the breeze with Mr. Sashar.

He returned looking a little glum. “Sashars’ are off to a controlled zone, eh?”

Sarah was shocked. “What for?”

Dad shrugged, rubbed his neck absently and looked around. “Rashid says it’s voluntary. He gets a big tax break. It’s supposed to be just a few months, until they relax the threat level or whatnot.”

“Jeez,” said Jordan.

“Sucks to be brown,” said Paramjit with an uneasy chuckle.

Everybody waved as the Sashars drove away.

When Mom pulled up in the two-seater it was all smiles, because Mom was easily worried by a long face. She always thought it meant somebody had died. “Sarah!” she beamed, hugging her daughter. “Did your father remember to bring out the extra cooler I called him about?”

Dad groaned and went back into the house.

“We’ll meet you there, kids,” said Mom.

And so even before she’d had a chance to throw her knapsack into her old room Sarah was squished into Jordan’s beetle blue hybrid — pinned between Tabby’s ample thighs and Hunter’s squirming bum. Paramjit twisted the volume up to full, assaulting their senses with a gay frenzy of bouncy pop. “Let the madness begin!” he shouted over the din.

“It’s so good to be home,” gushed Sarah a moment before she was thrown back into her seat by Jordan’s aggressive acceleration. “You’ll lose my parents!” she pointed out.

“They know the way,” said Jordan.

Hunter screamed out the windows at the passersby as the nimble blue car hummed out to the main road and merged into the thin traffic. “Jesus,” remarked Sarah; “does nobody drive anymore or what?”

“Commuters save their vouchers for the commute,” said Tabby. “Everybody else is pretty much getting used to going without. The bike shop’s been *crazy*.”

“I’ll bet.”

“I’m in a car with teenagers playing loud music!” Hunter yelled at a knot of his friends hanging around outside Tim Horton’s. He waved and they waved and then, inexplicably, they all gave one another the middle finger and laughed.

“Your friends are weird, Hunt,” noted Sarah.

“And yours aren’t,” groaned Hunter, pointing to the back of Paramjit’s head.

“Stop that now,” said Paramjit.

“How did you know?”

“I’m going to be a doctor of neural computational architecture. I know everything.”

"You got accepted at McGill?" asked Sarah.

"I did indeed," replied Paramjit proudly. "I have to get my passport shit done so I can get into Quebec without getting rendered—and then, come autumn, I'll be working under Dr. Zoran himself."

"Wow," she whistled; "everything's coming up everybody!"

In the wake of the speeding hybrid pink apple blossoms fluttered free from the roadside trees and swung lazily to the ground. Birds chirped. The sky had never been more blue.

The park was the pride of the town: a piazza of grass framed by wizened, pillar-like oaks and bud-luscious sugar maples in their bright green prime. On the corner by Western Avenue there was a small penny fountain and a metal merry-go-round, the horses repainted every summer by the Lion's Club.

A strip to the east had been humbled by a row of ugly red collection vats headed with signs for each kind of metal and a fading billboard of Allied Anne and Coalition Cody silhouetted against a golden dawn.

The parking lot was nearly empty.

Within moments of arriving Mom had efficiently busted out fried chicken and coleslaw and carrots with dip and cheese-filled fillo pastries and potato salad. She told Dad to fetch the lemonade and he returned from the car with beer.

"Cheers, Mr. Bleeton!" said Jordan, helping himself to a can.

"Christ, Howard," said Mom. "*Lemonade.*"

"You could always put beer in the lemonade," suggested Hunter.

Everyone ignored him. Paramjit grabbed a beer, too, but Old Andy couldn't on account of doctor's orders on behalf of his liver. He reluctantly conceded to lemonade so Dad went back to the car. When he returned he was startled to see Sarah taking a can of beer from the cooler for herself. He was about to say something but realized he no longer had cause. She wasn't a little girl anymore.

"No fair!" said Hunter. "Sarah gets beer and I don't?"

"Pipe down and drink your lemonade," said Mom.

Sarah asked Tabby and Jordan what they had been up to over the winter and it turned out they were both in munitions, and had even arranged to work on the same line together ever since they'd become engaged. "Oh my God!" cried Sarah, hugging Tabby. "Wow! Congratulations!"

"If we have a kid quick I can keep exempt, eh?" explained Jordan. "New draft regs come down first of July, so we've been...working hard on the problem."

Tabby giggled and blushed.

Jordan crushed his beer can under his boot and sauntered back to the cooler for another. "We're still saving up for the rings," confided Tabby with a forlorn glance at her hand. She looked up. "What about you and Mike?"

Sarah hiccupped a mouthful of beer.

"Oh my *God*," exclaimed Tabby, eyes cartoonishly wide.

"Shut up!" whispered Sarah fiercely.

Grandma said the fried chicken was too dry but everyone else was quick to assure Mom how great it tasted. Mom was uncharacteristically unconcerned. "There's more potato salad if you'd prefer," she told Grandma, who muttered nothing audible.

She caught Hunter swigging from Paramjit's beer and scolded both of them, and then Dad, who had been pretending not to notice, scolded Hunter too. Then he winked.

Hunter had stopped paying attention, however. He was looking up over his father's head, using his hand as a visor against the sun. Paramjit and Dad looked at the boy curiously. He glanced at them and pointed.

Three specks stood out against the blue sky — three harsh new stars: one fat and yellow and two twinkling and white.

"Must be one helluva light show up there to be visible in the day," said Dad quietly.

One by one the others noticed and looked up. The stars were slowly drifting apart. One of the smaller ones was starting to leave a trail as it burned across the troposphere.

"Jeez," said Jordan. "Hope that was one of *theirs* going down."

Grandma sucked her dentures wetly and then touched Sarah's wrist. "Your Michael, dear, he's not up there —"

"Oh no, Grandma," said Sarah distantly, eyes still on the sky. "He's down here with us. He's on the Indian Ocean, supporting the Pacific Front with the Australians."

"Thank goodness," said Grandma, nodding to herself.

"Mike's safe," said Sarah, which was something of a mantra to her. He included the phrase in every message, pushed back into the third person for an extra authoritative flavour: MIKE IS SAFE.

"As if the world doesn't have enough problems," muttered Dad. "Fucking opportunistic chinks."

"Howard! *Language*."

"Bastards should be fighting *with* us, not against us. Not goddamn *now*, for Chrisake."

"Howard!"

"Right on, Mister B," agreed Jordan.

"Whenever you drink beer you swear," hissed Mom, swatting him with a plastic salad fork.

"Sorry, dear," said Dad. He licked a spot of dressing off his arm, then turned around and grabbed his beer back out of Hunter's hand. "Thanks for holding this for me, son."

Hunter belched.

Before Mom could become upset Sarah stood up on the picnic table and tapped her beer can with her keys. All eyes turned to her, which made her stammer just a little. "Could I talk to you, everybody, for just a sec? Can I just...I want to make a kind of announcement."

"Oh my God!" murmured Tabby into her hands which were pressed into her mouth. Her eyes grinned.

Sarah ignored her. "Okay, what I want to say is—I know this might be a bit of a surprise, but we'll do everything right and proper afterward, um, when Mike comes home, but..." She took a deep breath, and then withdrew a golden ring from the hip pocket of her jeans. "*Mike and I got married!*"

Paramjit and Hunter cheered. Tabby laughed and cried simultaneously, hiding behind her doughy forearm. Grandma smiled and sucked her teeth. Andy had fallen asleep. Dad seemed stunned. Mom looked oddly neutral, the muscles in her neck taut.

"This calls for more beer!" enthused Paramjit, his white teeth shining in his dark face. Hunter cheered again.

And then everyone was around her, pressing in, squeezing her shoulder, hugging her head, cooing over the ring in her moist palm. Dad swung Sarah off the

table in a tight embrace, then put her down and winced while grabbing his back. "Damn!" he said, and then added quietly, "I'm sorry about that stupid 'chink' comment. I didn't mean it. I mean, you know I think the world of Mike."

Sarah hugged him again. "I know you do, Daddy," she said into the thinning hair behind his ear.

In the furthest corner of the park Mom stood by the merry-go-round. It creaked slightly as the breeze nudged it. She was in a faraway place. She blinked and noticed Jordan standing beside a nearby oak, his telephone hanging limply in his hand. "What's the matter, dear?" she heard herself ask.

Jordan jumped. He hadn't seen her. Her looked at his telephone. "My mother just called," he said. He swallowed awkwardly. "She went to get the mail." He started to say something else and then stopped and looked up, his face stricken. "What the hell am I going to say to Tabitha? Oh jeez. Oh fuck."

"Tabby's a good girl," sighed Mom, eyes defocused. "She'll understand, Jordan. We all have to do what we have to."

"They're going to send me to Europe," he said. "I'm scared, Missus B."

"There, there," said Mom, her throat dry, her voice like paper.

Jordan looked back to the picnic table where everyone was babbling over Sarah. "I can't stand to ruin everybody's good time with my bad news," he said hollowly. "Makes me feel like the grim reaper."

Mom looked down at the letter held tightly in her left hand, unfolded and refolded a dozen times since she had left the post office. "I know just what you mean," she whispered.

Jordan glanced down, licked his lips nervously. "Is that from Mike?"

Mom sighed. "It's *about* Mike," she said sadly. "Yes."



THE STARS ARE WONDER

Yo Ho Ho

The sea heaves and so do I.

It is much clearer to me now than it was three weeks ago why the life of the ocean-going man is shrouded in such a thick funk of romance. It is also clearer to me now how this reward is meant to punish me, and how I really lost what battles I had believed I won.

I'm a fool.

Let me tell you how I dreamed: proud tallships with billowing sails cared after by sturdy men adventure-bent, overseen by a shrewd and fearless captain-king surrounded by curvaceous mathematicians with flaxen hair and heaving bosoms.

(Back to the heaving...excuse me while I yell something horrible into the wind, punctuated with bile.)

I dreamed that being sent to sea on a mission of noble exploration was an expression of the prince's forgiveness for the entire nasty business between his cousin and me. The prince had assured me that it was all water under the bridge when he saw me to the wharf. I was so excited. He too seemed keen.

I spotted Captain Stay as I strode up the gangway and he was every bit the picture of a noble commander until I came close enough to appreciate the smell. It would be the first in a series of sobering discoveries about the true nature of life at sea.

It can be summarized thus: hard black bread in the company of the worst kinds of people who are all in an ill-temper and soaked and miserable from the rain or the spray or the dew, the tedium broken for me only by thirst and cramps and the urge to vomit or die.

The mathematicians are not curvaceous. They are half-starved waifs on chains. They steal furtive glances at the menfolk as they comfort each other and rock or hum over their figures, plotting our place within the world.

At night they give each other maidenlove, and I admit that overhearing this gives me wood.

Onion War

Travelling at sea is very boring. The most interesting person on the ship is crazy, and I can't understand what the rest of them are saying most of the time. What I can decipher disgusts me, so I talk to the crazy one. His name is Onion War and he has

a bad foot.

(His bad foot might seem an insignificant detail, but Onion War would be the first to tell you, at considerable length, about how being bedridden for much of his childhood was a remarkable gift from the magic which first turned him on to the path of learning, so that while other little boys were skipping in the grass he read the folios of women and indulged himself in fantasies of calendars and catalogues. He has never been studded and claims he doesn't mind one bit. Think of that!)

I have no idea how old he is but he smells worse than Captain Stay. His purple-black skin is lined like a raisin, his dreadlocks thick with life. His narrow frame is weighed down by all the trappings of his office, right down to the standard gargoyle codpiece that advertises a brand of masculinity I doubt he possesses. Like a woman he wears beads around his ankles and wrists, each inscribed with a rune. He shuffles them as the days pass.

The crew is leery of Onion War. They avoid his eyes, and after he has passed them by they kiss their totems and frown.

I fell into his association like this: only days out of port Captain Stay began making unusual requests of me, like assigning me to assist in pulling on sails or fetching things. I thought he was confused but when I reiterated *who I was* he just laughed and replied that he knew *exactly* my station. He beat me with a length of rope and asked me rhetorical questions about people who illicitly stud themselves with the cousins of princes. I tried to answer his questions at first but later on fell to examining the floorboards near my face and considering the whorls in the grain. Soon enough it was over.

I have quickly learned that assisting Onion War is far preferable to any other shipboard duty, especially working in the galley where Mr. Spice's knives fly freely in concert with his temper. In contrast Onion War is tedious and full of malarkey but not at all murderous.

He pays special attention to the sky so I often find myself on deck with him at night, Onion War casting his eyes into the spangled heavens and me casting mine into the twisted mirror thereof in the water. "Do you ever wonder about the stars?" he asks me.

I shrug. "I'm not religious."

"What do you imagine they are?"

"Who cares? Sparks in the turning veil. Why are mountains craggy?"

Onion War takes this as a serious point, which makes me groan. He closes his eyes and nods, puffing thoughtfully on his long pipe. "In my youth I often trained my wonder on the mountains. Indeed, indeed." Puff-puff-puff.

"That I can understand," I tell him. "Mountains matter. If a man were to know a mountain perfectly he could move his armies quickly through its passes. The stars are counted only by women or magic simpletons."

"They grant us the calendar."

"We would have our calendar by counting something else if not stars. Why question the world?"

Onion War puffs his pipe and peers briefly through one of his instruments, adjusting a knob three turns. "By questioning soil we learn to farm, by questioning water we learn to mill. Consider the greatness of the Empire! Would you have us live like the savages, all history forgotten?"

I take a moment to reflect on the savages we have seen in our brief forays along the shore of the Second Continent: pale, gibbering, bestial primitives draped in

unworked skins, living in the rudest circumstances, eking a living directly from the land without the benefit of real economies, without metallurgy, and without any appreciable understanding of the magic. We saw people throwing stones at one another and hooting—people worshipping cacti or owl turds or waterfalls. Idiots.

“Very well,” I concede, “but should we not therefore question things which are to our profit? The stars are part of the deep magic, inscrutable. Why waste time trying to know the unknowable?”

“We do not know what is knowable and what is not until we try to know it. If you awoke one day imprisoned in a cell and fed by automated means, would you not try to learn all you could about your captors and your wider circumstances? Without the benefit of a larger view, could you risk discounting *any* clue as unimportant?”

“Perhaps, in order to escape. But who longs to escape from the world?”

It is Onion War’s turn to shrug. He looks up at the glittering sky and puffs thoughtfully on his pipe. “There are, perhaps, borders beyond our conception.”

I sniff. Like I said, he’s crazy.

The Magician

We have a magician, of course. He’s fat and deaf and very, very worried.

He has a long face whose dour foundation is melded with his lost neck’s cleavage. Starved on ship’s rations his cheeks have lost any rosy pomp they may once have held and taken on the shape and the colour of melted wax. His eyes are small, the whites around them yellow.

His sucks his teeth loudly when he is not fulfilling his vows with liturgical songs, and when he is attempting to fulfill this duty we are united in our wish that he would shut up and suck his teeth.

He must once have sung beautifully. There is an echo of it in his toneless caterwauling, a memory of something inspired beneath the bed of ambiguous moans and shrill howls. “Kiss the magic,” he grunts, and we all echo the sentiment with earnest relief: it means the song is done.

From his makeshift pulpit he mumbles loosely and largely unintelligibly about his missions past as a highly respected and especially magical man of great influence. He seldom speaks of moral principles except to recount an occasion upon which he thwarted a sinner with particular pomp or glory, usually in front of adoring multitudes.

(Personally I had never heard of him before this voyage, but I didn’t tend to run in very magical circles, much to my mother’s dismay.)

It is dangerous to talk to the magician. He is theologically defensive. Coupled with his impaired hearing he manages to project an atmosphere of persecution wherever he goes. Once when I asked him to pass me a jug of water he accused me of spouting Reformist hypocrisy. On another occasion I asked him to cover my watch and he told me that if I ever threatened him again he would put a curse on me so black my children would be born as goats. I pretty much stopped talking to the magician after that.

The men mock him, but he pretends he can’t read their lips.

He is a very light shade of brown, which makes me doubt the office he held was as lofty as he claims. No singing voice could be golden enough to earn a man so colourless the respect of a crowd. Not in the city, at any rate.

(Perhaps he, like I, is being punished for something by being attached to this historic voyage. But who could a eunuch have bedded?)

The magician sucks his teeth and tells us we can eat. The men lay in to the meal with animal relish, a dozen hands reaching into the bowl at once: fluffy rice, strings

of conserved game, soil grapes and the broad, softened leaves of church frond. It is our reward for enduring the magician's murmurs about his greatness. Out of the corner of my eye I watch him pad out of the galley.

He's gone back to stand vigil on the deck, waiting for our ship to fall off the edge of the world.

Ascending Valley

My clothes are very filthy but the laundryman died after all his teeth fell out, and we were obliged to put his carcass overboard. This rather informal ceremony was presided over by the second mate, Mr. Valley, who hails from the east. His accent is swinging and hypnotic. Mr. Valley kindly loaned me some fresh laundry from his own supply and I took off my rags for burning.

Mr. Valley has shown a generous interest in me lately, though only when the other officers aren't around. He has discouraged the other crewmen from beating me or stealing my rations, and now he says I can use the dead laundryman's hammock instead of sleeping in the bilgewater between the bunks.

I am very grateful to Mr. Valley.

He is a lean man with ropey arms and a long neck. He has scars across his back from somebody's whip, translucent pink stripes of healed meat interrupting the cocoa flesh. He has logos of the magic tattooed upon his chest. He has no fingernails on his left hand and he blinks more often than most people do. He speaks quietly, and he smiles only with his voice and never his face.

The other day he had an argument with the first officer, Mr. Bailiff, which ended only when he tore Mr. Bailiff's mantle and thereby exposed the bottles of wine he had been denying stealing to augment the captain's horde. Mr. Valley declared that the first officer should be thoroughly searched, which the crew did with a kind of reckless abandon.

Afterwards Mr. Bailiff was no longer fit for duty, and the sight of his injuries returned me to the queasiness that characterized my first weeks at sea.

Mr. Valley has declared himself the new first officer, and Captain Stay has not emerged from his quarters to disagree. Onion War seems tense. The magician marked the occasion of Mr. Valley's promotion with magical fireworks and dazzling feats of holy prestidigitation. The men applauded and laughed, kissed the magic and sang. Despite the air of gaiety I am nervous.

I try to have a word with Captain Stay but he is busy drinking wine, and pauses only to throw up on my sandals. He reaches for his beating rope so I back out of his cabin, stumbling at the threshold. Mr. Valley catches my elbow and helps me to my feet. He closes the door and shackles it.

He wants to know if I'm okay. I tell him I'm fine.

He catches me looking at the barred companionway and says, "We are going to have to make some hard decisions around here soon."

"Yessir," I agree, and Mr. Valley walks away.

What a strange kind of courage it takes to carry civilization across the savage wastes of the open ocean.

Captain Stay, Captain Go

The ship lurches and I awake. The sunlit spot from the crew-berth's only port is crawling across the empty hammocks, bedbugs glinting like dust-motes. We are turning. As I stumble out of bed and dress myself I hear shouting from up on deck.

The sky is red. Mr. Valley stands at the helm behind a line of crewmen holding blades, before them the captain on his knees. "We are too far to turn back," Captain Stay laments, his words slurred and whiny. He spindles the front of his shirt pointlessly as he blubbers, "We will die before we reach home!"

"We are dying now," says Mr. Valley softly, eyes locked on Captain Stay.

"Tell them!" yells the captain raggedly, gesturing imploringly at Onion War who is crouching beside the two terrified mathematicians. One has wrapped her own chains around her forearms as if to use the links as a shield. They quiver and hide behind his dreadlocks, their bleary eyes wide.

Onion War turns to Mr. Valley wearily. "It is true, sir. The Empire is too far. Even the Second Continent is beyond the reach of our stores now."

"It is an unholy quest we are on," replies Mr. Valley with calm precision, enunciating each word with characteristic eastern lilt. "It will end today, at my word or blade or the will of the magic, so help me saints."

The deaf magician squints at Mr. Valley's lips and nods, sucking his teeth loudly.

"It is natural to be afraid," says Onion War. "But still we must press on. Exploration requires faith."

Mr. Valley blinks. "Do not presume to instruct me on faith," he replies. "I breathe with the magic, and the magic breathes through me."

"Do you believe we will come to the world's end?" challenges Onion War. (I hold my breath, startled. Can he not see their blades? Can he not smell the seething vitriol?)

Mr. Valley considers this for a moment, his eyes still fixed on the pool of captain on the steps up to the helm. "The world may not have a literal edge," he concedes, licking his thin lips. "The world may go on forever, for all I know. But I do know that the pursuit of this mythical Third Continent will kill every last one of us, and so damned is the commander who would see it through."

"Damned is the commander!" chants the crew, as if rehearsed. The magician sucks his teeth.

Captain Stay groans and sinks lower into his own capes. In the fine, rosy light of dawn I am able to actually see his sweat-glistening skin pimple in gooseflesh—I witness the moment of defeat finding him. He does not resist when escorted back to his cabin, and speaks only to beg for a bottle of wine as the companionway is shackled shut.

I notice a seabird. And then another.

Onion War points to the horizon: the tops of grey-bellied cumulus clouds reach up like giant thumbs from a point off the port-bow. "Land," he reports tonelessly.

Mr. Valley whispers to the magic and then barks orders at the crew. When they obey they call him "captain." I am commanded to help bring about the foresail and I hop to my duty. I call him "captain" too.

The crew is cheerful. My hands are burned hauling on the ropes, but it feels great to be a part of the team. The men sing and the seabirds do too, almost loud enough to drown out the magician's awful hymning. For the first time ever, Mr. Valley is really smiling. His teeth are startlingly white and even.

Onion War stands alone by the pilot, his lined face drawn tight.

An Encounter with Savages

After ten days of searching this magic-forsaken archipelego of lifeless islets

and fetid lagoons we came upon an island whose trees yield a thin butter which is nine parts fresh water to one part tart mud. In less than an hour we had razed the glen and ferried every stalk to our ship by canoe. Even now Mr. Spice is pressing their precious juice into jugs so that we might also drink tomorrow.

One of the light-brown shipmen managed to catch a small tortoise with his bare hands, which he then proceeded to consume raw after levering open the shell. Before we left the island the magician presided in a brief ceremony over the hungry crewman's corpse.

Onion War has been giving me little pinches of powder to put beneath my tongue, as he himself does each morning and evening. "What is it?" I asked him, and he claimed they were the distilled essences of substances required for the healthy operation of a body. "Like what?" I asked, sceptical. His answer was nonsense—rock dust and berry acid, traces of metal and beads of gummed oil.

(Still, it cannot be denied that while we are wasting with the others we do not sicken as they do.)

I dare not speculate how many more days we would have lasted had we not come upon the crescent-shaped island of savage people this morning. An enterprising tribe, they had little houses made of thatched grasses and primitive canoes made from trees. They shaved their colourless heads clear of hair and painted designs there in blue squid ink. They were ugly, of course. They hooted like apes when we first came upon them, brandishing wooden spears tipped with sharpened spikes of bone.

I believe they were a fishing people, and this I judge not only by the bone hooks and barbs we can see scattered in their nests but also by the distinctly aquatic aftertaste of their meat.

The mathematicians refused to partake. Captain Valley is worried they may starve, so he has sent some crew back to the ship to force feed them. In the meantime he's sitting on a boulder in the shade, watching us all with his blinking eyes and thinking whatever it is Captain Valley thinks. His mouth is a line. His limbs are motionless, like a lizard.

When I ask Mr. Spice for a second helping he is light-hearted and relatively unprofane. He asks me which cut I would prefer, and I admit that I would be delighted to have more child. "Very tender!" agrees Mr. Spice, and I hold out my bowl.

It can be disconcerting sometimes to eat the flesh of an animal that looks very much like a man, but the rawness of my appetite proved a sufficient incentive. It is only after being sated and then continuing to chew that I find it necessary to remind myself that white people don't have soul.

As with monkeys and eels, the magic is indifferent to the incarnations of savages.

Womanless Calculations

The mathematicians have died. They looked dead long before they expired, bones and sinews under a thin glaze of yellowing skin. During the funeral the magician broke down and cried. The crew looked nervously about, fondling their talismans and kissing their tokens. Onion War would not speak to anyone, his eyes bloodshot and his mouth loose.

They made very small splashes, I thought, for adult women.

That was last night. Today Captain Valley has ordered me to enter Onion War's cabin and pry from him the feminine secrets of navigation so that we might find a way home. I imagine I have been chosen since I have assisted the old man with his toys,

but I told everyone I hold no sway as an advisor. I still fail to see how I will persuade him. Captain Valley suggested I wear no shirt.

When I go to Onion War he is lying motionless in his hammock, staring at the ceiling.

For childish reasons I am afraid. "Are you dead?" I ask, stupidly.

"I am not dead," concedes Onion War. "I am dispirited."

When I try to steer the conversation around to navigation he interprets this as an attempt to inspire him, and responds by climbing out of bed and embracing me. "You're right—I cannot give up!" he tells me, as if this is something I was trying to say.

Onion War hobbles over to his trunk and opens the creaking top. He digs through his belongings—jars, badges, codpieces, orreries, folios—and tosses them aside until he uncovers and unlatches the trunk's false bottom. From this last compartment he withdraws an item I had always assumed existed only in legend.

It is an artificial woman.

Once unfolded she is only about three hand-spans tall, her tiny bronze face impassive, her canvas breasts proud, her wooden hips wide, utterly undecorated with the guild colours that would be covering any non-illicit mechanism. Onion War unravels a ribbon of pounded gold and gently feeds one end into the back of the little artificial woman's head.

I start to say, "What are you—" but he says, "Hush now! Ah-ha, ah-ha..." so I close my mouth.

"This is something I have been working on for years," he explains in a voice of special dignity; "a project that caused much damage to my dignity and my options, indeed. But, at last, I will have my chance to prove the value of my research."

I tell him that sounds good. He asks me to read him a set of numbers from an open folio, and as I do he inserts a finger into a hole between the little artificial woman's legs and taps around in there. When I am done he pumps the artificial woman's arms up and down three times. The goldleaf ribbon is drawn inside the head and emerges from her mouth covered in arrays of tiny punctures.

Onion War takes the ribbon and moves his fingers across its surface with his eyes closed, and then nods with satisfaction. "Today the sun will set a quarter hour before the ship's sun clock," he declares. Then he opens his eyes, raises one eyebrow and lets himself smile. "That is right, my friend—you have just witnessed a *womanless calculation*."

"It boggles the mind," I tell him.

He shakes my hand and then hugs me and then kisses me on the side of my neck, which is weird. I squirm away and try to change the subject. I ask him whether his revolutionary instrument can guide us safely to the Third Continent. Onion War chuckles and shakes his dreadlocked head. "You appreciate, of course, that the world is a ball."

"I have heard that philosophy."

"Heard it? Witness it! As we approach an island why do we see its peaks before its shores when the water we look across is flat? Why does it seem to rise out of the ocean?"

"Well, that *is* a quandary..." I admit, rubbing my chin and furrowing my brow.

"There are other proofs," says Onion War with a dismissive wave. "You may take my word for it, my friend. It is a fact. And it is also a fact that we have *already covered nine tenths of the journey* around the world's face."

"You mean—"

"I mean to say the next land we will see will be the far eastern shores of our own Glorious Imperial Continent. And, according to my womanless calculations, we shall be arriving there very soon indeed."

"Kiss the magic!" I cry out of sheer joy. "We're saved!"

The Water Walker

We are not saved. We have passed again into the open sea and despite Onion War's confidence of landfall we have been abandoned by bird and cloud alike. The sky is a heartless blue card, the ocean an unthinking mirror bladed by sunglints. Again our stores are diminished. Again our water is bracken and smelly, and we drink our urine in the mornings with animal relish.

We are all tanned like kings, even the inferior ones.

Mr. Stay and Mr. Bailiff have both expired in their cabins, one by bottle and one by traditional suicide. Neither loss was felt as keenly as that of our spiritual leader, the deaf magician. He went to sleep one night and did not awake, an empty phial at his bedside. Criminal suicide is likely, but Captain Valley enters nothing in the log anymore. The remaining hands help to huck the three bodies overboard and no words are spoken. All magical pomp is ignored, for the men feel ignored by the magic.

Captain Valley is grim. "He was no real man of magic," he swears quietly.

Our rationality is eroding. I see it in myself. I can still hear the magician's amelodic sacred weapon between the slap of the surf against our hull and the seashell sussuruss of hot air. Twice under the weird purple sky of twilight I have seen a figure following the bubbles of our wake, stepping between the waves as if hiking in a meadow, faintly glowing, careless, impossible.

I bring dismal rations to Onion War: green cake and bugs. I feel he may be our only hope. "Stick your finger in the little woman," I implore him. "Question the world! Find our way! Count the stars!"

He is weary and his skin is ashen. His breathing is noisy. "I have run the figures through my vulvic triangulator a thousand times."

"Then *when* will we get to the Empire?"

"We should be there already...we should already be home." He trails off and stares with unfocused eyes out the port in his cabin—nothing but unfathomable blue.

I snap my fingers and jostle his shoulder. "Hey! Master War! We've awakened in a prison cell and are not being fed at all: what can we do to know the mind of our captors? *What can we do, man?*"

He shakes his head sadly. "There are no captors, boy."

We sit in silence a moment, and then a strange little smile plays briefly over the old man's lips. "She's so beautiful," he comments.

"Who?" I ask.

I trace his gaze out the portal and then stand up for a better view. I stand up too quickly, and falter in dizziness. I imagine I see the one who walks between the waves but my vision throbs with the spectral bruising of afterimages. I am weak. My tongue is thick and my throat very dry. I blink with effort. I cannot even see the sea—only a wall of blue as if our ship were flying. My tortured brain will no longer render the image of the damned water.

"I see nothing."

Onion War chuckles mirthlessly. "And nothing sees you."

A Spot of Inclement Weather

I miss Onion War. I miss Captain Valley. These are the days of decision by committee—the days of blood on the deck and unmagical desperation. These are the days the burnt pork aroma of the third officer has oozed into our rags and refuses to vent, reminding us with our own pall of stink the abscess of our nobility.

We are depraved. Mr. Spice has broiled the calves of the dead into a soup, but if anyone tries to take any he cuts off their fingers. Then he puts the fingers in the soup. I have eaten my shirt, and like many I find it hard not to snack on stringy clods of the tar that keeps our hull fast against water.

Some songs are sung but I dare not repeat the lyric.

I do my best to steer. Come nightfall I awkwardly position Onion War's instruments on his floating tripod so that I can squeeze the stars between the tines of the register and thereby take numbers from the sky to flex into the vulvic triangulator with my sundried fingertip.

For the first time in my life I find myself staring into the heavens and really asking myself what it all is—why are the stars concentrated in a winding river from north-east to south-west, and why do some appear orange while others seem to be blue? I think of the blue gas fires in the swamps of my father's province, and wonder whether there could be any connection...

Is it a mystery the magic *wants* me to penetrate? Is the world, in fact, a riddle?

(Then again, were I to awake in a prison cell why would I assume the designers of my circumstances to be anything other than men? Captured by happenstance, would I not imagine authors rather than rail against mindless chance?)

It is only by remembering the glory of the Empire that I manage to push on. I am so certain it lies just over the horizon that when I first see the black line of devil's weather cresting the sea ahead I am able to convince myself I see a bank of dark conifers. "We have somehow drifted north," I reason.

The apparent conifers are backlit by spasms of silent lightning. They rise on spires of inky cloud, ascend upon a mountain of blue-grey shadow that begins to merge with the water at the horizon. I discern a curtain of rain lazily blurring the way between the storm and our ship a split second before we are punched by a fist of wind.

I yell orders but no one will help me. Captain Valley stands at the prow of the ship like a statue, hands clutched behind his back and thighs quivering with exertion as he fights to keep his feet against the pitching deck. A skeletal crewman tries to reef in a flapping sail but discovers he is too weak, and settles down to tie himself to a canoe.

"*Captain Valley!*" I scream, but he cannot hear me. When the wind rages in the right direction I catch snippets of his hymn. His range is good, and it occurs to me suddenly why he is so very private: Valley is an exiled magician, a castrato on the lam.

As I consider this a wave smashes across the foredeck and washes Captain Valley away. His song stops abruptly.

The ship is picked up by the next surge and balanced high. As I cling to a boom lightning flashes and illuminates my world: I see the heaving sea below, the cliff of frothing water on which we teeter, and the wall of jagged rocks upon which we are about to drop. I experience some horror.

The lightning passes, thunder rolls. I am grateful to be unaware of my circumstances again. Everything is black and wet and then, briefly, very painful.

I elect to take a nap.

Angel by the Wing

I awake on a narrow tongue of beach nestled in the shadow of bluffs overlooking the sea. The splintered wreckage of our galleon is visible jutting from an irregular pile of rocks upon which it has been dashed, apparently unleashing of landslide of lichen-slick stones from the face of the cliff above.

A flotilla of objects bob sedately in the vicinity: an empty bottle of wine, a codpiece, the upper deck of Mr. Spice's false teeth, the right arm of the artificial woman, a cabin boy, a seat cushion, a spoon...

The sun has come out. The head of a pretty girl sits upon a pile of rocks next to me.

I am not horrified, and I examine the head from where I lie with a kind of detached curiosity. The neck terminates in a smooth, bloodless line. Her eyes are closed as if in communion, her lips pursed as if at study. It seems to me to have been a very peaceful death, for a decapitation.

I wonder where she came from. Despite the lightness of her skin it seems unweathered, like the supple faces of the Empire's most comely noble mathematicians. Her hair is black and short, feathery.

Steered by a morbid compassion I reach out to her touch her apple-ripe cheek, and I scream like a child when her eyes snap open before my fingertips find her. I throw myself backward and land in the surf with a splash, gasping.

The head shifts and the rocks beneath the stump ripple. I blink, my eyes irritated by the strange motion. The girl's eyes are fixed on me, lively and focused. A hand sweeps out of the rocks and extends on a pole of grey sand toward me, a tiny metallic device pinioned between dirty fingers.

"Do not touch me," she commands, a bewilderingly toneless speech that comes a second after her lips move.

"What are you?" I demand hoarsely, scrambling to my knees and crawling away from the menacing apparition. Even in my fear I note the crisp shadows the decapitated girl's arm of sand casts, as tangible and real as the wet locks of my own hair dripping before my eyes.

She pinches her mouth tight, says nothing.

I stand. Breathing hard I make a wide circle around the head on the pile of rocks that waver and discolour as my perspective changes. I settle down on my haunches and against the ocean and the sky it becomes clear: the girl's body is there, invisible, copying the light of the world behind it. Now her arm is a blue horizon, and if I raise my head it takes on the hue of the bluffs.

I shuffle closer. She trains the device on me ominously. I hold up my empty hands and lean in closer again: I can perceive her camouflaged left leg pinned between two clots of the landslide's slurry. This girl—whatever she is—is pinned like a butterfly to a collector's felt.

The device in her hand flashes and I reel back like a ragdoll, pushed by an invisible agency. I land hard on the sand and lose my breath. Croaking for air I kick out blindly and manage to strike the girl's hand. Her weapon flies free, skips twice on the water and then submerges with a fart of bubbles.

"Faeces!" she cries.

"That hurt," I accuse, rubbing my ass. In my abused state the whole affair leaves me a bit tired so I remain splayed out on the beach for some time, regaining my breath and watching the trapped girl watch me.

I theorize that she is the being I have seen walking in our wake. Is she herself

of the magic?

After a while she sits up, her unadorned head seeming to float above the beach as she squeezes her hands beneath a large lip of rock weighing on her shin and attempts to prise it loose. She grunts, her face distorted not just by her effort but also by pain. Her leg, I imagine, has been broken.

She leans back against the rocks again, exhausted, sweat glistening on her young brow.

"You're stuck," I point out.

She stares at me, and then whispers something. After the briefest pause the toneless voice sounds again: "I am not permitted to speak with you."

"Oh."

I crawl over to her and ignore the next battery of warnings. There is an edge in her voice that tells me she doesn't have another magic pushing device. I explore the distorted camouflage of her leg, moving downward until I find the crevasse in which she has become lodged. Her strange clothes, grey and shimmeringly visible at this proximity, are ripped there below the knee, exposing a length of soft calf abraded and bloody.

(I decide that she is a mortal thing.)

She chops her hand at my neck and kicks at me viciously with her free leg, and I am toppled over into the mud again. The surf comes in a moment later and washes over me, leaving streamers of dank seaweed. I sit up and rub my throbbing neck.

"Get away from me," the girl commands. "Contact is forbidden."

"I can help you," I say.

"My colleagues are en route," she replies quickly. "Your surviving shipmates have walked north along the beach to a nearby village. I suggest you join them before my colleagues arrive."

I can tell this is supposed to be a threat but the childish quaver in her voice robs it of much strength. "How do you know where my shipmates have gone?"

"I can see them," she says, looking north and squinting.

I look north at the solid face of rock beneath the turf-topped bluffs. I look back at the girl, whose brown irises are dialled out for far focus. She blinks, her pupils flitting rapidly. "Less than an hour away by foot," she tells me, still looking at whatever ghosts she consults for such bewildering mathematics.

"You are a woman and I do not doubt your calculations," I say slowly, "but you are also possessed of powers such as I've never imagined and thus I have no basis to guess your motives. Tell me: are you from the Third Continent?"

No reply. I look out at the small cove in which we have landed, noting the lines of dried brine on the faces of the cliffs. I also note how the depression of sand where I had awakened has become a puddle. I turn back to the girl. "How long until your friends arrive?"

"Any moment," she lies.

I sniff. "The tide is coming in."

She raises her head to look for herself and I can see her elbows poking through other rips in her camouflaging skin. Her brow furrows. She bites her lip. She leans back again and avoids my eye. "Please help me."

"My help is conditional. You will answer my questions."

She assents. Her head drops. The rock camouflage of her bosom rises and falls with heavy breaths. "One question," she negotiates.

"Two," I correct.

(Onion War had spent decades squeezing answers—unreliable answers—drop by precious drop from the world. He never had my opportunity: I have an angel by the wing who begs my favour. Think of that!)

With a frustrated grunt the girl sits up again and pulls frantically at her leg while stealing glances at the rising tide. Then she gives up once more and pleads, “I am forbidden from sharing information with you.” Her eyes jitter, then moisten. “I will fail my class,” she adds.

“Two questions,” I remind her.

She bites her lip again and nods. “Two questions. Quickly! Please.”

When she has satisfied me we work together to topple away the debris pinning her leg. At the moment when she is freed I am close enough to discern the grey folds along her shin and calf inflate to become turgid sacs, correcting the position of the girl’s mislaid bones with an audible crackle. She lets out a little yelp and squeezes my shoulder.

When I look up there are five figures standing on the rising waters. Hobbling, she goes to them. For a long time I watch after them, long after they have walked away over the glittering horizon.

The stars have come to horrify me, so when evening comes I cower.

My Wives Cannot Count

I cannot pronounce of the name of our people yet, but I’m trying.

Our lives are simple, and good. We have houses on little legs to keep them safe during the monsoons. Our boats are painted to resemble different fish, an idea whose origin is lost but whose tradition is artfully embraced. When people around here laugh they make clicking sounds with their tongues, a refrain more refined and subtle than one might suspect. I practise laughing every day, in order to fit in.

I remember standing in the surf to see off my surviving shipmates as they set out upon their makeshift craft, determined to find civilization and greatness and all the glory that is the Empire. My wives, neither of whom can count, stood by my side.

We waved and smiled as their vessel diminished in perspective and then sank below the edge of the world. I was in a great mood. I had no regrets.

Whether or not my shipmates ever found the passage home is unknown to me. I don’t really care. I eat nuts and berries and I wear a loincloth. When it’s rainy I get a little bit wet, but most of the time it’s sunny here.

I cultivate edible roots, which is demanding but satisfying labour.

I’m still quite handsome when unstarved. To the eyes of the colourless savages I am ugly, however, and thus have to work hard at my marriages. Likewise I cannot get by on charm, because to these villagers my ways are uncouth.

They find my songs hilarious. They rib me about my civilized habits.

However they also view me as a man possessed of special knowledge, though I discourage it. The wonders of the Empire don’t seem so wonderful to me anymore. I have no ambition to introduce them in any kind of detail to the magical precepts or the arts of masonry or feminine cartography. I would sooner tell them the truth, and that I will never do.

Who would want to know?

Who would want to know that the sky is full of suns? (When I learned that from my trapped angel a chill ran down my spine and in a certain way I have never felt warm there again.) Who would want to know that what was held as great is in fact paltry? (When I realized that the godlet cried for me.)

We call the world “the world” but its name is Eden, a globe where our founding blood travelled to live apart from knowledge.

I learned that she, like me, was an animal called a human being, bred by circumstance in a far away time at a far away place called Sol.

She told me she had come from the University of Callicrates where her professor was leading an audit of the cultural anomaly known as the Empire of Light and Conquest, a malignancy of complexity whose rapid influence over the face of this kindergarten had surprised so many.

I mourned, “My world is a joke. It is studied in school, by children. Our glories are insectile.”

She replied, “All works are insectile. You cannot guess the true immensity and baffling complexity of the Everything. Your brain would bleed to imagine, and so would mine.”

(It really puts things in perspective, when deities lament.)

My integration into the tribe continues. I have been assigned a totem and a spiritual animal buddy. I am learning all the moves for the big dance. I will be circumcised at the next solstice, which I admit I have mixed feelings about.

Around the fire I sometimes tell stories about my old life.

Like I said, I am viewed as a font but I do not flow freely. There are some things it is easier not to know. When I am lying on my back at night with the soft grass behind my head, surrounded by the murmurs of the jungle and the rustle of the sea, with a wife snuggled in on either side tightly, one or the other or both will ask, “Tell us, husband, what are the stars?”

I sigh. I squeeze them against against me. I breathe in the breeze. “They are wonder, my loves,” I always reply. “Nothing but wonder.”



SANDY IS A SPIDER

1.

Halfway up the irregular and eroded southern face of the Nohoch pyramid at Coba, Ryan waited, crouching in the shade of a pile of rubble as he wiped the lenses of his binoculars. The jungle was a rolling carpet of mossy bracken on every side, a wavering cloud of heat causing the furthest trees to scintillate in his vision.

He checked the binoculars, spotted her. He still had a moment to get ready.

Ryan opened a tin canteen and poured water carefully over himself, creating blobby triangles on his chest and back. He spilled enough into his short, strawberry blonde hair to run down his neck and cause his forehead to drip as if sweat-soaked.

He lay back against the pile of rubble with his legs splayed out before him in an attitude bereft of dignity. He began to breathe heavily, working himself into a wheezing, plaintive pant.

He checked his watch.

Sandy staggered up to Ryan's ledge, eyes on the stones as she bent over to catch her breath. A fjord-like birthmark stained her right cheek. Without seeing him she craned her head up and gazed toward the summit of the pyramid, a frown of grim determination tightening her lips. She straightened and secured two long brunette braids behind a kerchief, wiped clean her glasses, and then resumed the climb.

Ryan was in the midst of working up the air necessary to pant even louder when Sandy stumbled on the next riser. She pinwheeled backward, threatening to overturn and plummet down the stone steps to the jungle floor.

Ryan caught her.

"Oh my God," she squeaked.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Thank you," she said.

Ryan let go of Sandy and shuffled backward to lean against the pile of rubble again, mopping at his brow ineffectually with the loose front of his sopping polo shirt. "You almost gave me a heart attack," he said. "And I was sitting here worrying about that *anyway*."

"I'm sorry," said Sandy quickly. She crossed her arms, hugging her own biceps absently. The sun winked off a simple silver crucifix hanging between breasts which were heavy for her slight frame, her back self-consciously curved to minimize their prominence.

"Don't be sorry," said Ryan. "I'm glad I *was* here, thank Jesus. Otherwise—sheesh. Could've been a nasty fall."

"Sheesh is right," agreed Sandy. "Thanks again."

She smiled awkwardly and started to turn back to the steep stone risers. Ryan coughed.

"I hate asking this, but you wouldn't happen to have any water, would you?" He was good at being sheepish. He looked down, shrugged, spread his hands. "I thought I'd be a hero and get right up to the top easy as pie, but it turns out I'm in worse shape than I thought. I'm just dyin' here."

"Sure, yeah," said Sandy, fumbling at her canteen, expertly concealing the right side of her face. "Okay."

Ryan drank swiftly, but was careful to leave some in the bottom. He gasped in exultation as he handed the canteen back, wiping his mouth with his wet forearm.

"Thanks a lot," he said. "I'm afraid there isn't much left. I feel terrible."

"I'm sure it'll be enough for me," said Sandy amicably, hearing it slosh. "Don't worry about it."

"That's very nice of you," said Ryan.

"No problem."

Ryan picked up his knapsack and binoculars. "Well, I'm ready. Let's beat this pyramid. Um, unless you're planning on sprinting—I don't want to hold you back."

Sandy smiled uncertainly, then shrugged. "No, I don't mind. Let's go."

They took in concert the next series of narrow, crumbling risers slaves of the Maya had erected centuries before, hacked free from the jungle by the grad students of archaeologists only in the last decade. The climb was steep and the feeble, moist breeze was heavy—reluctant to refresh, an air like hot breath.

As they proceeded Ryan measured Sandy's pace and then gradually exceeded it. After a few minutes he paused and looked back apologetically. "I'm rushing you."

"No," breathed Sandy, waving dismissively. "Keep going. It's good for me."

"Well, okay," he conceded.

He pressed the pace faster for the final push to the summit, ultimately having to hoist her up to the top platform with a firm, steady grip. They were both too winded to speak. They leaned against the walls of a tiny, broken temple. Sandy unscrewed the top of her canteen and offered it to Ryan.

"I couldn't," he said, shaking his head. "You drink it. It's yours."

"I feel bad."

"Don't," said Ryan. "I'll live. Drink. I insist."

She drank. "I left you a little," she said, handing him the canteen.

He emptied it, and then offered his hand to shake after wiping the perspiration off on his shorts. "My name's Ryan Billing. It's good to meet you."

"Sandy," said Sandy, taking his hand.

Ryan smiled. Sandy smiled too. The game was on.

2.

Ensenada de Arcos Iris Villas & Resort stood on the southern coast of Quintana Roo, nestled in a shallow cove protected from the ocean's worst by the trailing edge of Cozumel's coral wall. The buildings all followed a common faux-Maya style, complete with frescoes of pictographic warriors dancing around pyramids. The walls were white stucco, the metal roofs covered in bales of decorative thatch.

Every room had a slowly turning ceiling fan, lending the establishment a

common, lazy beat of throbbing air.

This slow rhythm was desecrated by Ryan as he attempted to juggle a beach bag, a roll of towels and a fold of clothes while fishing around for the key to his tiny villa. Playing to a unique but precise tempo, Ryan dropped two thirds of his bounty and stumbled just as Sandy rounded the corner.

“Damn it!”

Without turning around he gathered up nearly everything and then appealed over his shoulder for help with his key. Sandy picked up the key and unlocked the door to Ryan’s room. “Fanks,” he said, a towel in his mouth. Then he looked up. “Hey—ith *you*.”

Sandy smiled, turning away the birthmarked side of her face. “Hi again,” she said. “Are you okay there?”

Ryan walked inside as he replied, leaving Sandy dangling at the entrance, crossing her arms over her navy blue bathing suit. Ryan dumped his beach bag and towels on the sofa. “I got it now, thanks Sandy. That’s *two* I owe you now, isn’t it?”

“Oh, not really.”

“You can come in, never you mind,” he said firmly, which caused Sandy to take a step or two into the hall of the compact, two-storey guest villa nearly identical to her own. “But seriously,” continued Ryan, “you have to let me make it up to you. First the water, now this. And since we’re both here at Arcos Iris the least you can do is to let me buy you dinner.”

Sandy blushed. “That’s really not—”

“No no, I insist. You can’t leave me feeling obliged to you like this. It isn’t right.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to.”

“Listen, if you’re travelling with somebody they’re absolutely invited, too. Any friend of yours I’d be happy to buy dinner for. Let me do this, Sandy. You gave me your last drop of water—you have to let me make right. Fair is fair, isn’t it? I mean, come on: isn’t it?”

“Well, yeah, fair is fair...”

“So let’s do it. We can meet right outside here, on the walkway. Say...six o’clock?” Ryan grinned and opened his arms in appeal.

Sandy giggled despite herself. “Six is okay, I guess. Just outside here...?” She pointed vaguely behind her.

Ryan nodded, then waited patiently. Sandy hovered nervously and then looked down. “Okay well I guess I should go,” she said. “I was going to have a shower and stuff.”

“Until six then, Sandy,” said Ryan warmly, eyes still on her, brow open.

Sandy coloured under his scrutiny, smiled again, made a false start left and then turned right and shuffled out into the sun again, closing the door gently behind her. “Sorry,” she mumbled about something.

Ryan waited a moment, then relaxed. “This one’s going to be easy,” he chuckled aloud, sinking into the sofa and propping his feet up on the matching Guatemalan-quilted ottoman. “...So easy.”

3.

Sandy and Ryan were led to a table by the patio-lantern gilded edge of the Yum Caax Restaurant, the only non-buffet option offered to guests of Ensenada de Arcos Iris Villas & Resort. The centrepiece of the space was an intimidating statue of a

fierce warrior with what looked like a cat's head crouching on top of his human face. The warrior appeared to be carved from dark wood but was, in fact, fabricated from fibreglass.

"Who's that?" Sandy asked.

"Yum Caax," replied Ryan breezily, pulling out her chair for her. "A god of the hunt."

"He doesn't look very happy." Sandy sat down. "Thanks."

"Hunting requires focus, I imagine." Ryan took his seat and then appraised his companion across the candle-lit table. Her long chestnut hair was down, pushed casually behind her shoulders; she wore a yellow dress, chaste but fitted. "You look ravishing, Sandy. Will anyone else be joining us?"

"Um, no," she smiled hesitantly, touching her glasses. "Just me. Disappointed?"

"Absolutely not."

They dawdled over their menus, Ryan staring fixedly at the pages while Sandy glanced up and down, anxious to seize the next cue for how to proceed. The names of the dishes failed to mean anything to her. Her gaze flicked across the beach, hanging on a couple walking hand in hand, their pants rolled up out of reach of the sussurussing surf.

She turned back to see Ryan watching her. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" he said.

"What is?"

"There's nothing like a tropical sunset."

"That's so true," she agreed readily. The sun had sunk behind a bank of thick, sagging cumulus clouds, illuminating them from within with a ruddy, golden glow. "This is the first time I've ever been to Mexico."

"Me too."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. I won this trip—or earned it, I suppose. It's a reward for performance from the office; also, their not-so-subtle way of forcing me to take a vacation. And I'm glad they did." He looked at Sandy warmly. "What about you, Sandy? What brings you to Quintana Roo?"

Sandy covered the birthmark on her right cheek as she looked down. "Oh, my family just thought I could use a rest. You know: things get crazy sometimes."

"You have a stressful job?"

"Not really. I'm just a teller. A bank teller, I mean. But I've been on a leave of absence, um, looking after my husband. He was very ill."

"But you've come alone? He's not well enough to travel?"

"He passed away, actually."

"Oh sweet Jesus, I'm so sorry," said Ryan, reaching across the table and touching her hand. "I didn't mean to open a painful subject. Forgive me, Sandy."

"Nevermind. I'm sorry."

"Never be sorry," he said lightly. "Girls who are both kind and pretty have no cause. Do you mind if I select a wine for us?"

"I'm not pretty. Um. Go ahead, about the wine. Um, thanks."

Ryan chose a Chilean Merlot which arrived promptly. He swirled a dollop in the bottom of his glass, sniffed it. "Very nice," he told the waiter, giving the nod to fill the lady's glass and then his own.

Sandy played with the stem of her glass, watching ruby reflections from the wine slide on the tablecloth. "So...what kind of work do you do?"

"I work in adoption, actually—arranging connections between orphaned children and prospective parents. I don't want to go on and on about it, but let me just say it's very rewarding work. I wouldn't trade it for the world. Every day is another chance to touch someone's life for the better."

"That's a wonderful thing to do," said Sandy. "God—my job makes no difference for anybody. I have a sneaking suspicion I'm going to be replaced by one of those new automated tellers any day now."

"What's an automated teller?" asked Ryan, folding his hands and leaning forward with frank fascination.

Sandy blushed at his interest. "Oh, it's just a stupid thing—a machine that gives out cash. They have an experimental one at our branch and it's always broken."

"Maybe I've seen them, never paid attention."

"They say they'll be everywhere soon."

"Isn't that something? You can't stop the future, can you? Back in New York they're moving all of us over to computers now. You'd think the office would be quieter without all those typewriters, but it's just as loud—with people swearing at their computers."

Sandy laughed. "I bet. We're moving to computers, too, at the bank. It's such a headache. Did you say you work in New York?"

"Yes. Our offices are in Manhattan."

"Wow," said Sandy. "I've never been to New York."

"It's a spectacular city," Ryan assured her. "Where are you from, Sandy?"

"Just a little place called Sackville. Outside of Halifax."

"That's in Nova Scotia, right? In Canada?"

"That's right."

"Beautiful country up there."

"Oh yes."

They sipped their wine and were considering entrees when a young, sun-burned couple approached their table. "Mr. Billing!" said the woman, smiling. "We were just going back to our villa and we saw you and thought we'd say hi. And thank you."

Ryan stood up. "Why don't you join us for a glass of wine? This is Sandy, a fellow Canadian. Sandy, these are the Cuthbertsons, from Ontario."

"We don't want to interrupt your dinner," said the man, offering Sandy his hand to shake. He was muscular, and filled with a certain anxious energy that caused him to continually shift his weight from one foot to the other.

"Nonsense," said Ryan. "I've been helping out Kate and Jules with an adoption situation, Sandy. I know I'm on vacation but—well, I just couldn't help it. They've had such a run of bad luck."

"We really appreciate everything you've done," gushed Kate. "I've been on the phone with my mother all afternoon, and so we should have that certified cheque ready for you by tomorrow."

Ryan nodded. "The important thing is that we've started processing the application. I had the papers you signed couriered off to New York this morning."

"This is so exciting," said Kate.

"Why don't you sit down?" Ryan invited again, reaching for a spare chair.

"No no," said Jules, shaking his head. "Enjoy your dinner. We'll talk tomorrow."

"It was nice to meet you, Sandra," added Kate.

"Have a nice night," said Sandy. As the couple departed she said to Ryan,

"They seem nice."

"I'm expediting their adoption process, putting it through our own private screeners. It costs a bit more, but it'll save them a lot of hassle in the end. They're trying so desperately to build a family—I just couldn't leave them hanging. It's my job, after all."

"That's very kind of you," said Sandy. "It must be amazing to be able to help people like that."

"It makes me feel good as a Christian," agreed Ryan earnestly.

Sandy touched her crucifix absently. "Do you have kids?"

"You know, it's funny," said Ryan, eyes cast out over the darkening water. "I spend all my time helping people put happy families together, but I don't have one of my own." He turned back and shrugged. "I suppose I'm a bit of a workaholic. I never seem to find the time to meet someone."

"That's too bad," said Sandy.

"Let's not brood," he interrupted, raising his hand. "We're having a nice dinner. We're in paradise. Aren't we supposed to leave our problems back home? In fact, I propose a toast."

Sandy picked up her glass and held it aloft, watching him expectantly.

"To new friends, and helping make dreams come true," pronounced Ryan seriously.

"To new friends," echoed Sandy. They drank.

After dinner they took the meandering way back to the villas, walking along the beach and then among the fragrant gardens tended by elusive Maya in matching polo shirts who bowed out of sight at the sound of Ryan and Sandy's footfalls on the flagstones, keeping to the shadows like faeries.

"I think there's somebody in the bushes," whispered Sandy.

"Don't worry. He probably works here."

"Do you speak Spanish?"

"Yes, but they don't."

"What do they speak?"

"Mayan."

At the walkway between the rows of villas they slackened their pace. "I had a really nice time tonight, Ryan," she said, swinging her purse distractedly.

"I think that's the first time you've said my name, Sandy."

He could feel her blush, even in the dark. "I guess we're even now, huh?"

"I'm still in your debt, for your fine company tonight," said Ryan breezily.

"I'm not trying to push anything on you, but—you know, I'm around. If you ever need a friend, I mean."

"That's very nice of you."

"As a matter of fact I'm thinking about taking a tour to see the ruins at Xcaret tomorrow. Have you already been?"

"I haven't, actually."

"Well, think about it. You know where I'll be. But there's no pressure: you're on vacation—do whatever suits you best."

"Thanks, Ryan."

He bowed courteously and then turned toward the walkway to his villa. Suddenly remembering something Sandy wrenched open her purse and fished around inside. "I still have your key!" she called.

Ryan paused. "Ah, yes. I'd been wondering where I left it."

"I'm sorry. I guess I just wasn't thinking, earlier, when I had it in my hand. I'm so stupid. I hope I didn't cause you a big problem."

"Not at all. The front desk loaned me a spare."

Ryan waited patiently until Sandy stepped closer and held out the key. He took it gingerly, allowing their fingers to briefly meet. Sandy shivered, then looked around awkwardly. "So, goodnight I guess. Thanks again. And sorry about the key."

"Goodnight, dear Sandy. And God bless."

Sandy waved, hid behind her hair, and scurried up the walkway to her own villa. Ryan watched her go, a smirk flickering across his lips an instant before he turned on heel and sauntered home.

After a brief lull six short Maya materialized from the shrubbery and resumed sweeping the walk.

4.

A squadron of locals worked with machetes to push back the jungle from the western fringe of the ruins at Xcaret. Though the day was overcast the heat was intense, their copper bodies glistening with sweat. The ring and chop of their labour echoed off the stone buildings, melding with the rhythmic yawn of surf against the beach.

Sandy and Ryan sauntered down the length of the Maya ballcourt, an open field of fat tropical grasses framed by tall murals of winning athletes dancing and losing athletes being ceremoniously decapitated. High above the reach of the tallest man were narrow vertical hoops set into the walls.

"How could anyone get a ball through that?" wondered Sandy.

"A stone ball, no less," added Ryan.

"They must have been amazing athletes."

"I'd be amazing, too, if my head were at stake."

They strolled to the beach, a crescent of white sand at the mouth of a small inlet that looked across the water to Cozumel, a hazy smear on the grey horizon. Ryan suggested they go for a swim and, before Sandy could voice her hesitation, he peeled off his shirt and shorts and sprinted down to the waves in a red Speedo. "Hey!" called Sandy, "wait up."

Ryan dove in and swam a ways, then stood up on a sandbar and turned back to the beach. Sandy arranged her clothes in a neat pile with her sandals and glasses and then waded in after him, hugging her arms over her chest. "The water's nice," she admitted.

"What?"

"I said the water's nice!"

"Come on out here. I can't hear you."

Ryan smoothed his strawberry blonde hair off his forehead as he waited, squinting against the glare. He was aware of his own tanned skin, the definition of his firm muscles, his casually confident pose—he let himself be watched by her as he pretended to scan the sky. Just as Sandy was about to gain her footing on the rise Ryan jumped off the far side into the deeper water, gesturing at her to follow. She sighed and then started easing herself in.

"You need to make a splash," called Ryan. "What's the ocean without splashing?"

"I'm just getting used to it."

"Come on!"

He disappeared beneath the waves, and then suddenly emerged right beside

her. He put his arm around her waist and threw her off balance, crashing sideways into the turquoise water. Despite herself she shrieked like a schoolgirl, then sputtered on flying spume, then broke into a fit of giggles.

"*That's* the smile I want to see," grinned Ryan.

"You devil!" she laughed, kicking water at him.

A pasty-fleshed fat couple in matching wide-brimmed straw hats sat on the beach observing them sadly. On the breeze they could just make out the woman's simpering grumble, "Why don't *we* have fun like that anymore, Kev?"

"I think I'm hungry," noted Kev.

Ryan and Sandy both cracked up, then resumed splashing and tackling one another, wiping the salt from their eyes and panting for want of dry breath. "Okay, okay," begged Sandy, holding up her hands in defense; "I yield—you win the splash-off."

As they waded back to shore Sandy lifted her arms to push her long brown hair out of her face, her breasts thrust forth to strain against her blue bathing suit. While Ryan was able to admire this sight on the sly Kev was surprised out of his observations by a harsh slap on his doughy shoulder from his wife. "What are you? Twelve?" she wanted to know.

On the microbus back to Arcos Iris Ryan was quiet. Both of them were sitting on towels because their bathing suits had soaked through their shorts. Sandy shifted uncomfortably. After a number of false starts she managed to ask, "What are you doing for dinner tonight?" and then added, "I'm sorry, I don't mean to pry."

"Oh?" blinked Ryan, looking away from the jungle scrolling past the window. "Forgive me, Sandy, I was preoccupied. What did you say?"

"Is there something on your mind?"

"It's nothing that should trouble you. It's my own problem to deal with." He waved dismissively, tried to smile. "In fact, I'm afraid that's what I'll be spending my supper hour taking care of today."

"What is it, Ryan?"

He pursed his lips. "I shouldn't be telling you this..."

"I'm sorry," she interjected. "Nevermind."

"It's Jules and Kate," continued Ryan, letting his shoulders fall. "They weren't able to come up with the full amount to secure a private screening, for their adoption. I'm a little bit torn up about having to give them the bad news."

"Oh God," said Sandy, pained. "I thought everything was all arranged for them."

"It was, it is," nodded Ryan. "But my office called this morning—the Cuthbertsons are technically foreigners, so an additional international handling fee applies." He shook his head morosely. "It's just that kind of red tape I'm trying to spare them, but it always seems to come back tenfold."

Sandy sighed. The microbus bumped along. The windows streaked as the clouds released a light rain. "Um," she said after a moment, "how much are they short?"

"Almost a thousand dollars."

"Oh dear," said Sandy.

The rain came down harder, the windshield a swirling miasma of distorted road punctuated by the ineffectual tick-tock of a single loose wiper. The driver opened his window and reached around to dab at the windshield with a dirty handkerchief.

"I can give it to them."

Ryan blinked. "What's that?"

"I can give them the thousand dollars," Sandy repeated.

"Oh no Sandy—"

"Why not? You're always telling me how rewarding it is to help people. Let me feel that. Let me do this for them. They seem like such nice people."

"But Sandy, it's an awful lot of money..."

"I can afford it. If pride's the issue just don't tell them where it came from. Tell them it's anonymous or whatever. I don't need their thanks—I just want to know that I've done what I can for some people who deserve some help. How could I look at myself in the mirror otherwise?" She touched Ryan's shoulder. "Do you know what I mean?"

It was Ryan's turn to sigh. He pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. "I really can't let you do that. It isn't your problem, Sandy."

"No," she agreed, "but it's my solution. And—you know what—you can't stop me. If I have to I'll give it to them myself."

Ryan turned to face her squarely, searching her watery green eyes for a long moment. Sandy blushed, and was about to squirm or stammer when Ryan smiled and said, "God bless you, Sandy. You've got to be the sweetest, most unselfish woman I've ever met."

Sandy looked at her lap. Ryan gently touched her chin and turned her face upward again. "Don't look down. Don't be embarrassed. I only wish more people had your heart...what a world we would have. Can you imagine?"

Sandy smiled, then frowned as the microbus jostled roughly.

"Apesadumbrado!" called the driver apologetically. Everyone aboard took a firmer hold of the sides of their seats, cringing against the sharp hammering sounding from the roof as the rain opened up into a wicked storm.

"Will cash be okay? I only have traveller's cheques."

Ryan nodded. "Cash will be fine."

For the remainder of the ride back to Arcos Iris they held hands, like grade school kids.

5.

Come evening the throbbing heart of Ensenada de Arcos Iris Villas & Resort was the Disco Kukulkan, a doughnut-shaped dancefloor with a full service bar at its core below a crow's nest for the DJ emblazoned with a neon outline of a stylized feathered snake. The disco had a faux-thatch roof and its support columns were encased in imitation wood fibreglass. On the north side it connected to a hot tub and to the south lay the beach.

The sun was setting, a fading bronze eye behind a veil of grey atmosphere. Out over the water ribbons of rain dragged behind the swiftly moving clouds.

"Fugging hurricane," swore Lorenzo quietly.

"You think it's going to turn inland, boss?" asked the bartender, a pale Caribbean black from the Bahamas with freckles on his cheeks.

Lorenzo shook his head. "Probably not, mang, but I want all the equipment under plastic yust in case the wind decides to blow some rain in at us, jou know?"

"No problem, boss."

Lorenzo nodded curtly and continued making his rounds, inspecting a display of liquor bottles and then asking for a cable to be duct-taped down so no one would trip. He shot the cuff of his white suit jacket and consulted his Rolex. "Disco opens in five minutes, people. Les be ready. The guests have been stuck in their rooms all

fugging day, and they're going to want to have some fun, jou know?"

The wide-hipped Maya girls tucked their inky black hair into neat buns and smoothed their blouses after strapping on their change belts. The DJ lay down his first vinyl selects and queued up some tight, buzzing New Wave from England. The coloured patio-lanterns around the periphery of the disco came on, and then the lights at the bottom of the hot tub.

The first guests began to wander over. "You think the weather's going to hold?" asked a rich old bird from Miami.

"It's going to be a beautiful night, Señora Penworth," smiled Lorenzo, nodding brightly.

An old, heavily jowled man with tufts of white hair sticking out of his ears ambled up, winded from the journey from his villa. "Give me the usual, huh? A table where I can see the young girls dance but isn't too far from the john."

"Right this way, Señor Coriander."

Drinks were dispensed, hands shaken, shoulders clapped. As the disco filled Lorenzo wandered over to lean on the bar, surveying the unfolding evening and smoothing down his thick black mustache. He took a moment to examine his own fingernails critically and when he looked up Ryan Billing was strolling casually up to order himself a little something. "Señor Billing," Lorenzo greeted him quietly.

"Lo," said Ryan with a polite nod. "How's it looking?"

Lorenzo glanced at the darkening sky. "I think we'll be hokay tonight. Tomorrow might be shit again though, jou know? I've got Marcus glued to the fugging radio."

Ryan took his drink from the Bahamian bartender and sipped at it, brushing invisible crumbs from the front of his silk shirt. "You seen Wendell around lately?"

Lorenzo gave Ryan a hard look. "Wendell's out, mang."

"What do you mean, 'out'? He's retiring? Did he strike gold with that Italian broad?"

"Wendell's gone, mang. Forget about him."

"Why the tight lips all of a sudden?" Ryan leaned in closer. "Did something happen to him, Lo?"

Lorenzo frowned, chewed the inside of his cheek for a moment. "Jou running something now, mang?"

Ryan shrugged. "Sure. I have a few things going on."

Lorenzo looked around and then pulled Ryan closer by the shoulder. "Jou might want to think about taking a breather, Señor Billing. Jou know? Listen to my advice to jou: take a vacation, mang. Take it now."

Ryan chuckled dismissively. "What are you talking about, you crazy spic?"

Lorenzo's green-flecked eyes bore down on Ryan. He whispered, "There's heat."

Ryan rolled his eyes. "The hell there is. I already paid Gonzales this month. I talked to him last night. There's nothing going on—nothing here, nothing in Cancun, either."

"There's fugging heat, mang. Are jou listening to me?"

"You don't think Gonzales would know if something were going down?"

"It's not police."

"So what kind of heat is it supposed to be?"

Lorenzo looked around again, straightened his jacket. "Cut and run, Ryan. I'm

fugging telling jou, as a friend. Cut and run *tonight*. Come back in sis months, jou know?"

"Six months?" Ryan frowned, his brow furrowed. He hissed, "What the fuck is this about, Lo?"

But Lorenzo would say no more. He nodded at someone over Ryan's head and flashed his pearly whites. "Jou having a good time?" he called.

Ryan stared for a moment longer but Lorenzo turned his back to him and wandered into the crowd, shaking hands, patting backs, exchanging pleasantries in a powerful voice over the increasingly loud music. He yelled up at the DJ: "Don't turn on the dancefloor lights until the place is full, mang—it looks pathetic."

"Sorry, boss."

Ryan shook his head and turned away from the bar. He immediately spotted Sandy making her way toward the disco and smiled. He waved for the bartender's attention. "Give me a white wine too, will you?"

"No problem, sir."

He met her under the patio-lanterns, holding aloft a frosted glass of wine for her. She self-consciously brushed at her floral-print dress and tucked her hair behind her shoulders. "I'm so glad you came," he told her.

"I wouldn't leave you hanging," said Sandy brightly. "Did you think I would?"

"No. Not you, Sandy, no."

He kissed her hand and gave her the wine. She looked around the rapidly filling dancefloor and bopped her hips experimentally in rhythm to the music. "I think I want to have a fun time tonight," she said, biting her lip. "I think it's been years since I had a fun time."

"Would you care to dance?"

She pushed her empty glass at him. "I want another drink first, okay?"

When they got to the dancefloor Sandy moved with a new kind of abandon, pressing herself playfully against Ryan and, for the first time, showing no nervousness about the irregular pink birthmark that stained the right side of her face. She flung her head from side to side to the beat, laughing and fishing through the flashing colour and shadow of the disco's pulsing lights to find his hand.

When they broke for another round of drinks she squeezed Ryan's bicep and whispered into his ear, "I think I'm drunk. And I think I want to tell you something. Can I?"

"Anything," he said.

"I think I'm falling for you, Ryan Billing. Does that scare you?"

"No."

"I'm glad."

He took both of her hands. "I think you're wonderful, Sandy. If I haven't said so before it is only out of respect for your grief."

She shook her head. "I got used to the idea of Anthony being gone a long time before he went. It was slow. It...we didn't have much, anymore, in the last few years—between us, I mean. He lived in a world of pain. The cancer, you know."

"I'm so sorry, dear Sandy."

She pursed her lips grimly. "It's been almost a year. Everyone tells me I have to move on. And, do you know what? In the past few days I've started to feel for the first time that maybe I can." Her tone changed suddenly, and she buried her face in Ryan's neck. "But I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?" he asked tenderly, speaking right into her small, perfectly

shaped ear.

She looked up again. "Afraid that somebody as amazing as you could never fall for somebody like me, I guess."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You're so together and so confident—you're sophisticated, and I'm not. You live in New York City, and I live in the backwoods. You do something that actually *matters* for a living, and I just do what I'm told."

He looked her in the eyes and sighed. "You are kind and honest and beautiful, Sandy. I can't believe I've been lucky enough to meet someone like you."

"I'm not beautiful," she said, dropping his hand to touch her own face.

"You *are*," he affirmed earnestly, putting his hands on her surprisingly muscular shoulders. "I think you must be the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Then why do you look so sad?"

Ryan turned away. "Let's take a walk."

The short, squat shadows of Maya labourers pulled rakes across the beach, combing it free of seaweed and discarded straws and empty bottles of lotion. They quietly made way for Ryan and Sandy as they sauntered along the water's edge, the thump of the Disco Kukulkan's music becoming tinny and muted as they drew further away.

"I had a call from New York this morning," said Ryan carefully. "And it's looking like I might not have a job to come back to."

"Oh my God, Ryan," said Sandy. "What happened?"

He sighed. "We've been taken over by another agency. A much bigger one. Nothing is for sure yet, but it looks like they're going to be moving in their own staff, offering the rest of us layoff packages."

"Jesus," said Sandy.

"I think they waited until I was gone to announce it. I think they knew it would crush me."

Sandy squeezed his hand. "Oh Ryan, what will you do?"

"Honestly, I don't know. I've been a fool. I put everything into my job. It was my life. And now that it might be gone, what can I do? Go back to an apartment I can't afford and scan the classifieds?"

"I'm sure you could get another job, couldn't you?"

He shrugged. "Sure. Yes. Of course you're right. I'm just feeling overwhelmed right now."

"That's understandable."

"The whole idea of going back to New York sickens me."

They walked in silence for a spell, their feet just out of the reach of the foam washing in at the fringes of each wave of black water. Up ahead another squadron of Maya caretakers retreated from their path like shy Oompah-Loompahs.

"Maybe you don't have to go back to New York," said Sandy.

"What's that?"

"I'm sorry."

"What?"

Sandy took a breath. "I don't suppose you'd be bored enough to want to see Sackville. I mean, my place is small, but..." She coughed. "But you'd be welcome," she concluded lamely.

"Sandy, I couldn't ask that of you."

"But instead you could ask that I give you up forever at the end of this week?"

"Sometimes a week is all we get."
"If you don't want to come, just say so."
"That's not it at all."

"Forget I mentioned anything."

"I won't." Ryan stopped walking and turned to face her in the dark, hands on her shoulders which shook ever so slightly. "I won't ever be able to forget your kindness, your compassion, your trust. I don't want to."

"What *do* you want?"

He stepped back from her, looked out across the dark ocean. "What do I *want*? Sandy, I want you all to myself. I want to go wherever you go. I want to hold your hand and never let go. I want to forget everything that's ever happened to me and start my life brand new, starting tonight."

There was no sound except the raking and the surf.

"...Sandy?"

Ryan turned around. Sandy was still standing there, shoulders quaking. He heard a muffled sob. He took a step closer and then hesitated. "Sandy?" he called gingerly.

She pushed her hair out of her face. "Let's do what we want," she said, voice trembling. "Why shouldn't we?"

"I'm afraid."

"Why?"

"This is too perfect. I don't want to ruin—"

"You think too much."

Sandy stepped forward, put her arms around Ryan, and kissed him. She felt his lips melt against her mouth, his body relax. They pushed closer into each other, uncaring when a wave washed over their ankles and turned the sand beneath their feet to mud.

The Maya combed the beach around them, their eyes courteously downcast.

Later, back on the walkway Ryan glanced up at his villa, squeezing Sandy's hand. "Would you care for a night cap?" he asked with uncharacteristic nervousness.

"Let's go to my place," countered Sandy. She giggled. "Come on."

Once inside her villa Sandy seated Ryan on the sofa and tended to the kitchenette, pouring out two glasses of rum over ice. He noted the pillow and sheet shoved to one end of the sofa. "Do you sleep down here?" he asked.

"Um, yeah," she replied, handing him his drink. "It's cooler."

The ceiling fan cut the air above their heads rhythmically. Sandy turned down the lights. Ryan sipped his drink appreciatively, watching her move around the room. She locked the front door. She kicked off her shoes. She pulled her dress over her head and stood before him in her underwear, hands on her hips, regarding him with one finely arched eyebrow cocked. "Finish your drink," she advised.

"Jesus Christ," said Ryan, doing as he was told.

Sandy pushed aside the ottoman with a grunt and then knelt on the tiled floor at Ryan's knees. She watched him with a saucy smirk as she unhitched her brassiere and let it drop away, then traced tickling circles on his thigh through the thin fabric of his slacks.

Ryan drained his glass and put it aside, smacking his lips and frowning his brow. "This is strong stuff..." he mumbled.

"So am I," said Sandy.

"I feel a bit dizzy," he confessed.

"That's okay."

"Okay..."

She looked into his face expectantly. Ryan reached out to touch her, his hand heavy and clumsy. He frowned, then blinked and withdrew his hand to rub his eyes.

"...Damn," he whispered weakly.

Sandy nodded.

And Ryan remembered nothing more.

6.

Ryan awoke in the dark.

His head was pounding. His mouth was cottony and his throat filled with a noxious taste. He detected a musky, masculine smell to the air.

He tried to move but found that he could not.

His wrists, ankles, shoulders and waist were bound with what felt like tightly wrapped fabric. He was suspended, face up, at a forty-five degree angle. With experimentation he discovered he could swing faintly side to side by scooching his hips. He could not swing very far, however. He might, with persistence, be able to rock himself to sleep.

As his mind defogged he noticed a feeble light growing from his left. Through the scintillating grain of dark blindness he began to detect the fuzzy vertice where two walls met a ceiling. White stucco walls.

Outside, the sun was rising. The tropical sky turned pink and caused the white stucco walls to faintly glow. He heard the familiar chirping insects and cooing birds of the jungle, and he thought for a moment that he was back in his villa at Arcos Iris...somehow, inexplicably bound.

Then he remembered Sandy. What had happened to Sandy?

Something behind him shifted and made a vaguely animal sound. Ryan gasped. He tried to turn his head but could not. He shuddered and felt a cold sweat rise across his shoulders. His heart raced. He wondered what he was trapped with. Was it free, or also bound?

Whatever it was, the next thing it did was pass gas.

Shaking, Ryan's eyes darted across the white stucco ceiling as the pink glow dissipating into real morning sunlight—orange and harsh. His eyes watered and he shut them, the afterimages crawling in rhythm with his throbbing headache.

Someone or something urinated loudly into a plastic container, like the sound of a wet zipper.

Ryan opened his eyes again, his skin crawling and his breath shallow. He craned his head back as far as it would go and saw a confusion of strips of white fabric radiating from a hub with dangling pulleys. He pushed his head forward while twisting and saw that on the floor directly beneath his buttocks was a plastic receptacle.

He startled at the muffled sound of a typewriter. It sounded like it was downstairs. It clattered purposefully for a few minutes and then silence returned. Ryan fought to keep his breathing from running away from him as his mind raced, trying to understand what kind of a prisoner he was.

With a lurch he backtracked and realized fully that he was just that: a prisoner. He was not in any way haphazardly tangled, but rather he had been methodically caught and caged.

Footfalls sounded nearby. The door to the room Ryan was in opened, and someone in bare feet padded in, the skin of their soles faintly sticking to the cool tiles.

He smelled cigarette smoke.

His torturer, perhaps? Ryan tried desperately not to void his bladder.

After a moment the barefoot person walked around the room, and Ryan heard one of the plastic containers being emptied into another vat and replaced, followed by the shuffling of papers. Then the person walked around to the front of Ryan, eyes cast down into an open cardboard dossier.

"...Sandy?" croaked Ryan feebly, blinking.

She wore a dirty pair of khaki shorts he had not seen before and a careless white T-shirt bearing a faded image of Mickey Mouse. Her hair was pulled up into a loose bun. Her glasses were gone, as was her crucifix. And her birthmark.

She didn't look up. "Sandy, what's happening?" he whispered hoarsely, eyes wide.

Sandy drew on her cigarette absently and looked up from the dossier, her face expressionless. "Angus Craig Llewelyn, born nine April nineteen fifty-seven, Spaulding, Illinois, USA," she said quietly and crisply. She closed the dossier and stuck it under her arm, then looked into his eyes.

"Who's that?" breathed Ryan.

She slapped him. Quick and hard, across the left cheek.

He changed tacts. "What the fuck *are* you?"

"Angry," said Sandy.

She walked out of his view again and a second later he was roughly rotated in his fabric creche, spun about to face the interior of the villa bedroom. He saw his own cocoon-like reflection in the grey face of the television. And he was not alone: two other men hung suspended in the far corners. Both were oriented to face him, and gagged.

"Wendell!"

Wendell nodded his head slightly and mumbled something. Ryan didn't recognize the other guy who just stared back at him listlessly.

Sandy pointed toward the floor and Ryan buried his chin in his chest to see down over his body. A series of photographs and folders were artistically arrayed by his feet. The photographs were of women. Ryan recognized all of them. "Fuck," he said.

"Fuck indeed," agreed Sandy, smoking.

"So you know who I am...so what?" grunted Ryan. "I didn't force anybody to do anything. Each of those women—"

"Each of those women," interrupted Sandy sharply, "was plied out of their life savings by you, pretending to be a man. We're not here to debate it. We're here to end it."

Ryan tried to say something but couldn't manage.

"Am I going to kill you?" she asked, looking out the window. "Is that what you're wondering?"

Ryan stared at her.

She put out her cigarette in an ashtray shaped like a Maya calendar on the TV stand. She licked her lips and sighed. "The answer is no. There will be no more death."

Ryan gulped. "No more?"

Sandy turned back toward him, strode close, leaned into his face. "Wasn't my sister's life enough? Ask Wendell. He's been spending some *serious* time thinking about how she killed herself after he left her holding the bag for a quarter of a million in debt. Or ask Juan, here. He murdered a girl when she threatened to turn him in. He did it with a champagne bottle. Knocked her little head right in. Didn't you, Juan? Just pulped

her up and moved on to the next mark.”

Juan made no comment.

“I never killed anybody,” swore Ryan.

“Who cares?” declared Sandy with a fierce snort. “You ruin lives. You’re going to pay.” She stepped back into the middle of the room and surveyed the three suspended men and the arrays of evidence at the feet of each. “I’m just doing my little bit for justice,” she said with a cold smile.

“What’s going to happen to me, Sandy? What the fuck *is* this?”

She ignored him, gathering up a few items from the bureau including Ryan’s wallet and the little green book in which he wrote the access codes to his Caymen Islands accounts.

“You’re robbing me?”

“Always keep your eye on your keys,” said Sandy.

Next she opened the mini-bar and extracted three plastic sacks of juice—apple-flavoured Capri Sun. She placed one each of the chests of the bound men and carefully angled the little plastic straws in reach of their lips after moving aside their gags. She paused beside Ryan. “I’ll be back in a bit to collect the garbage. I’ll bring you your gag then, Mr. Llewelyn. Don’t you fret.”

Then she turned on heel and left, closing the door behind her.

After a moment Ryan turned toward Wendell, who was busy working on his sack of juice. “Wendell? Wendell! This is so crazy. I feel like *I’m* going crazy. God. Jesus. This is so fucked up.”

Wendell paused and considered the question. “Shut the fuck up, Billing,” he spat, and then went back to his juice.

“What are we going to do?”

Wendell ignored him. When he was finished his juice he expertly knocked it aside with his chin, made a face of sublime concentration, and then dropped a long log of faeces into the plastic container beneath him.

Ryan looked away, disgusted. With a start of surprise he saw that Juan was grinning at him. “At lunch we get diet-shakes, guy,” Juan cooed in a disconcerting, sing-song voice. He added, “When the shadow from the lamp gets to my toes, it’s time for lunch, guy.”

“How long have you been here?” asked Ryan, his voice flattened by horror.

“Don’t get him talking,” muttered Wendell darkly. “Oh Christ, just don’t.”

“Forever and a day!” cried Juan liltingly. “I was a little boy in this web, playing and laughing and kissing my mother’s sweet round tit!”

“Shut up!” hissed Wendell. “If we make noise *nobody* gets lunch. Billing—you fucking moron.”

“Shit,” said Ryan. Juan continued to shout. “He’s insane,” decided Ryan. “This is all insane. Oh my God. How long is she going to keep us here?”

“Shut the fuck up,” repeated Wendell wearily.

“I received my first communion right there by the dresser!” announced Juan enthusiastically. He twisted in his bindings and his sack of juice dropped off his chest. Juan began to sob.

“Oh, God,” moaned Ryan.

“Shut up! Shut up!”

The morning wore on. The sunsplash from the window crawled across the floor, dimming as clouds rolled in. Thunder growled in the distance. Ryan closed his eyes and tried not to cry.

7.

Sandy's name wasn't Sandy. Sandy had been her sister. But Sandy would not utter her own name until her mission was complete, so she did not bother to correct Lorenzo as they ordered drinks in the Ensenada de Arcos Iris' main pavilion lounge. They sat on tall stools beside the wide, rain spattered windows. "This one is on the house, Sandy, hokay?" said Lorenzo, motioning her hand away from signing for the tab.

"You don't need to butter me up, Lo," said Sandy. "You've already done your part. I don't have any complaints."

"So let me buy you a drink anyway. Maybe just because I'm impressed. Maybe just because I wish I had the *cohonos* to even think about doing something crazy like that."

"You think I'm crazy?"

Lorenzo preened his mustache craftily. "Anyone who does anything out of the ordinary is crazy. I'm fugging crazy, you're fugging crazy. Those guys you got, they're fugging crazy, too. Otherwise they'd make a living like regular peoples. So let me buy you a drink, lady—one crazy to another, you know?"

"Very well," said Sandy.

Lorenzo held out his glass and Sandy tinked hers against it. "Here's to being fugging crazy," he said, and drained his drink.

Sandy emptied her glass as well and slammed it down on the bar dramatically. For the first time in weeks she felt like herself, safe to regain her confident posture and to wear her comfortably careless clothes—faded khaki slacks and a well-worn sweater. She pressed out her cigarette in a glass ashtray. "Well, that's it. I'm going home. The *federales* are on their way?"

"I can call Inspector Herrera again, if you want."

"No, that's fine. I'm sure they'll be here soon enough. And I should get moving before my flight gets cancelled by the hurricane." She slipped off her stool, put a canvas bag over her shoulder, and picked up the lead of a single wheeled suitcase with a typewriter case strapped to its top.

Lorenzo brushed the arms of his white suit meticulously, then looked up at Sandy and regarded her significantly. He opened his mouth but said nothing.

Sandy smiled. Lorenzo smiled back.

She reached into her canvas bag and pulled out a manilla envelope. Lorenzo took it courteously, blew open the end with a suave cough and peered inside without removing the contents.

"The negatives are in there, too," said Sandy.

"Very well," agreed Lorenzo, closing the envelope. He walked over to the lounge's fireplace and placed the envelope gingerly in the hearth. Then he straightened, put his hands behind his back, and rocked back and forth on his heels as he watched it burn.

"Thank you for your cooperation in this matter," said Sandy gravely.

"Right back at you," said Lorenzo with a sly wink. "...Sandy."

Sandy's taxi to Cancun was waiting for her under the portico beyond the lobby, a lime-green Volkswagen Beetle with checkered doors. The driver put her suitcase under the hood and Sandy tossed her canvas bag into the backseat. He gunned the cheerfully popping engine and the car emerged into an opaque grey deluge of rain.

Crawling along Arcos Iris' curving driveway they passed four police cruisers and two black cars. Sandy craned her head to watch them proceed to the hotel. "Thank

you, Inspector Herrera,” she whispered.

“Qué?” said the driver, leaning in close to the windshield in hope of a better view.

“Nada, nada.”

Fifteen minutes later they came to a screeching halt just shy of a tangle of twisted vehicles on the coastal highway—a pickup truck, a microbus, and two Beetles. The truck had been full of people standing in the tailgate and now they were spread across the road. The top of one of the Beetles appeared to have been torn off, along with pieces of its occupants. The fierce rain diluted red pools of blood into pink puddles.

Sandy screamed, and so did the driver.

A tall palm ripped from its roots and crashed down into the middle of the scene, leaves shredding off into the wind. Clots of dirt spattered against Sandy’s taxicab, and the driver screamed again. “Hesus Dolce! I’m sorry Señorita, but I’m going back to the hotel, hokay hokay?”

They turned around, passing an ambulance on their way back west. They buzzed back to the driveway of Arcos Iris and entered a maelstrom of rain, mud and small objects buffeting the car from all direction, disorienting the driver and causing him to rear-end one of the police cruisers parked in front of the main pavilion. “Hesus Dolce!”

Smashed pieces of plastic flew into the air and were instantly torn away laterally by a gust. A chair with a floral print cushion tumbled through the portico next, knocking over a soaking federale.

Sandy jumped out of the Beetle. The hood was crushed—her luggage jammed within.

“Get the fug inside!” bellowed Lorenzo, grabbing her arm.

“There are people hurt out there!” she yelled, stumbling into the lobby. There was crowd of frightened guests gathered there and they collectively screeched as one of the tall windows overlooking the interior of the resort was shattered by a flying fibreglass statue of Yum Caax.

“Welcome to Mexico,” grumbled Lorenzo darkly, hauling Sandy to her feet.

At the tail of another influx of terrified guests came a cadre of federales marching tightly around Ryan, Wendell and Juan, who were sopping and handcuffed. A rotund, red-faced man in a brown suit strode over to Lorenzo. “What’s the most structurally sound building in the complex?”

“You’re in it, Inspector,” said Lorenzo.

Just then the eastern edge of the ceiling crumbled with a grating, ripping sound, exposing racing clouds and a sky filled with flying objects. A bale of thatched grass burst apart, raining down into the lobby. People fled toward the outer walls, falling over one another on the suddenly rainslick floor.

Sandy spotted Jules kneeling on the floor next to Kate. “What happened?” she yelled over the din.

“I think I broke my leg,” said Kate, wincing.

Sandy helped Jules pick his young wife up and then ushered them both into the shelter of an alcove by the front desk. She was about to run back toward Lorenzo when the roof above her peeled open with a roar, a trunk of two old crossed palms looming over her as they tumbled.

“Sandy!” yelled Lorenzo.

She was suddenly propelled sideways by a harsh force on her right side, then

knocked roughly to the floor to slide up against a wall. A display of day-trip brochures broke loose and fell on her, releasing a flurry of glossy full-colour spreads through the lobby.

The trees struck the floor with a bone-shaking double thud.

Sandy looked up. Ryan was on the ground beside her, breathing hard. He had pushed her clear. He had saved her life.

They exchanged a long look a split second before the federales caught up with the action, jumping over the broken, fallen palms in the middle of the lobby and clustering around Ryan. They jerked him roughly to his feet and dragged him away. One of the officers dropped down one knee and tossed the brochure display box off Sandy. “Señorita?”

“I’m okay,” she said, staring after Ryan.

The guests remained huddled there in the much abused lobby of Ensenada de Arcos Iris Villas & Resort for another half hour as the winds gradually diminished and the rain ceased to fall like sheets of bullets. The storm was moving up the coast, carrying on its ball of destruction in more westerly locales. The federales radioed for an ambulance for Kate Cuthbertson, then loaded the shackled prisoners into the cruisers and sped away, lights flashing. After that the only sound was dripping water and the panicked breathing of a woman with an anxiety disorder whose puffer was empty.

“Well,” said Lorenzo sadly, surveying the lobby as he played with his mustache. “I’m totally fugged.”

Sandy patted him on the shoulder of his stained and frayed white suit. “Take heart, Lo. You’re crazy. You’ll figure something out.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” he sighed. “Crazy to build a resort where fugging hurricanes come. Hey, Señor Coriander, where’s your club at, mang?”

The old man with shoots of white hair in his ears was sitting with a small group of seniors drying themselves off with little sauna towels. “Eh? Toronto, Lo.”

“Do you get any hurricanes hup there?”

“Never,” said the old man.

“Thas it,” declared Lorenzo, raising his chin. “I’m moving to Toronto on fugging Monday, mang.”

8.

In a small apartment in Montréal, Justine opened a package of Mexican newspapers and scanned the headlines, flipping through the pages impatiently: *Excelsior*, *Epoca*, *Reforma*.

At last she found it: a narrow column running down the left-hand side of *El Herald*o. She strained her Spanish to get through it: three men arraigned on charges of fraud and theft after being collared by a foreign vigilante who anonymously provided the authorities with carefully detailed dossiers of evidence of their years of conning.

She tasted the word: “Vigilante!”

The article went on to mention how one of the men, Harold Nowalsky a.k.a. Wendell Nowers a.k.a. Winston Fetchings, was even connected to the suicide of a Quebecoise woman despondent after she lost everything to him. Justine put the newspaper aside and poured herself a glass of red wine.

She speculated about how fulfilled she would not feel to return to the office next week, swirling the wine in her glass and smelling it. “Vigilante,” she said again, languorously.

Then she cried a bit. She cried because it was all over. For two years she had

been bent upon this quest to right the wrong of her sister's death, and now she was thinking about whether she'd take the metro or a taxi to work. Now she was reduced to wondering how long her Mexican tan would last under the dull orb of Canada's winter sun.

She felt small and big, all at the same time—destined and useless, driven and aimless, important and irrelevant. Incorrectly filed.

She was startled out of her reverie by the ringing telephone. "Hello-bonjour?"

"Justine Schalen, please."

"May I ask what it's regarding?"

"I'd like to talk to her about our mutual friend Sandy."

She held the phone away from her ear, startled. She licked her lips, slowly brought the phone back to her face. "I'm afraid I don't know anyone by that name."

A pause. "This is Ryan Billing."

Her breath caught. "What do you want?" she said at last.

"I just wanted to talk to you."

"Aren't you supposed to be in a Mexican prison?"

"No—well, I'm here actually."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm in Montréal," said Ryan. "I'm at a payphone at, uh, Saint Laurent and Prince Albert. I was wondering...if you'd come meet me here. There's a bar. Do you know Chou-chou?"

"Why would I want to meet you?"

"I just want to talk. Can't we do that? I just want—"

"I don't have anything to say to you."

"Look, I came all this way. To find you. Please, Sandy, just hear me out."

"No. Goodbye, Mr. Llewelyn."

"Wait—no, no. Please. Don't hang up on me. You changed my life, Sandy—
please!"

Justine sighed. She got halfway to replacing the phone on the cradle and then, with a sour swallow, brought it back to her mouth. "How did you find me?"

"Your bag. Crushed in the taxi. I found it. And I just had to see you again, if for nothing else than just to tell you what an impact you've made on me as a person. You've *changed* me, Sandy."

"There. You've told me. We have no further business."

"I wanted to say thank you."

"So say it."

"Thank you."

"Great. You're done. Never contact me again or so help me I'll have Surete Quebec on you so fast..." She trailed off, pushed her chestnut hair out of her face, glanced around for the cigarettes she'd already quit. "Are you still there?"

"I'm still here."

"So go already."

A pause. "I can't hang up without telling you that I love you, Sandy. I don't care if you never think of me again, but I want you to know for just a single second that I've totally fucking fallen in love with you. You're the most amazing thing that's ever hit me, and I don't want to let that go. I will if I have to, but I don't want to. So at least you know. Do you understand? You fucking *rewrote* me. Do with that whatever you will. I promise to leave you alone now."

"Ryan..."

“What, Sandy?”

She bit her lip and swore under her breath. “Listen, I’ll meet you for a drink, okay? One drink. At Chou-chou. Around people. Okay? But that’s it.”

“Okay. Okay, great. Oh, thank you, Sandy. You won’t regret it.”

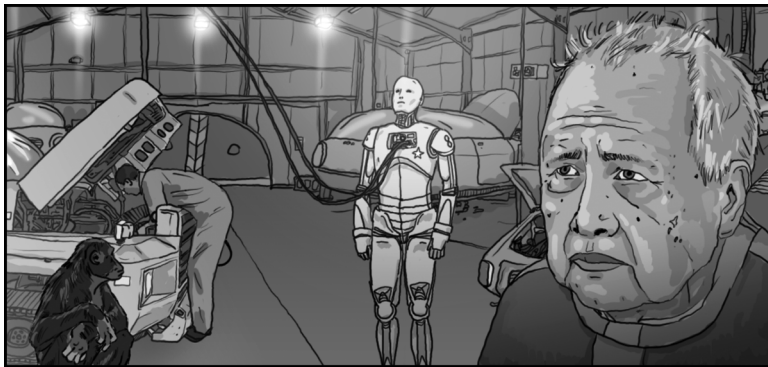
“Fifteen minutes,” she said and hung up.

When she arrived at Chou-chou she stamped the snow off her boots and then took a tour around the place, pushing through the crowd, feeling unreal. Ryan was nowhere to be found. She sidled up to the bar and described him for the bartender, who shrugged and shook his head. She bummed a cigarette and smoked it while she stared at the door, then stepped out and wandered into the intersection of St. Laurent and Prince Albert. She looked around but could not see a payphone anywhere.

Justine couldn’t make any sense of the situation until she got back home to find her apartment stripped bare. Every item: every scrap of clothing, furniture and electronic equipment was gone leaving nothing but dents in the carpet.

There was a note in the middle of the floor. It read: *Fair is fair—love, Ryan.*

The vigilante sat down slowly, shook her head, and then laughed and laughed and laughed.



FREE FELIX

Felix arrived by crate. In two crates, actually.

The larger crate was a colour that used to be white, lettered in English and Mandarin *THIS SIDE UP* with corresponding arrows. It contained his arms, legs, pelvis and viscera, with a padded compartment for his hands, feet and face. The smaller crate was as white as it had ever been, and in addition to the indication of preferred orientation it bore the plea, *FRAGILE*.

It contained Felix's brain.

Sheriff Tom sat down on the stoop to have a good, long look at the two crates. He knew they contained Felix on account of the manifest he had been asked to sign. The courier didn't care whether Tom had actually ordered anything or not. He gave Tom an address in the planetary metalibrary to contact with his complaint. He asked Tom for a glass of water, and Tom gave him one.

"I don't know what I'd have the feller do," Tom said to himself as he considered the crates after the courier had left. "Might do as well to keep him all packed up like he is."

Sheriff Wa Tom was law, order and mayor in the tiny pioneer camp of Naktong. He was a compact, barrel-shaped man with a fastidiously groomed mustache which, no matter how much attention Tom lavished upon it, resembled the peach-fuzz of a teenager more than anything else.

He wore a gauge-two heavysuit even though he would admit to his big brown dog in the quiet of night that he was feeling its drag on his bones these days, and that he secretly pined for a gauge-one. Sheriff Tom was seventy-three turns old.

Camp Naktong, on the other hand, had only been founded thirty-five turns ago. The entire settlement lived beneath only three small domes, crouched on a hillside overlooking the steaming flats of the Fortuna Fossae. About a third of the population at any given time were scientists of one specialty or another, using the camp as a base from which to launch their expeditions to Fortuna or the northern edge of the Noctis Fossae where the hills had stripes in them like an old-fashioned parfait dessert.

Just about everyone else at camp was either involved directly or indirectly in gathering, filtering, packaging, selling or shipping of spring water from the Fortuna or the Noctis in bottled or sack form to the larger camps down south at the valley. "Pure as Naktong" was an expression then in use at the growing twin super-camps of Nirgal

and Huo Hsing.

A battered archway of sun-bleached plastic greeted visitors as they came through the main lock, proclaiming: *Camp Naklong: Home of the Sweetest Waters on Mars. Pop: 142.*

Sheriff Tom reminded himself to update the sign on account of Miss Vinovich's new baby. He had been meaning to update it for a week, but had not been able to find the instructions for the sign software.

Tom's wide verandah jutted out into the main square of the camp in the main dome, shelters of greater or lesser permanence ringing it on all sides. The square, like all the camp's streets, was made of fine, rust-coloured grains congealed flat and hard with a special kind of intelligent dilly the streetcleaners applied as a dust to keep the sand from getting kicked up and mucking with the ventilators. Across from Tom's verandah were the camp's two restaurants: Daddyeats where they served liquor, and Kidsyeats where they served milkshakes.

It was Daddyeats that Sheriff Tom felt would provide the counsel he sought, so he stood up slowly and sauntered across the lonely bronze street.

The doors swung open and shut behind him. He spotted a couple of campfolk and greeting them cheerily. He sat down and had Tabina bring him a glass of beer.

"What's in the package?" George Lee asked as he lumbered into Daddyeats. George Lee was a giant in the medical sense and a child in the mental sense—every camp needed a lovable fool. "Tell me Tommy, please? What's in it? Can I open it?"

Tom snorted. "Dunno. Just arrived. This here paper says it's a feller named Felix."

"A ro-bot, you mean?" George asked, eyes wide.

"That's the way I have it pegged," Tom told him.

"My oh my," said Old Man Russet, who was rotting in the corner. "A rowboat. Say, where you going to row it, Tommy?"

"Not a rowboat, Russey, a *robot*. It's a sort of walking computer that acts like a man. You know the things."

Old Man Russet grunted noncommittally and returned to his drink.

George sat down at the bar beside Sheriff Tom, which made the glasses tinkle and quiver. "Can I help you build it, can I Tom? Please?"

When Tom hesitated to answer Tabina warned, "Now don't tell me you're thinking of sending it on its way, Tom..."

Tom sighed. "Well, I dunno. Maybe I should."

Nolan Chow, an amicable hydroareologist from Camp Nirgal, sidled up next to the sheriff to make his appeal. "You know as well as I do that Grace is getting too old to fix every seal failure, especially in that leaky west dome. I bet she'd appreciate a robot around to lend her a hand."

"It sure would make hauling the kegs easier," Tabina pointed out.

"I don't want any damn eggs," retorted Old Man Russet.

"Aw, come on Tommy," begged George. "Having a robot'd be fun. He could be like your deputy."

Sheriff Tom nodded slowly. A deputy! Now that would be something. He began thinking about all the things the robot could do for the little camp, and a smile bloomed on his thin lips. "I reckon you folks might be on to something," he admitted.

Putting Felix together didn't turn out to be as difficult as Sheriff Tom had at first figured. By the end nearly everyone at camp had lent a hand one way or another.

Kalil the buggy man volunteered his garage for the purpose. Tabina brought some cheeseburgers by. Chad Beardley, a medical scientist originally from Nirgal but staying on after his research post at Naktong had expired, had some experience with surgical robots so he was selected to help Tom actually get the thing started up.

It was standing in the middle of Kalil's garage, all of the sand buggies having been parked off to one side. The robot was light brown in colour, with skin made from a soft, leathery plastic. The eyes were black and shiny, set within a face whose contours suggested a human being: the mouth, lipless but clearly pliant, the nostrils little more than slits. The "skin" around the eyes looked pliant as well, but currently hung lifelessly slack. The robot lacked fingernails, a navel and any evident genitalia—but there was a ridge, a suggestion of a spine, running down the back.

Tabina thought the robot looked like it could use a good meal, and said so. Tom pointed out that robots probably didn't need to eat. "Au contraire," said Chas. "They eat just about anything, but they don't need much of it. A little oxygen will do him just fine if he gets peckish."

As its only insignia on the right shoulder the robot bore a simple numeral 8.

Kalil's chimpanzees were sitting in the corner eating, the big mother occasionally glancing over her shoulder warily at the silent man-shape in the middle of the garage. One of the little ones ate an ant, and was scolded.

"Well," said Tom slowly. "How do we boot it up?"

"Well," said Chas. He added pensively, "H'mmm."

George blinked.

Chas put his ear against the robot's chest and listened. "I don't hear anything," he reported.

"Should you be hearing anything?" Tom asked.

"Does he have a heart?" George wanted to know.

"Heck no, he ain't going to be having a heart, George," said Tom.

"On account a' his being a robot?"

"That's how I have it pegged."

Chas shook his head. "He has a heart. But I'm pretty sure it isn't in his chest. I'm trying to hear his power source. It should be ticking over on battery, even in storage." After a bit of fumbling he managed to find the pressure-points that opened the robot's chest panel. "Ah," Chas said abruptly.

"Ah?" echoed Tom.

"No go."

"No go?"

"There is no power source."

"Ah," said Tom.

That left them in a bit of a pickle. Tabina brought a couple of beers over to the garage, and they all stood around the inert robot and noodled the problem. Nolan Chow wandered in and asked how everything was going, then joined the ring of glum and pensive faces.

Kalil came by in the tow hauling a battered old buggy. He had been out-of-domes, so when he hopped off the tow he let loose a cloud of sand and snow which drifted sedately to the floor. Chad snapped the robot's chest shut quickly to avoid mucking up the innards. Kalil pulled off his masque and goggles, and made a few quick signs to his co-pilot chimp who scurried off to do his bidding. Kalil shook the dust out of his hair. "What gives with the rowboat?"

"Ro-bot," corrected George helpfully.

“Whatever.”

They brought Kalil up to speed. He wished them good luck and turned his attention to the buggy he’d brought in which two of his chimps had now freed from the tow. Kalil replaced the main battery quickly, then hooked the buggy up to the leads from the garage grid. He flipped two switches and the engine purred to life.

“Red is plus, black is minus,” George mumbled to himself.

Chas furrowed his brow. He opened the chest panel of the robot once more and peered inside. The small cavity he had accessed through the sternum was made of a dark, dull metal, the surface of which had several apertures and connection ports. He spotted two small, unremarkable cable ends near the back bearing the symbols “+” and “-“ in tiny white type.

“You getting an idear there, Chas?” prompted Tom.

Chas nodded. “I reckon I am,” he reported thoughtfully.

“I don’t know about this...” murmured Kalil.

“Aw,” groaned Tom petulantly, “you know we’ll discount your power, don’t you fret.” He turned his attention back to Chas Beardley and Nolan Chow who had just finished checking the soundness of their connections. Two long cables hung from the main panel of the garage grid, snaked across a couple of light fixtures, and ultimately were plugged into the chest cavity of the robot.

“We’re all set,” said Nolan.

“Well okay then.” Tom nodded at Kalil who grumpily stood and punched the appropriate controls. Power ought now to be flowing into the robot. Tom looked at Nolan, who looked at Chas, who put his ear against the robot’s ribs.

Chas straightened. “I don’t think it’s working.”

“Good afternoon,” said Felix crisply, “and welcome to Felix, a professional-grade twelfth-generation precision automaton derived from the eighth pool. I exist, operate, and am at your service.”

Everyone jumped, and George spilled his beer.

The chimps hoot-panted excitedly, for they reasoned that the strange patient had finally been successfully revived. They began to sign emphatically, their big hands blurring with the intensity of their gestures. “Want cup water? Throat dry? Want cup water?”

From that day forward it was not certain whether the small camp of Naktong had a robot or an extremely clever and courteous garage. As Felix continued to remind them, he lacked a Type 3 Cold Fusion Micropile Set with External Auxiliary Temperature Control Unit 44M. He indicated that his preferred brand would be Sony. “Do you have any idea how much one of those puppies costs?” Sheriff Tom asked Felix. “Jeeze Louise!”

And so Felix was permanently attached to the camp’s power grid through the buggy bay at Kalil’s garage. During the first week everyone at camp came around to have a boo at him, and maybe stop for a chat. Most folks had seen robots before—at least from a distance—but most of them had never spoken with one, or even had occasion to be near one of the ones that could speak intelligibly.

The children pestered Felix with questions. “How strong are you? Do you have a wife? How high can you count?”

“I can exert twelve hundred fifty Newtons of force. I have no wife. My calculations may enjoy any number conceivable.” Felix always answered in a precise and refined manner, with gentle emphasis and polite tone. He spoke English when he had

been activated, but seemed equally comfortable in the Marsgo of the campfolk.

Despite the immobility of his new deputy, Sheriff Tom stuck a golden star to Felix's breast. "If you see any trouble, you have the authority to sort it all out," Tom said solemnly.

"Yes sir," said Felix.

"Now, don't be using undue force unless it's warranted, you hear me?"

"Yes sir," said Felix.

"Well okay then," agreed Tom.

When the scientists came home after a long day out-of-domes they would stay and gab a while with Felix after sending the chimps to park their buggies. They would ask Felix his opinion on any particularly thorny problems they had encountered, and sometimes ask him the favour of doing a little number crunching for them if their computers were too full, or on the fritz, or if the metalibrary connections were too slow.

"So, do you think we're on solid ground with our estimate of the crevasse dimensions?"

"Given available data, the probability is ninety-seven point three nine four six repeater percent in your favour, madam."

More and more people found questions that they felt Felix could help them with, and after a while no one even needed an excuse to swing by and shoot the breeze with the camp robot. Tabina even opened up a little stand outside Kalil's garage during the afternoon to refresh the visitors and spoil the chimps with bananas. Whenever there was a problem at camp, the general advice was to head on down to Kalil's and ask.

Felix was eternally obliging, and always polite.

"Is that your back bothering you again, Tommy?"

Wa Tom looked up slowly and nodded. "Ayup, that's what it is, Kwong. And no, I don't want anything for it, damn it. I'm a hundred and fifteen turns old, and a man can't ask for much more than that. Back be damned: I'll be dispatched soon enough."

Dr. Kwong shook his head and chuckled. "You're as stubborn as ever, Tommy. You're even healthy—for a man your age. So clear out of here. I'll see you at the Daddyeats later."

Dr. Kwong leaned on her cane as she sat down. Tom craned his head around. "Now just where in the hell is that chimp of mine? Melita! Melita, damn it, it's time to leave."

Melita was a strong twelve-year-old chimpanzee with braided black fur and big brown eyes. She poked her head out from behind Tom's chair and hooted quietly. Tom spotted her and shuffled over. Melita handed him his cane, and then got into position to let Tom lean on her shoulder if necessary as he walked. She wore a simple white tank top and shorts, the top emblazoned with the red palm of her order. She was very fond of the old man, and thought he would never admit it for fear of disgracing the memory of his long passed favourite dog, Tom was pretty fond of her, too.

If they argued—which they did, for Tom was stubborn and, as he grew older, more often wrong than right about the little things—Tom always ended up saying, "Look, when you were born I was already over a century old."

To which Melita invariably and infuriatingly replied by signing, "Exactly!"

Camp Naktong was no longer the humble place it had been thirty years ago when Wa Tom had been sheriff. Where the arch over the main lock had once said *Home of the Sweetest Water on Mars* it now sported a display of wondrous facts, scrolling in English, Mandarin and Marsgo ten times an hour.

The sign said things like: *Welcome to Camp Naktong, City Class 1, Boreal Valles Marineris...Population: 19 540...Visitor Information Kiosks are located All 16 Domes...Buggy Borrow see Dome 1...Plant Workers see Dome 9...The current dome temperature is 22C with a humidity index of ten...Out-of-domes temperature is -100C with strong western breezes of up to 90 kph, sand clearing by mid-day...Earn workhour bonuses through State Service, see City Hall in Dome 2...Water of Ares shares up 7.13 on Terran Exchange...Population Update: 19 541...*

Beyond lay a broad avenue of smooth stone leading straight through the Old Quarter and directly on to the new administrative complex in Dome 2. The old medical building had been lifted and moved back to accommodate the wider street, and Tom grumped about that for a bit while shuffling down the steps with Melita's help. He was preparing himself for the trial of crossing the avenue, which was always bustling with careening buggies or speeding cars or clots of obnoxious young people.

Tom recalled a conversation from years ago when he had heard from Kel Programmer down in Camp Huo Hsing. Kel had said, "You're in for a bit of population explosions there, Sheriff. Ares is growing up, and the pioneering days are coming to an end. I'm sending you a magistrate to take some of the load off your hands."

Tom had indeed been busy, and he was thankful that he wouldn't have to arbitrate every little scuffle. Youngsters poured into the little camp by the dozens and then the hundreds—youngsters who weren't interested in exploration or securing the nascent ecosystem: instead, they came for jobs, markets and society.

Tom found himself in charge of a police force who could have been his grandchildren. He had a devil of a time just understanding what they were saying half the time, their speech riddled with bizarre neologisms and baffling slang.

Eventually Kel Programmer sent in a fire chief, and then a full-time mayor. Shortly thereafter Wa Tom retired with no regrets. The camp was too big for him, anyhow. He remembered fondly the days when he knew the names of everyone in camp...

Melita was tugging his arm, pulling him back to the present. Tom looked down. She was signing, "Pay attention, cross street." Tom nodded and allowed her to adeptly guide him through traffic. He followed like a lamb.

Once the street was successfully forded he said, "Melita, take me to Kalil's. I've been fixing to have a conversation with our Felix."

Kalil's garage was a garage-in-fact no longer. The simple colonist shelter that Kalil's father had erected turns and turns ago was still there, but a more permanent structure stood around it. The quaint inner shelter still bore the original sign that said *Kalil's Buggy Bay* in big green letters, with smaller blue type beneath reading *The Robot is 'in'*.

Kalil's son restored so-called "classic buggies" in the front, and Felix lived in the back.

Not too many folks came to see Felix these days, for the young people didn't—and couldn't—know about him, and the older folk were mostly gone. When the magistrate had arrived Felix had to kept out of sight. Oddly enough, the biggest problem was not that Felix was not the camp's property, or that he had been entirely misdelivered, but instead the outstanding tab for the misdelivery. Apparently, as Tom had learned several turns ago, Felix had been wildly misdirected and the charge for freight was high.

"Where the hell is Saotario?" he had asked, squinting at the screen as Kalil explained the particulars of the shipping fiasco.

"What else does it say?" Nolan Chow wanted to know, smacking his toothless

lips pensively.

“Saotario, Tea-Ex.”

“Tea-Ex? Oh. That’s Texamerica.”

“Who?”

“Texamerica—it’s a Terran continent. Didn’t you ever go to school, you old coot? This robot was supposed to go to north-western Terra.”

“Holy smokes!” said Sheriff Tom. “The Earth!”

Indeed. And as the population explosion went on the disused shelter in the corner of Dome 1 was forgotten. Kalil passed on, followed by just about everyone else Tom knew. He blinked away the past and barked at Kalil’s son, San, to fetch him a glass of water and an apple for Melita.

He settled down on his chair and said his hellos to the robot. No one else sat in Tom’s chair, and if they forgot Felix reminded them: “It defies local protocol to occupy that chair, if you please.”

Felix had quite a bit of play on his cable so he was able to walk over and sit by Tom’s chair. “Felix,” Tom began, “you know I’m an old feller. I’m not going to be hanging around too much longer, there’s no doubt about that. Hush now, Melita. Now Felix, it has bothered me for a dog’s age how you’ve never had a proper whatchamacallit so’s you could walk around like anyone else. Thing is, by my figuring, when I dispatch I’ll have enough workhours left over to get you one.”

“I could not wish for your untimely demise, sir.”

“Untimely is exactly wrong,” chuckled Tom. When he had gathered his wheezing under control, he continued: “Fact is, the time is just about right. Melita, fetch me my purse. Thank you. Now see here Felix? This is my will. You can see I’ve left you the entire bundle, along with a completed order form for your whasisis.”

Felix held the small screen in his hand and peered at it.

Tom went on to say, “As soon as you get word, you execute that order. You follow?”

“Word of your timely demise, sir?”

“That’s the ticket.”

“Yes sir, I understand your instructions.”

There was a moment of silence between the two of them. Tom cleared his throat. “Say Felix, I really appreciate the way you’ve helped all us folks out over the seasons. I mean, even when you were just there to listen, you were helping. Remember when Xi Po lost her baby? We all couldn’t have got through it without you Felix. What I’m trying to tell you is, I sure am glad you got shipped to us instead of to some fool Earthman.”

Uncharacteristically, Felix jumped as if startled. “Pardon me, sir?”

“I say, you were originally supposed to be shipped to the Earth. Haven’t I ever mentioned that to you, in all these turns? You knew you were misdirected, of course.”

“Yes sir,” said Felix, his voice still a little strange. “I had not understood that my original destination was Terran.” He paused. “To whom do I belong, sir?”

“You belong to the camp, I guess, but the camp don’t know it anymore so I guess you belong to me. And I suppose that when I’m gone and you have your thingy-magicky in your chest instead of those cables, you’ll be no one’s property but your own.”

Felix seemed to consider this. “Would I then be free to pursue my own interests, sir?”

“You would. Where do you want to go?”

"I should go to Terra, to my intended mailing address."

"You're an upstanding feller, Felix. Do you think they missed you?"

"Insufficient data to guess, sir."

"How do you reckon you'll travel?"

"Insufficient data to guess, sir."

"I'm sure you'll think of something."

"Thank you, sir."

Tom paused, and patted his pockets ritualistically. "Well okay then," he declared. "Melita, have Kalil's boy start me up a buggy. And get me a suit—we're going for a drive out-of-domes."

Felix continued to live at the garage for many turns, even after he received his cold fusion micropile in the mail and had Kalil's son San install it in his chest. San and Felix more or less adopted Melita, who had been deeply troubled by the death of Wa Tom out-of-domes and needed to be surrounded by friends. Nolan Chow's kids brought their kids by to play with her, and after a few months she began to cheer up.

Felix never complained about restoring classic buggies, but San suspected that Felix was carefully watching the workhours accumulate in his numbered account, waiting for the day when he judged he had enough resources to ship off for Terra. As the turns went by and Felix did not act, San began to wonder whether the robot intended to go or not—who could know the mind of a robot, a not-quite-aware thing?

San got an inkling, however, when he noticed Felix quietly making some unusual purchases—that is, unusual for a robot. From the Nirgal Complete Catalogue he ordered large work-boots, two pairs of large slacks, an overcoat and a smattering of sweaters. From the camp haberdashery he bought a fine hat, and from the salon he bartered for bags of old hair.

San said, "I get the feeling we're going to be missing you soon, Fe."

"I will miss you too, sir," replied Felix.

San nodded to himself, cracked open a bottle of water and downed it. "Pardon my nosying into your business, Fe, but it seems like you're working up a plan that's got to be six kinds of crazy."

Felix regarded him levelly. "Which element is most likely to fail, sir?"

"Well," said San, slapping his knee, "let's take a looksee. You want to try on your get-up for me?"

"Certainly, sir."

Felix disappeared into the equipment locker he had called his home for a few turns and San heard him rummaging around. A moment later he emerged, oversized clothes stretched on his bulky frame, a hand-stitched beard hanging awkwardly from the lower half of his smooth face. With great dignity he placed a grey belted hat on top of his head.

San rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "Huh. Well. How do you like that?"

"Do I appear to be a human being?" asked Felix.

San frowned. "Maybe a human being put together by a six-year-old," he admitted, trying not to chuckle. "Why don't we take you down to Minnie's Esthetics and see if we can't improve on this a bit?"

"I would be most grateful, sir."

And that's how Felix's tenure at Camp Naktong came to an end: a chilly night, Minnie, San and Melita huddling for warmth on the tram platform waiting to see him

off once his ride arrived.

Minnie had done an exceptional job: Felix truly looked like a man. He stood on the edge of the platform practicing his smile, the skin-like makeup covering his plastic face bunching in an almost realistic way at the corners of his mouth. "Remember not to show your teeth," Minnie reminded him. "Use a closed mouth."

"Yes, madam," said Felix.

"And don't be *too* polite, it's a dead giveaway," said San.

"Yes, sir. That is to say: okay, buddy."

Melita pant-hooted sadly and offered Felix a banana, which he only accepted after Minnie told him he'd have to at least *pretend* to eat or the other passengers might get suspicious. San sighed. "There's a hundred ways this can go wrong, but if there's anyone who can pull it off, it's you, Fe."

"Thank you," said Felix. "Your assistance has been invaluable, my friends."

Minnie sniffed. "It's going to be weird around here without you, Felix. We'll all going to miss you something terrible."

"And I you," agreed Felix. "But Sheriff Tom always felt it was important for me to conduct my own destiny."

San nodded. "Well, there's no arguing that. It's a part of growing up. At least, for humans it is."

The tram whisked into the station with a gush of freezing air from outside. Felix doffed his hat to each of them and presented a small bow, then picked up his suitcase and advanced to the edge of the track. A scuffed yellow and black robot with a transit crest on its shoulder stepped out of the doors. "Ticket, please."

Felix handed over his ticket, briefly revealing the golden star pinned to his sweater as he opened his overcoat.

The transit robot was satisfied. "Please step aboard, sir."

Felix looked over his shoulder. "I will never forget you, my friends. I will carry you with me always. Thank you for everything."

Minnie sobbed. San put his arm around her. "You get now, you hear? Don't you look back, Felix. We're all rooting for you. And if you get yourself in any trouble, don't you hesitate to call. You got that?"

Felix nodded. "Goodbye," he said.

The doors slid closed behind him. Felix chose a seat in the empty tram and picked up a newspaper to read, crossing his legs the way Minnie had shown him. The transit robot withdrew into his cubicle and a warning chime echoed through the station. "Next stop: Camp Huo Hsing," said the tram. "Please stand back while I am in motion."

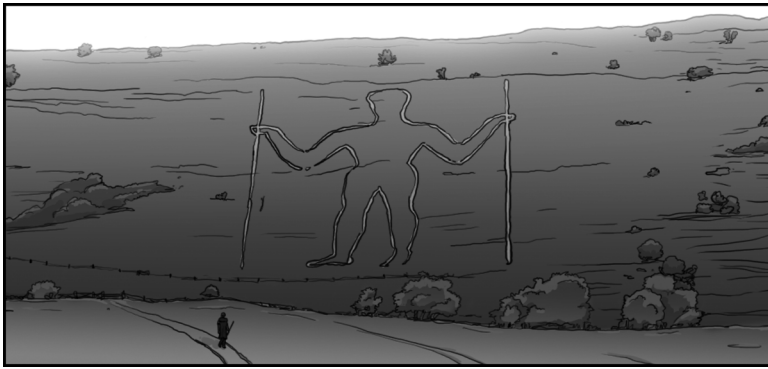
The tram pulled away and accelerated with a rising hum. San and Melita waved.

"Do you think we'll ever see him again?" asked Minnie tearfully.

San nodded, rubbing his chin. "I don't doubt it. This is just the beginning of Felix's adventures, not the end. I bet you workhours to whizbees he'll come back and visit us some day."

"I hope so," she said.

The station was quiet. A light snow fell on the glass ceiling. Soon, the sun would rise.



THE LONG MAN

1.

To me, she was beautiful.

By today's standards she'd win no pageants, that's true. Back in those days we liked our women womanly—lumbering hips, pendulous breasts, belly of plenty—and by that metric she was a goddess. In fact, on more than one occasion she was used as the model, or at least the inspiration, for hand-sized carvings in bone or stone meant to incarcerate the spirit of fertility for our admiration.

She could snap a boar's neck with one hand. She'd smile while she did it, barely breaking from her gathering song. Her teeth were like little pebbles, each one irregular, unique and brown like bark.

I feel light-hearted just thinking about her. Even all these many years later.

Today it's all waifs and scarecrows, whips of girls made of sticks and beef collagen, coat-hangers for the gay art of fashion designers and greedy textile merchants. It seems like only yesterday women were seen and not heard whereas now their reedy, demanding voices babble on from slices of matter so thin they can be lost to the eye at the wrong angle.

Of course, we were all more self-reliant back then. Tougher. Romantics imagine we also had a much deeper understanding of community, but that's bunk—we were each of us islands in a way modern people can't fathom without suffering a debilitating head injury or going beserk on drugs.

We *knew* we were animals. And there was no shame.

But there was fear. It brought us together, backs against backs, sure in the comfort that the indigent or injured or old on the outer periphery would absorb the night's predation. That's what darkness was all about in the old days: keeping warm and wondering who wouldn't be there in the morning. Wondering idly, because it really didn't matter much. We didn't used to miss the departed the way people have taken to doing these past dozen millennia.

We weren't philosophical so much as indifferent. We didn't used to think of things in terms of how they may have been, but instead only as they were.

Death was constant, which is one of the reasons we had a lot of babies. These days people have babies for fun, but back then it more than serious business: it was our profession and our obsession. After eating the only thing left to do was screw.

(It brings me no end of shame that my overstuffed and much abused memory

cannot, no matter how squeezed, be induced to recall her name.)

We used to screw, she and I, whenever it struck our fancy. Most often we'd just roll over by the fire and get to business, but occasionally she liked to make me chase her around a bit first. That got everybody hot so if we wanted to play that game without it becoming a team sport we'd wander off from the group.

The day that it happened to me, the day I became the long man, was on just such an occasion.

I had followed her into a low grove, panting as the branches slapped against my face. I caught a flash of flesh in the foliage ahead and charged onward, getting hard and happy. We had a merry chase across a grassy plain and then I tackled her before she could dash into the next glen. With the momentum of impact we rolled and slid through the glen and down into a ravine.

At the bottom we lolled, clods of dirt and shredded leaves catching up with us in a dusty slurry. We didn't talk, but that wasn't unusual—talking idly wasn't nearly as popular back then as it is today. It was a moment of smell and feel, of the mutual craven need to fulfill our aching instincts. I was just starting to roll her over to paw for access when we were both frozen by the startlingly nearby roar of an angry bear.

We switched modes without so much as a look. We skittered across the floor of the ravine, our bellies scraping the stones. She raised her head and sniffed, then frowned. I pushed past her and climbed the next rise.

And there they were—the strange people, cornered by the bear.

They were small, like children, which probably explains how I acted so quickly. I've always found children getting eaten to be upsetting. My body moved of its own accord, pouncing into the fray and swinging a loose branch menacingly at the creature's foamy muzzle. I shouted and screamed, jumping up and down.

And, as they more often do than don't in the face of such enthusiasm, the bear reconsidered her options, turned around and ambled away with a percussive snort.

I watched her go. My heart slowed down. I took a breath and surveyed the scene: one of the strange people had been broken and partially devoured, its entrails steaming and crackling in a way most dead things did not. The other two were huddled against a rock, holding one another with thin little arms and staring at me with big, dark eyes.

I retreated a step and stooped my posture humbly. Almost immediately the funk of their fear began to dissipate in the air. They released one another and considered me.

I tossed aside the branch.

My impression of them has been smeared by time and emotion. If I had seen them today I could probably do a better job of understanding what they looked like, but back then, without a wider context, my brain did a fairly loosey goosey job of committing the incomprehensible to memory. They looked like men to me because they stood on their hind legs and held their faces up. I'm pretty sure their eyes were on the front.

They did not wear anything I recognized as skins, but their bodies did have a different texture than their wan, pale faces. If I'd known about clothes back then I probably would've done a better job of noticing.

Like I said, they were strange.

When I came to, lying on my back and feeling tingly, nobody was around but my girl, patting my face, muttering sadly. She noticed I had awakened and she began to sob. I sat up, rubbing my dizziness away, and held her close for reassurance. After a

time our hearts beat as one, and her fear ebbed.

I noticed that the strange little man who had been partially eaten had been removed, along with any signs of his weird leakage.

She had not seen the strange people or the bear. She said there had been a big fire but no heat and great draw of stinky wind. She had run to find me collapsed. I patted her dreadlocked hair and kissed her brow. That made me hard so I rolled her over and pushed my way inside her.

Afterward we walked back to the group and ate some berries. We didn't talk about the incident. As I mentioned, chatting wasn't something we did a lot of when I was young.

And before too long I had mostly forgotten about it. Frightening events happened frequently and each incomprehensible act of nature more or less merged into the next one. Meeting some strange people in a ravine and then passing out faded over time when incorporated into a group's history along with flash floods, lightning storms, forest fires, sudden fogs, mudslides, funny birds, foreign people with painted faces and bizarre wares, caves that whistled, groaning glaciers, and that time the top blew off a mountain and the sky turned orange and the rain turned black for a whole season.

All strangenesses are equal when you understand nothing.

I didn't figure it out until she died. It was a death that meant everything to me. Her absence after so many years of comfort caused me to take tally of those in the group with whom I had grown up, and I realized none remained. She had been the last. Everyone else around the fire had a childhood I could remember—a childhood occurring well after my own.

Yet I lacked the white hair and feeble strength of elderhood. Though I had acquired lines in my face and hands they were not the complex etchings of seniority. I was still interested in hunting and screwing and singing, just like the young people.

When our hunting party was trampled by the furious mammoth and I alone survived I began to recognize what had happened to me. Though my bones might break they do so only under extreme stress, and even then they knit quickly. My skin will tear under a knife, but it takes a sharper knife than will cut any other man. I do not sicken. I weather, but I do not wither.

As even more seasons passed, one blurring into the next, I came to appreciate my unique position within our group. Something had happened to me on that day in the ravine and it had changed me forever. Though I knew not the extent of my difference, I knew that death was reluctant to take me.

I had become the long man. And so am I still.

2.

I'm ugly. Make no mistake about it.

I have only the haziest recollection of my mother but I do remember that she looked a lot like me, so I come by some of it naturally. Nobody thought we were ugly at the time, but times have changed. Back then ridges over the eyes were quite *chic* and everybody considered being squat and bulky rather alluring. I'm quite hairy, and by modern standards I'm short. Also, I only have one eyebrow, and that puts a lot of people off.

The other part of it has nothing to do with how I started out but more to do with where I've been. For instance, this one time in the sixteenth century, they told me I had to accept Christ again or they'd pull out my fingernails. So I accepted Christ and you know what they did? They pulled them out anyway, just to make sure. So from then

on my right hand has been a little funny looking, like I have a fistful of badly tied sausages.

To match, my left foot has been missing for ages. It was pulped by rot after being crushed between rocks during a construction accident on the Nile, years and years ago. I've worn various prostheses over the centuries—some good, not not so good—and really I haven't much missed having the foot. Sometimes my limp makes my lower back ache, but you have to expect some wear and tear as you get on.

In my dreams I can still run, speeding grass blurring beneath me. It's nice. I don't deny that. But I'm not bitter. So I can't run when I'm awake—what's the big deal? I sleep a lot.

Of course running isn't nearly as important as it used to be. We used to run to eat, but now people run to burn off excess food. Maybe I'd miss it more if my life depended on it, but then again my life depends on so little so who's to say?

Que sera, sera.

I have this friend, Aum, who lives in India. He always lives in India. Whenever I swing by he bugs me to settle down somewhere and get in touch with the infinite. I always say the same thing; I shrug and tell him, "Nomadic life is in my blood. I have to keep moving. If that comes to changing you'll be the first man I'll tell."

And Aum is fine with that. I press the joke sometimes. "How about you coming along with me for a couple of laps? You wouldn't be so skinny if you'd just walk around a mite."

Aum waves it off. "Ask me again in one hundred years, my friend."

"Okey-dokey."

He serves excellent tea, but he only drinks water. He eats no meat but permits me to eat meat at his house. He's flexible, in other words. Which is the only way to be if you want to hang in there. It's the excitable ones that swim in all kinds of grief.

Take Prester John for example. He's constantly banging his head against one wall or another. I'm always sure his next martyrdom will be his last. I ask him, "How's the kingdom of peace going, John?"

He smirks grimly and spreads his hands helplessly, "And yet I believe."

I clap him on the shoulder for reassurance, sometimes too hard. I'm clumsy that way.

Prester John also used to hang around India a lot, but these days nothing can shake him loose from America. He's always farting around with one hare-brained scheme or another over there. Lately everything with him is about his pet conglomerated pan-media multinational corporation—it's a bit of an obsession. They make movies and theme parks and hotels and books and toys and gated communities. He won't stop talking about it—blah, blah, blah—which is one of the reasons I just steer clear of the whole continent nowadays.

There are a few more of us here and there. They're all kids, though, compared to me. Aum's pretty long too, I guess. But not so long as my long.

Every once in a while you run into somebody you didn't know was there, like the time in the third century before Christ when I first met Ella. She'd been doing laps for almost two thousand years before we crossed paths in Patagonia. It was spring.

She was something else: tall, black, muscular, fearless.

I spent some time watching her before I went in to introduce myself. I skulked in the bushes, as is my wont. She was palling around with a bunch of Tehuelche tribes unified under her banner of agricultural reforms and goddess worship, building an impressive army of hybrids with cocoa skin who stood a head taller than their kin.

Setting yourself up as a god on Earth may seem a touch self-indulgent at first blush, but I'll be the first one to admit that from time to time it cures what ails you. I myself once had a middling impressive kingdom in Britain before it all fell to ruin. Those guys were great. They carved a giant picture of me on Windover Hill, over two hundred feet long. I was really touched. They even included my bad foot. You just can't beat Druids for hospitality.

At any rate I first approached Ella while she was riding in an ornate litter at the head of a long parade of priests and hybrid soldiers decked out in their finest feathers and wool, winding along the bottom of a rocky valley in the foothills of the Andes on their way to their solstice temple. I didn't really have a plan. All I knew was that watching her ample body sway and shudder atop the litter was getting me randy, and at a certain point I just couldn't help myself anymore.

I stepped out from behind a boulder and said, "Ut vales hatie mane?"

The parade compacted to a rapid halt, barking guards surrounding me with spears and grimaces. I put my big hands up and smiled at Ella, trying again in another tongue. "Mwa shilwa?"

But she'd understood the Latin well enough. She slipped off the litter and marched through the ring of guards, bringing her violet-brown muzzle to only inches from my own face. In Latin she grunted, "What are you? A daemon?"

"Heavens, no," I said, smiling in a friendly way. "My name is Lallo. I'm from Spain. I was just in the neighbourhood and I couldn't help but stop to admire your little fiefdom here. Say, are those soldiers hybrids?"

Ella narrowed her eyes. "What do you know of us?"

I shrugged. "Nothing, really. Except I should probably warn you that the hybrids never breed true—at least, not for long. They might go a generation or two, but that's it. After that the babies come out all funny and die young."

Her gaze flickered briefly. "How do you know about the babies?"

"I'm long," I said. "Aren't you? I mean, correct me if I'm wrong but most of the time when I meet folks on strange continents raising armies of supermen it turns out they have the long life, like me."

She stared into me, boring for truth. "You have the long life?" she whispered.

"Oh sure," I said. "I've been doing laps for a dog's age."

"Laps?"

"Around the planet," I explained. "Don't you do laps? You've been to Rome, obviously. And I'm betting eggs to chickens you started out in—where? -- the Congo?"

She pursed her fleshy lips, took a step back, and then barked at one of her men in the local language with which I was unacquainted. A soldier stepped out of rank, grabbed me, and twisted my arm sharply behind my back in a clear attempt to snap the bone. I cried out, but there was no break. He continued to push, grunting. Then Ella ordered him to cease.

"You have the strong bones," said Ella slowly, rubbing her round chin.

"Ouch," I said, rubbing my arm.

"You will accompany us to the solstice temple," she commanded.

"Yeah, sure," I agreed. "Why not?"

So I walked along beside the litter while we filed through the valley and eventually navigated our way to a plateau decorated by rings of precisely aligned stone monoliths. The typical set up, really. My Druid friends were crazy about stuff like that.

A fire was ignited and songs were sung after a smattering of animals were ceremonially eviscerated, stripes of their gore painted on the faces of the attendees and

their sublime chocolate goddess. I wandered up to her and took a turn at a skin of fermented milk being passed around. "Some party, huh?"

Ella couldn't move her head much on account of the big feathery hat they'd put on her, but her eyes flicked over to me. "You are an irreverent knave. This is our most sacred rite. Show some respect."

"Oh, sorry." I shuffled awkwardly. "So what's your name?"

"I am Ella."

"That's a nice name."

"They are sacred syllables, holy to my tribe."

"So pretty much everything's sacred to you, isn't it? I can appreciate that. I used to be like that when I was younger. How long have you been ambling?"

"I have wandered for two thousand years."

"Pah," I scoffed amicably. "You're just a kid."

She stared at me, fury dancing in her expression. "You dare to mock me?"

"Not really," I said. "I'm just trying to make friendly. I know it gets lonely being long. Have you met any of the others? Do you know Aum?"

She shook her head. "There are many others?"

I shrugged again. "I don't know—maybe eleven or twelve, give or take. To tell the whole truth I'm a bit antisocial, myself. I tend to hang around on my own a lot."

For an instant her solid presence faltered, and she seemed almost soft. Quietly she said, "I never thought I would meet another like myself. I thought I was on this quest alone."

"What quest?"

"The quest to understand what the gods who made me this way would have of me. What other quest could there be?"

I took the skin of milk as it was passed to me again. "Yes, I went on that quest, too. Ages and ages ago." She looked at me expectantly so I continued, awkwardly.

"...There are no answers, Ella. I'm sorry to say it, but there it is. The further you go all you find is more walking."

"So what do you do?"

"I walk."

"You have no purpose?"

"Nah. Like I said, I've had kids before, but I pretty much quit it when I figured out the long don't mix well with the short."

She looked out at her platoon morosely. "They will not be long?"

I shook my head. "I'm afraid not. They're strong, as I'm sure you know. They're durable alright. But they will still wither. And their children will wither young. And their children's children will be feeble monsters for the brief moments before they die."

"Then my Patagones will disappear. My dominion will not last."

"Nothing lasts, Ella. Nothing but us."

When the fire died and the drunken soldiers and priests passed out we went for a stroll and held hands. The moon rose and cast a silver light across her broad back, the ropes of muscle across her powerful shoulders. It took all of my reserve to keep from wrestling her to the ground right there and then, but I was determined to bide my time.

For a while we did not talk, and I could almost believe I was strolling with my girl, back home, centuries upon centuries ago. I could smell the earthy odour of her womanhood, the brine of her dried sweat. "You are very ugly," she told me.

"I get by on personality," I said.

"You are a fool."

"Don't fix what isn't broken. This fool has seen a lot of smarter men die."

"You mistake your gift as craft."

"You mistake my success as luck."

And on and on. Her Latin was very good. I asked after her travels. She told me about her previous attempt to raise an army in Scythia, and I told her about the giant picture of me on that hill in Britain. She wanted to know if anyone had ever tried to breed two long people together, and I took that as an overture and pushed her to the ground, pried apart her thighs and went at it.

She smacked me brutally back and forth with both fists and finally tossed me aside with a roar, towering over me with a rock between her hands. She menaced me with it, teeth gritted, her tears glinting in the starlight.

"Hey, what gives?" I shouted, frightened.

"You will die for your attack on me," she promised.

"Attack? I thought we were screwing."

"I gave you no leave to touch me."

I snickered smugly. "You can't lie to me. I can *smell* your arousal."

With a screech of hate she brought the rock down hard and fast. My world went dark. I awoke many hours later. The day was cool and breezy. My face was stuck to the dirt by crusts of clotted blood, breaking into dust and flakes as I pulled myself into a sitting position and blinked. I rubbed my fractured skull ruefully and swore. "Women!"

So, there's another reason why I steer clear of the Americas—haunting memories of a bad date. Just thinking about Patagonia gives me a headache.

But it would not be my last encounter with Long Ella.

3.

It can be a nuisance being long. Every now and again people get weird ideas in their heads and decide it's time to lynch you for being possessed of unholy powers. To avoid this one has to keep a low profile.

This is, of course, much harder than it used to be.

In the good old days when physicians did as much guesswork as priests having myself treated for minor ailments was a simple affair—balms, tinctures, knocking dislocated shoulders back into place, that sort of thing. I remember clearly being treated by the great Galen himself one winter in Athens after an overzealous farmer put a sword through my thigh for stealing carrots. "You're a remarkable healer," Galen told me a week later, checking the bandages.

"I'm a big believer in fruits and vegetables," I claimed.

These days everybody wants to image my insides with CAT scans or whip my blood around in a centrifuge. I have to be awfully sly to slip past a triage nurse without her sounding alarm bells about my unusual physiology. I have on more than one occasion faked leukemia in order to explain my elevated white blood cell count, and I'm a fair expert at muffing X-ray photographs by fidgeting.

When that fails I am a master of rapid exits. "Your bones show a very serious density of healed fractures. I'd like to do a little more imaging and get more details about your history."

"Do you mind if I just slip off to the washroom first?"

Presto—no more Lallo!

Probably the worst time I ever had came about nineteen or twenty centuries after Christ. There I was, minding my own business, sauntering through New Mexico when I ran into a bunch of soldiers in jeeps doing drills. They panicked when I was slow to respond to their orders and somebody shot me.

I woke up in a secure army facility and was poked, prodded, probed and perused by a murder of scientists with grim faces and oiled hair. "He has the skull of a Cro Magnon!" they told each other excitedly. "He must be some kind of an evolutionary throwback."

I'm a pretty easy going man but the truth is that once my temper's engaged it's hard to quell, and eventually the military scientists pushed me too far by trying to extract tissue samples without anaesthesia. I totally freaked out. By the time the red haze faded from my vision I was running, already miles from the base, my hands covered in blood.

Chalk that up as a third reason I tend to stay scarce from the New World. Fucking Roswell.

There does exist a sanctuary for us, though it isn't as peaceful a sanctuary as the forests of the world used to be before there were people everywhere. When I'm feeling harassed I know I can always go to Rome to put my feet up, have a drink, and shoot the breeze with Moses.

Moses lives in the Constantinian Basilica, and before that he lived in the House Templar at Ager Vaticanus with Peter. Nowadays all of that stuff is walled up in Vatican City, but for a long time getting into the basilica was as easy as walking up the steps and introducing your business to the guards. "What affair have you in this church, brute?"

"Just tell the big man it's Lallo knocking."

Moses is a great guy. I think I have a special soft spot in my heart for him because he's nearly as long as I: he's been sallying around for about ten thousand years, which is only a few dozen thousand less than my stint. He's probably been chased out of about as many places as I have, too, so he understands the lonesome mood. He still misses Peter.

"Lallo, my great friend—welcome!"

"How's by you, Mo? You're looking splendid."

"Thank you, thank you."

The basilica is usually decorated in a very fancy way. On the occasion I'm thinking about it was all done up with fresh frescoes of the life of Jesus Christ and I was handed my wine in a golden goblet. "So..." I said, after savouring my first sip, "Jesus, huh?"

"Jesus, yes," agreed Moses.

I gave him a little wink. "Was that you? Seriously, you can tell me."

"No, it wasn't me. Jesus died."

"Well, maybe," I admitted. "I still think maybe it was just Aum trying to yank our chains."

"Aum never leaves India."

I shrugged. "Maybe it was somebody else, then. Maybe Peter?"

"Why are you so sure it was one of the long?"

"I became suspicious when I heard how he walked away from his own tomb. I mean, who does that? Me, you, Judith—our kind."

"Could you not fathom that his body was sublimated directly to Heaven by the Divine Host?"

"Fathom? Sure. Believe it? Not really. It was probably just somebody we don't

know about yet.”

Moses smiled indulgently. A gentle rap came at the study door and he called out to enter. A little boy in white robes walked in with a tray of bread and olives. “Lallo, I’d like you to meet John. John, this is Lallo.”

“It is an honour to make your acquaintance, my liege,” said young John.

“Nice to meet you too, John,” I said, shaking his small hand.

Moses popped an olive into his mouth, chewing around the pit artfully. “John is long, Lallo.”

“Is he now?”

“His parents thought he was a miracle, so they brought him before the officers of the church. They, in turn, brought him to me. I am raising him, molding him from the ground up to act for the long peace.”

I patted John on the head. “Good luck to you, young man! It is so very important to keep busy.”

“I do the work of God, sir,” said John primly.

“That’s super.”

Moses stroked his white beard pensively and flashed me a little smile. “I had a visit from a young longwoman who calls herself Ella,” he said, gaze cast off into the hearth. “She said you two had a bit of an encounter in Patagonia a while back.”

I rubbed my head ruefully. “Did you know she raised the Scythian armies?”

“She mentioned it, yes. Um, she’s rather upset with you, you understand. She explained to me that you raped her.”

“Oh,” I scoffed dismissively, “we were just playing around.”

“She feels differently.”

“Women are weird.”

“It’s a fairly serious business, Lallo. I know your temper and appetites routinely get you into trouble with the short, but this is about someone long. It’s different.”

“Different how?”

“Consequences,” said Moses heavily. “The consequences are different.”

“Is she going to hunt me down and kill me?”

“No. She is determined to hide herself and the child from you forever.”

That gave me pause. In fact, I spent a moment choking on my wine. Moses clapped me on the back helpfully. John stared at me with wide eyes, lips trembling. I wiped away my tears and forced my raw throat to form my next words, hoarsely, desperately. “Is the child long?”

Moses nodded. “As you well know, Lallo, the question of reproduction has always weighed on us. Our kind is perpetuated directly by the grace of God, and nothing we have ever managed to do has resulted in the creation of a long child. Judith is infertile, of course, but Lilith consented to several experiments with Peter before she was killed. None of these experiments bore fruit, however.”

I swallowed. “She was very old. Ella’s just a kid. Barely over two thousand.”

Moses nodded again, stroking his beard. “Because of our lack of success in this regard we have never had to seriously contemplate racial displacement, but now I’m afraid it is a subject that deserves our strict attention.”

I frowned. “What do you mean? What’s racial displacement?”

“Racial displacement is the inevitable consequence of long breeding, where over time the long population comes to outnumber the short population, eventually bringing us into a direct competition for resources. In any such contest the inescapable

conclusion is a loss for the short and supremacy for the long.”

I shrugged theatrically. “Whatever will be, will be.”

Moses shook his head. “Lallo my friend, it behooves us to consider that if God had intended us to inherit the Earth He would have made it easier for us to be fruitful. We must wonder whether we subvert His plan by reproducing.”

“I’ll leave the philosophizing to you, Mo. I’m just a man.”

He slammed his fist down upon the silver food tray, bread and olives flying in every direction. “No, Lallo, you are *not* just a man. You are a long man, and you cannot ignore the burden of responsibility you carry.”

“Why not?”

His eyes widened. “I have been patient with your godlessness as long as we have known one another, but I have to draw the line here. Yours is not to spend all time giving in to your craven appetites.”

“Your God gave me the appetites. Who are you to subvert *that* work?”

“My God?” he echoed, incredulous.

I sneered and stood up from my chair. “Let’s not start this again, Mo. Do we have to go over it afresh *every* millennium? For the last time: leave me out of your phoney-baloney superstitious hookum. I’m just not interested. Maybe if you’d started messing with my head fifteen thousand years ago I’d have been naive enough to swallow it, but not now. I’ve seen too many sunsets. I’m not a kid anymore, and no god is my parent.”

The child, John, was weeping. I reached out to pet his head but mistook my own strength and knocked him to the floor. “Whoops.”

“*Govern yourself!*” shouted Moses. “For Christ’s sake, you *must* learn to govern yourself.”

He knelt beside the white-robed child and hugged him tenderly. I shuffled around awkwardly. “Or what?” I asked quietly.

Moses looked up. “Or else for the sake of Christendom now and in the future we will declare you our enemy, and end you. It pains me to say this, my friend, but you leave no alternative.”

“I am from the land. I answer only to the mud I am made of. If you and your cohort interfere with my freedoms I warn you to be prepared for my ruthless defense.”

We stared at each other for a long moment. Moses blinked first. He was blinking away tears. “I love you, my brother. Can you not open your mind to heed my counsel?”

I thought about it a bit. “No,” I concluded. “I will grant none dominion over me. My life is between myself and the world. I do not recognize the authority your club of sheep awards itself, and I never will.”

“Then we will do what we must.”

That was the last time I stood in the Constantinian Basilica, and the last time for a long while I even dared visit sweet Rome. Within a few centuries I would be pursued out of Christendom by the armies of Moses, chased ever eastward until I took my stand in Jerusalem and, surrounded by my own legions of Islamic troops, let loose a rage of unspeakable dimensions. Hundreds died in a day.

Like I said, once my temper’s lost it’s a shitstorm for everybody.

But I’m no strategist. I lost Jerusalem and fled further east, only to run into John, a child no more, the king of a mighty country whose fierce knights captured and bound me for delivery to Avignon and the puppet of Moses, Pope Paschal II. I did manage to escape, but not without razing John’s capital city—which I apologized for

and, to his credit, John accepted this graciously. "Every setback makes us stronger," he told me, turning the other cheek as he stood on a mound of rubble. "Send me to God if you must."

"Aw," I groaned, frowning. "You know I hate striking down the defenseless."

"Indeed," agreed Prester John. "It is because we know of the good in your soul that we cannot give up our quest to save you."

I pulled an arrow out of my thigh with a grunt. "Is that what you're doing? Saving me?"

"With your last breath, if need be."

"Moses told you to end me."

Prester John smiled serenely. "I take my commands from a higher authority."

So that's how it's been for this whole last millennium—lynched by the short whenever I get too comfortable, pursued by the long whenever I become too visible. The thing is, that kind of crap becomes little more than a nuisance—a trifling distraction—when you're dedicated to a larger mission.

I admit that it has been refreshing to have a purpose this last while, to have something to strive for.

And I shall never give up until I find my child.

4.

Being long doesn't mean a life apart from the short, regardless of how the short may get suspicious from time to time. It's all about the short, in fact. They're the main act. Without them it would be just us and the trees, growing rings and gaining stains as the seasons flit and flash.

I've even fought in wars. Honestly, that's how caught up I've been at times.

I first marched in an organized army for the Mahabharata, against Aum's advice; he also advised against my playing in the Lelantine War, in which I did indeed end up taking a pounding, emotionally as well as physically. The Peloponnesian Campaigns were good times, though; we all used to make fun of Socrates. The Balhae Invasion was exhilarating, I'm the first one to admit—great food. In the Hungarian Civil War I lost most of my right earlobe to an interrogator's dagger. In the Punjab War I bit off a man's thumb. In Te Kooti's War I burned villages and then had nightmares about it later. Don't even get me started on the Thirty Years War, the Dog Tax War, or the Second Boer War. I don't know what I was thinking.

It was just after the Russo-Turkic War that I was captured by Vladimir Antilovich Barofsky and enslaved in his famous circus. Vladimir and his lieutenants scoured the military hospitals and prisons for candidates for his freak exhibit, an idea he had picked up from an itinerant American named Simeon Netherweather, whom he subsequently robbed. During the darker years of the war Vladimir and his company had been forced to eat many of their animal acts, leaving a void in the programme he hoped to fill with human oddities.

Such as myself.

"Are you a Turk or a Russian?" Vladimir barked into my cell.

"I'm originally from Spain."

"Your Russian is good. I'll call you a Russian."

"Okey-dokey."

"You want to get out of here?"

I kicked a rat away with my good foot and considered the matter. "Yes sir."

"I can offer you food, shelter, girls, excitement."

"What do I have to do?"

"Entertain."

"I know a few good jokes."

"You look like a brute. Are you strong?"

"Open the lock and I'll show you."

Once Vladimir had recovered from his injuries and the wardens had beaten me back into submission a deal was made and I was transferred into the care of the circus. I was lodged in one third of a train car, chained to the wall in reach of my bed of hay and tin pisspot. In the mornings I was given weak tea and black bread.

"You know," I said to Vladimir one day, "I think I would've been better off in prison."

Vladimir shrugged. "The prison burned down. You're better off here. You're making people happy. These are hard times. Don't people deserve to be happy?"

"Don't I deserve to be happy?"

"You complain too much. Stop complaining and I'll find a girl to throw in there with you."

So I stopped complaining. He didn't send me a girl, though.

It wasn't all bad. In fact, there was something downright intoxicating about show-time itself. Vladimir would stand in the centre ring in his brass-buttoned suit, a megaphone pressed into his lips, shouting, "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls—the Barofsky Brothers Circus now warns that our next act presents a certain danger. Those of you in the front rows afflicted with weak constitutions may wish to leave the tent at this time; for, we are about to introduce to the ring a beast so monstrous, so wild, so untamed, that it is possible we may lose control. Straight from the wilderness, unblessed by Christ, noble in his ugly, savage existence, untarnished by learning of any kind—*the Cave Man!*"

At that point I would be pushed into the ring inside an iron cage. I would lunge toward the audience and slap the bars, roaring and grunting incoherently, delighting in the palpable stink of their giddy fear, pacing back and forth like a lion.

Vladimir's brother, Wassily, would then open the cage and guide me through a series of tricks as he menaced me with a whip. At one point in every performance I would "escape" from his control and have to be chased down by acrobats standing on the backs of horses. They would throw a net over me, which was my cue to fall down and bellow in rage. Thus entwined I would be dragged back to my iron cage and wheeled away as Vladimir shouted his enthusiastic apology for inadvertently endangering the welfare of the crowd.

The audience ate it up. They loved it. Nothing inspires applause like a well-timed release from terror.

One day when we were camped outside of Petersburg I was lounging in the yellow, crispy grass of autumn, chained to a train car, hanging around with two sad, drunken clowns named Dmitri and Arkady. They shared their Chinese cigarettes with me, and sometimes even gave me a little vodka. We were telling lewd jokes and guffawing when I noticed the shadow of a man pooling over us. I turned around.

The man was short and powerful, his forehead heavy and broad, his jaw lantern-like and full of square yellow teeth. He wore a gentleman's coat, fine woolen trousers, shiny black shoes. His eyes glistened at me from beneath the shadowy orbs of his swarthy brow. "Can the brute speak?" he asked Dmitri and Arkady.

"For a bottle of vodka," said Dmitri.

Arkady nodded. "For two bottles he'll sing and dance."

“For three bottles he’ll write you a sonata and service you sexually,” added Dmitri.

The man sniffed. “Retire for five minutes, won’t you?” he commanded smoothly, pulling a bottle of vodka from beneath his cape. Dmitri and Arkady snapped up the liquor and obediently disappeared. The gentleman regarded me and I regarded the gentleman.

“What is your name, brute?” he growled, his adam’s apple quivering.

“Brute,” I answered, nodding once. “My mother sensed my nature immediately and named me correctly. You may call me Mr. Brute, because you dress like you have manners.”

“How old are you then, Mr. Brute?”

“I do not know. I have no command of counting.”

“You lie.”

“I hereby rescind my appraisal of your manners, pig.”

“You dare call me a pig?”

“Sure. You look at me as if I am something disgusting, and give orders as if I am your wife. Is there some reason I should hesitate to qualify you as you have me?”

His lips tightened into a small, humourless smile. “I have this,” he said, glancing down at the pistol hovering at the edge of his cape. “I find it engenders a certain respect.”

I chuckled. “Maybe where you come from. This is the circus. When pistols are fired all that happens is a little red flag pops out of the end.”

“Not this pistol.”

I shrugged. “Show me.”

His jaw worked with tension. “I hope you are enjoying mocking me. It will be the last levity you experience. Hot lead quells mirth.”

“Blah blah blah.”

He glanced around quickly. “Do you know who I am?”

“Someone with an inflated sense of self-importance, I’ll wager.”

He hissed, “I know who *you* are.”

“Considering that you’re standing in front of a painting of me the height of a railroad car you’ll forgive me if I’m not unduly impressed by your powers of deduction.”

He licked his lips once quickly, like a lizard. “Your are Long Lallo,” he said. “Do you deny it?”

I must have paled or blinked or started because I saw new confidence flicker in his brown eyes. “That name means nothing to me,” I suggested, but even I didn’t find my tone convincing. I sighed. “Have you been sent by Moses?”

This time I saw the uncertainty in his eyes. “I know no man by that name,” he said truthfully.

“Prester John?”

“Prester John is a legend, you clown. You’re only making me angrier.”

“Since you’ve come to kill me I fail to see how that worsens my situation. Speaking of which you’d best get on with it—Dmitri and Arkady won’t hide in their tent kissing forever.”

He raised the pistol. “My mother sent me,” he said, and then fired.

Before he could fire again he was tackled by a bearded lady. But his first shot had done me dirty: a rude puncture on one side of my abdomen through which my blood was leaking prodigiously. There was intense pain.

My recollections are hazy, but I think I may have injured the first few people who tried to help me. I feel badly about that.

(The whole affair cost me a kidney, but that wouldn't become apparent until later.)

I awoke with Doc Sergeyev at my side, smoking a Chinese cigarette while applying pressure to my wound. The ash was long and presently dropped down his grubby shirt front, his eyes glued to the turmoil continuing to boil out from the angry gentleman as he fought tooth and nail with what seemed to be the entire company of the circus. At work were fists, pistols, swords, dogs, and one elephant.

The elephant's name was Raskolnikov, and at the command of Madame Therriault he attempted to step on the gentleman but was stabbed in the foot for his trouble, causing him to bellow.

Now, you have to understand that the cry of an elephant speaks to me on some deep level I cannot ignore. It makes my bones tremble. It thrills and terrifies me, as it did when I was a small child curled under my mother's hanging breast by the group's fire. Something inside me sings when elephants do.

Acting on pure instinct I got to my feet and hauled myself up to sit between Raskolnikov's shoulders, kicking his ears to show him who was boss. He hollered and bucked but I managed to hold fast, having bested many, many pachyderms in my day.

Down below lay a ring of injuries with the gentleman at its nexus. He looked up at me, his face contorted with rage. "*Lallo!*" he screeched, "your death is why I *am*."

I clutched at my wound as a wave of dizziness washed over me. "You're doing a superb job, sir. Rest assured!"

In this moment of distraction four Ukrainian horse-wranglers grabbed the gentleman and threw him to the ground, stepping on his wrists and ankles as one clutched his head between his knees. The gentleman howled, not unlike the way Raskolnikov had.

I seized my opportunity. At my behest the elephant began lumbering away, the limp favouring his foreleg lending a violent canter to his progress. Madam Therriault ran behind us, shouting at me to stop. She uncoiled her whip and cracked it loudly.

"Let us be free," I told the elephant, prodding gently behind his head.

His awkward canter broke into a barrelling run. Together we trampled the cooking fire and upset the giant cauldron of fish soup, then spilled over two bleachers of roustabouts eating their lunch. As we neared the edge of the field the land sloped and Raskolnikov picked up speed.

The grazing horses scattered before us.

I risked a look over my shoulder, wincing at the pain as I twisted. A single figure was in pursuit: the short, strong, dark, angry gentleman who knew my name.

My son, obviously. Mine and Ella's son. Who else could he be?

Raskolnikov crashed into the woods in an explosion of dry leaves and brittle twigs. I threw my arms around his neck and pressed down low in an attempt to secure myself against being scraped off. His head smelled awful. Nothing could stop him. He was like a fist through the bush. A juggernaut.

Like me.

And, probably, like my son. I turned around to see what could be seen behind me but it was nothing but bramble and sticks. Behind the horizon I could smell him, hunting me, furious and fearless and mad. A ruined circus lay in our mutual wake, a corridor drilled through a forest in mine.

My injury throbbed, my vision turned grey. I aimed my ride toward the

mountains. At the very least a clash there would claim fewer peripheral casualties.
For he would soon catch up.

5.

Let me tell you about the best time I ever had.

It was 1919. Europe was a mess. I had the Spanish Flu and so did everybody else, the only difference being that it killed them. The Great War was over but its devastation continued to echo through the world in a series of sick aftershocks, influenza riding on their backs.

I wanted to hear Quasimodo ring his bells before I succumbed so I found myself hobbling to Paris, coughing up blood. At the gates of Notre Dame they insisted that Quasimodo was long gone once I forced to them to give up the pretense that he had never lived.

I didn't hang around. Quasimodo has been a good pal, and it pained me to imagine something untoward happening to him. Also, the steps of the church were blanketed by mewling hordes of the dying which gave me a case of the willies.

In Pigalle I collapsed beside an ornate fountain and watched the slowly turning tines of the Moulin Rouge. The sun was setting. The streets were nearly empty, socializing being eschewed in favour of health. I watched an old man pee into the gutter with detachment and wondered whether my will to live had finally expired. I became cold but did nothing about it.

"You have a cigarette?" asked the old man.

"No," I said, lifting my head to face him.

He fled in terror. I sighed and lay back down against the stone edge of the fountain, the chuckling waters reminding me of the creeks I dallied in as a boy. The splash of water always sounds exactly the same—centuries make no difference.

I was as surprised as anyone that I awoke the next morning. The fountain was still doing its thing, now populated by small brown birds grooming their wings and twittering. The summer sunshine was filtered through a roof of thin cloud, lending it a diffuse, unreal quality. There were no shadows.

Horses clattered by, and on the wind I could hear the putter of a distant automobile. I blinked wearily at the streets, emotionally unprepared for the effort of going on. Once you've resigned yourself to an exit it can be disconcerting to find yourself back onstage.

The tines of the wooden windmill over the Moulin Rouge continued to turn, turn, turn, squeaking intermittently. Much like myself.

A woman in a dirty shawl approached me slowly. I summoned the effort to turn around, certain the state of my disfigured ugliness would frighten her away. Instead her brown eyes welled up with unmistakable compassion. "You poor thing," she said. "You have the flu?"

I nodded weakly. "Me too," she said. And then, "Have you taken any breakfast?"

I shook my head.

She looked into my eyes without flinching, no stitch of revulsion evident. She held out a thin, long-fingered hand. "Come with me. I have enough to share."

"I am a monster, woman," I said wearily. "Find your comfort with a man."

"All men are monsters," she said. "Will you eat with me or won't you?"

I would. I did. I shambled to my feet, leaning heavily on the weathered crutch I had adopted since the loss of my most recent prosthetic. She offered her arm to help

stabilize me and, after a brief hesitation rooted in pride, I took it. Together we shuffled over the cobblestones, turned down a narrow alley, and found a doorway leading up stairs to a set of dank apartments that smelled like spoiled food.

I had eaten worse things than spoiled food lately, so my mouth began to water.

The woman's rooms were dingy and compact, housing an iron bed with a sad, stained mattress, a small hearth for cooking, a few pots and pans, a splintering chest and a wardrobe made of waste wood marked with foreign characters. There were also two chairs, and I sat on one of them gingerly to avoid breaking it under my weight.

She revealed a sack from beneath her shawl and pulled some meagre scraps from within: two apples, a hunk of hard bread, a wheel of cheese covered in a green patina of mould, a paper envelope of coffee grounds. As she set to fixing breakfast she spoke toward the wall, her voice reverberating dully: "I don't want to die alone."

"Everyone dies alone."

"I don't want to be *dying* alone. Does that suit you better?"

I said nothing. She lit the fire with bricks of manure and twigs, then set a pot to boil. She wiped her hands on her apron and turned to regard me. Her face was long and drawn, almost skeletal, the hollows around her eyes discoloured and blue. "I was once pretty," she told me. "Do you believe it?"

"Everyone has their own taste. I like my women meaty, personally."

She looked down at herself with a grim shrug. "I once had breasts. I once had cheeks. But the flu is eating me."

"You're bearing up well. Some die in hours."

"I am tough," she reported. "Dying is the easiest thing I've ever done."

Despite myself I warmed to her company, my compassion shored up by her unaffected candor. "What's your name?"

"Madeleine."

"I'm Lallo."

We did not speak over breakfast. As my appetite was quenched I slowly became aware of the unrestrained sloppiness with which I was scarfing everything down. I dropped my gaze from her when she looked at me, ashamed. "It is no matter," she assured me. "You are very hungry."

"I take the last meal of a dying woman. My own nobility overwhelms me. Tell me, what else can the pity I inspire cause you to give up on my behalf?"

With surprising suddenness she reached up and touched my face, her fingers lightly travelling over the strange contours of whorls of my burned flesh. "What happened to you, Lallo?" she asked in a whisper.

"Everything," I said sharply, pulling back. "What do you want?"

"To share and be shared. It is all that I have. There isn't much time left. I want to know only goodness before I go."

"I am not a goodness," I said, frowning. "I am a monster and you waste your charity on me."

"Someone has hurt you."

I winced. "I don't care enough for anyone to be hurt anymore."

"You're a poor liar."

I couldn't help but smile a little. "Yes, you're right," I confessed. "I always have been."

"Let me give something to you."

"I should leave. I can't take anything more from you." I reached for my crutch and began working my way to standing.

She stood up also and took a step closer to me, her gaunt face only inches from my twisted nose. She felt out blindly and held my hand. "Take tenderness," she breathed. "Please."

"I told you I will take nothing else."

"Then give yourself up to me," she persisted, "if giving makes you able to receive."

We made love. At first quietly, and then without reserve. We broke the iron bed, and laughed when we hit the warped floorboards. We kissed with our eyes closed and then our eyes open, and afterward we both wheezed and coughed up sprinkles of blood. Then, for a long while she lay against my scar-studded chest and listened to the beating of my ancient heart.

Weeks passed. Autumn threatened the summer with frosty mornings and cold breezes. And one day I awoke to realize that I had begun *living* again without noticing, my morbid paralysis having ebbed away in the sweet nights when I embraced Madeleine in the dark and worried about nothing.

I coughed, and all that came out was snot. I took a deeper breath and felt no pain from the bottom of my lungs. My preternatural immune system had extinguished the virus from me and, heedless of the consequences, my body was regenerating. Nothing could stop it.

"You're not dying," she said simply over coffee that morning.

I nodded. "I seldom am, in the end. I'm deeply sorry to have ruined your palliative fantasy."

She looked at her hands. "I don't have the flu."

"No," I agreed. "You have consumption. The mistake is easy to make in such panicked times. You may yet live to see Christmas."

She coughed into her handkerchief and smiled wanly. "You will stay with me?" "I will."

She said, "Soon I will not be able to whore for our bread."

I waved dismissively. "Don't worry about it. I'll figure something out. Just let me gain my strength back a tad and before you know it I'll be bringing home a cornucopia of plenty every evening. What's your favourite food?"

"Don't be stupid."

"No, honestly: what's your favourite?"

She blushed as much as her pale face could muster, her eyes defocused and far away. "When I was a girl at Christmas we had oranges and chocolate. I don't think there is another mix of tastes in this world I remember as fondly."

"I will find you oranges and chocolate, Madeleine. I promise."

"You're sweet to lie to me, dear Lallo."

"You are the reason I wake up each day. There is nothing I could deny you." Madeleine cried.

And she cried again, rasping for breath, eyes watering, the day I came to her bedside with a basket of oranges and sticks of chocolate wrapped in newspaper. I leaned down so she could kiss me, and wiped the tears from her sallow skin. Together we uneeped the fruit and ate, cocoa-stained juices running down our chins.

She took my hands, turned them over. Though I had scrubbed well there were still lines of dried blood in my palm's wrinkles. "Ask not," I said.

She started to open her mouth. "*Ask not*," I repeated sharply.

In the final weeks she didn't get out of bed at all. When I wasn't out procuring supplies to the chagrin of Paris I spent my hours reading the newspaper aloud to her,

fluffing her pillows and rinsing her bedpan. One night as we lay in a pool of moonlight coming through the single dingy window she told me about her brother, a boy freakishly disfigured by fire whom she had cared for as a girl living on the streets of Montmartre. In a whisper she explained how she had lost him to drunken hooligans cavorting in the streets at the news of the Great War's end.

"His body was so small," she said. "I buried him in Boulogne, with my hands."

In the spirit of revelation I also found myself telling a sad story, beginning with my son's relentless pursuit of me eastward across the Russian steppe and into the cold, barren plains beyond. He caught up with me in Siberia and we fought for days on end, tireless wrestlers under a cold sun, blood and dirt and sweat covering us in equal measure.

"Why do you hate me?" I asked him.

"You destroyed *her*," he told me breathlessly, using the same emphasis on the word I heard in my head when I thought about *her*, my girl, from so many, many moons ago. I knew that his *her* was Ella, his mother. "You broke her spirit by conquering her, and forcing her to endure me. For I am a sick thing, and I never should have been."

This was during one of the lulls in our match—we had both fallen down a steep slope and broken our bones on the rocks at the bottom. We lay only a few yards from one another, grimacing, exploring the new contours of our limbs with numb and chafed fingertips. Dawn was colouring the eastern horizon.

"She's gone?"

"She left me," hissed my son. "She could not bring me to order, as the world cannot bring you to order. We're beasts. We're weapons. We're damned."

I scoffed and then howled briefly as I pressed a dislocated shoulder back into place. "Nobody has the power to damn you except yourself, boy. You can't blame me for bringing you to life anymore than you can blame the world for bringing any of us to life—sparrows, skunks, Napoleon."

"That is wrong and you know it. We are freaks."

"I can live with that."

"I will not let you."

"And whom would that appease?"

"My rage."

"Some cause! Have you ever considered..." I trailed off, then continued despite blushing under my own hypocrisy. "...Have you ever considered that there may be a standard of right and wrong that supercedes your feelings?"

He did not answer. He craned my head and looked over at where he lay, his eyes now glued to the northern sky. There came a distant, low rumble like thunder. I traced his gaze and my breath caught in my throat. "Oh shit," I said. "...Not again."

The longer you live, the more some events the short see as rare come to seem as regular as the weather. Even so I am shocked and terrified every time I see a large meteorite plunging down to Earth.

This one was a doozy.

The sky seemed to split in two as the column of roiling fire sailed overhead, the concussions of material vapourizing at the bowshock coming to us like overlapping peals of heavy artillery. I squinted against the glare, transfixed.

The shadows clocked around us as the meteorite passed overhead.

It exploded just a few miles from the ground, a harsh blue light shining like the sun for an instant before it was occulted by speeding clouds of dust, debris and flaming ejecta. I was able to actually see the sound of the thing as a wave racing across the

tundra toward us, reflexively cowering behind my arms in the seconds before the blasted air washed over us with a roar.

The breath was sucked from my lungs and then I was struck by a second wave—this one accompanied by a heat so intense my hair burned away in a blink. I was picked up like a ragdoll and tossed across the valley, my back skidding on the rocks.

I fell unconscious where I landed.

It was noon before I awoke again, and another hour after that before I was able to shake my daze sufficiently to remember where I was and what had happened. My head was bleeding rather badly and so was my back. One side of my body was burned, some of the skin blackened and crispy at the edges where it hung free. I felt pretty awful.

Using two charred branches as canes I managed to get upright. My wooden prosthesis had been incinerated, the ankle red and blistered. “Hello?” I called, the inside of my mouth and throat singed and stiff.

By late afternoon I had climbed back up the side of the valley and, from that vantage point, was able to for the first time appreciate the devastation the exploding meteorite had wrought: to the horizon in every direction the pines were laid flat against the dirt, smoke from many fires raising a grey veil over the sun.

My ears were ringing.

Dusk was approaching when I finally found my son, wedged in a slide of rocks a quarter mile from where I’d landed. He had not fared as well as I. His body was mostly ruined, and I will not describe the damage. Suffice it to say that significant pieces of his anatomy were missing and nowhere to be found.

I hobbled over to him and dropped to my knees, cradling his head in my lap.

His eyes opened feebly. “I am killed,” he told me matter of factly.

“No,” I argued, my voice hoarse.

“Yes,” he replied, closing his eyes again. “I have already looked.”

Vultures circled overhead, their long, diffuse shadows slipping over the smashed terrain. The sun kissed the horizon and the dusty sky turned red.

I said, “You might heal.”

“I don’t want to heal. Not like this. Not trapped in this body.”

I shuddered, sobs working their way up my constricted throat. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry for everything. I’m so sorry you’ve known so much pain. I am Vishnu. I ruin the world. I should be you, and you should be free.”

He almost smiled, his ripped lips twitching. “I will soon be free.”

“Are you in pain?”

He shook his head ever so slightly. “I feel nothing.”

I stroked his brow with my clumsy, calloused fingers. I wiped the ashes from his cheeks and kissed him. Night descended and he was lost to my view. Before midnight he sighed and said, “Father!”

And then nothing else.

I wept and wept and wept. I clutched his body into the small hours, and when the sun returned I buried him with my broken hands, erecting a stone monolith and marking it with my blood. That’s how we used to do it in the olden days.

What an effort it took to stand. What an effort it took to walk away, aimless.

It was with the same heavy heart that I spirited Madeleine to the woods in Boulogne under the cover of night, her skeletal remains seeming to weigh less than a bag of flour. I had held her as she passed, too, the air whistling weakly in and out of her disease-ravaged lungs at a slower and slower pace until she fell silent and still. She

relaxed into the bed, her bladder emptying and her eyes fixing cloudily at the dirty ceiling of the room we had shared for four months.

“My love for you hurts so badly it is the only way I know I am still alive,” I said to her corpse as I swaddled it and waited for nightfall. “Thank you Madeleine, thank you.”

For ten years my heart had been frozen, from the grief of my son to the grief of my lover. Unlocked by the passion I felt for her, for the first time in a long, lonely while I remembered why I bother to breathe.

It’s all about the short, like I said. It’s all about falling in love with them and crying when they die. It’s about caring, no matter how much it hurts. Being a part of the world is essential—it is self-banishment that makes the freak.

That is what Madeleine gave back to me: the capacity to care.

6.

I didn’t really come into my own until recently. It took a world gone mad to make me sensible, I guess.

Many epiphanies are born out of tough times—at least, mine was. The Great Depression meant my usual antisocial haunts and hidden byways were infiltrated by scores of displaced shortmen. Everywhere I went there were people: sleeping in ditches, lurking in alleys, squatting in abandoned buildings, milling around on the fringes of forests hunting and gathering like in the days of yore.

They sang around what small fires they could muster. Very retro.

Where once the whole world was groups around their fires with only the thin tether of lore to remind them they didn’t wander alone, now this Earth was entangled in networked nations of symbiotic institutions with interdependent economies complex enough to behave like a genuine beast—unpredictable, wild, tantrumatic. When it thrashed thousands died and millions were reduced to living like we did in the olden days: humble, depraved, and always close to death.

But the short always purge themselves eventually, like fire sweeping the forest floor; and I could smell it, waiting in the wings—war. The world quivered at its edge.

You should understand that the Great War scared the life out of me. I was stuck right in the middle of it, and for a while there it seemed like there was nowhere I could turn without challenging somebody’s army. By the skin of my teeth I escaped gassing, shelling, shooting. I saw the impossibility of aeroplanes flying in squadron, and I heard and felt their insectile drone. It was a carnival of mechanized murder that stung me to my soul, and opened my eyes.

So, like I said, when I smelled big war coming again I applied my newfound wisdom and *got the hell out of Europe*.

I took to the deep woods of western North America where the towns still had space between them. I competed with bears for dumpster diving privileges. When my clothes became too torn and discoloured I wore skins, which made me feel very nostalgic.

I did a lot of thinking. The world was giving birth to a new kind of animal—a grey and restless one that straddled continents. It was as alien to the short as it was to me; they found comfort mostly in each other. Madeleine had taught me to love again, but she had died. Whom could I love in her stead? Another of the short seemed a daunting prospect on account of the sheer number of unsuitable candidates on top of the delicate conundrum of my life-ravaged unattractiveness.

I eventually decided that I could love the beasts, because I pitied them.

It was strange to pity those whom I had once revered and even, in the youngest sliver of my youth, thought of as gods along with the personified forces of nature—my childhood friends whose terrifying aspect was occluded only by the faith that their power represented something meaningful.

And yet here were these heretofore great creatures, biting one another's tails as they cowered in ever shrinking patches of disconnected world bisected by concrete and steel, becoming psychotic for want of a normal life. It was the worst kind of desecration. Yes! I could act for the once noble beasts.

...This lasted up until I was kicked in the chest by a moose I had saved from being impacted on the front of a CP locomotive. "Okay, that's *it*," I declared, probing my cracked ribs. Earlier that day I had been mauled, pecked, and defecated upon. "You animals are ingrates! I'm through."

I stalked up the railway to the next town, determined to find a source of spirits.

Upon arriving at a sad looking foresters' camp I sussed out the local watering hole by the stink and pushed through the batwing doors with a grunt. The lumberjacks looked up from their card games and conversations, cigarettes dangling forgotten from their frozen mouths. I sidled up to the bar, swishing through the sawdust on the floor.

The barkeep, a blotchy-skinned, beefy woman with squinty eyes and a lined face etched in a permanent frown. She began to stammer incoherently.

"Shot of rye," I said.

"S-Sasquatch!" she groaned, brow glistening with sweat.

I sighed. "On second thought...just leave the bottle, will you?"

With shaking hands she pushed the liquor across the bar—an unsanded brace of two-by-fours balanced on rusty sawhorses. The lumberjacks just continued to stare, absolutely motionless. The wireless warbled on with some fellow's tinny voice pining after his sealost love. I filled my glass and knocked it back, then filled it again. I listened to the wireless. A couple of drinks later I noticed that the place had emptied out behind me, half-drunk drinks in greasy glasses left abandoned on the wooden tables. When I turned back the barkeep had also fled, so I flipped a couple of gold coins on the table in case I forgot about it later.

I drank another shot. The wireless mumbled and whistled.

A gang of lumberjacks burst into the bar carrying a net between them. I upended the first two manually and menaced the other two with my walking stick swung in a tight, hissing arc. They all fell over themselves to leave.

I turned back to the bar wearily, poured another drink, listened to a commercial about breakfast cereal. And that's when I heard about him: Superman. Apparently this guy was possessed of strength many times that of an ordinary man, and was capable of amazing athletic feats, all performed in the service of protecting shortkind from its own most nefarious and cruel members.

I knew immediately that he must be long—a new peer! And at the end of the programme the announcer told me the origin of the broadcast: New York City. That's where I would find this new friend.

...I know, I know: you're already laughing. I'm still embarrassed. So what if every kid in the world over the age of five knew Superman wasn't real? I didn't. What can I say? I'd been a little out of touch, and what I had been in touch with over the past generation had mostly served to baffle me. I had no basis to doubt the reality of Superman in a world that had zeppelins. Thus, my visit to New York was coloured by a not insignificant amount of disappointment.

I slept in Central Park. Come nightfall New York's megaliths glow.

Meat was hard to come by, but I stole out to Chinatown in the small hours to scoop crap out of the gutters, or to scoop up the rats eating the crap out of the gutters—whichever smelled least rancid. It was on one such foray when I was forced to quickly retreat into the shadows at the sound of approaching shortmen engaged in horseplay, their drunken voices ringing off the bricks.

As they passed by the mouth of the alley I slunk in I saw that a woman was at the centre of their ring, and she seemed to be in some distress. When the wind turned I smelled the men's arousal and knew something untoward was afoot.

And maybe I knew, too, that I had something to atone for.

They backed their prey into the alley. They tossed her from one of their number to the next, taunting and singing. She sobbed raggedly, and plead. Someone tore her skirt.

I cracked my knuckles.

Everything went quiet. "Who's there?" barked one of the boys.

"Comeuppance," I said, stepping forward and cutting the air with my spinning staff. Its whistling end intercepted the closest boy in the collarbone, felling him neatly.

Someone rushed me in the dark, a switchblade snicking open. I tossed him aside and he struck the wall rudely, dropping into a pile of trash cans.

The two boys left standing retreated to the sidewalk but I followed them, tripping their feet out from under them, then standing over them as I let my hood drop. They blanched. "Bad boys," I rumbled. "Your own comeuppance is nigh. Run away home now, and renounce your evil ways."

They fled. I replaced my hood and turned to the alley. "Go home, girl."

She fled.

I straightened the dirty trenchcoat I wore over my robes and limped back to the park. I stood tall as I walked, feeling just a little bit like Superman. I wondered how else I might serve the citizens living in the belly of this city...

My initial campaign did not go as smoothly as would have been ideal. Some people got hurt—petty thieves as well as cops and bystanders. I'm clumsy, and sometimes I freak out when I'm cornered. Never the less it was sufficient to gain me a certain amount of controversial notoriety on the island. I wondered how long it would be before Moses came to shut me down.

One night while I was eating a rabbit in the park I smelled hot tobacco and heard twigs crunching in the shadows. An ember burned. I tossed aside my dinner and prepared to pull away but a man's voice called out, "Please, stay a moment. I only want to talk."

I hesitated beside an old oak.

He continued, his voice low and soft, transatlantic pronunciation covering an eastern accent. "I have been observing your work here in New York. I am very impressed. I am interested in helping you."

I snorted. "Help how?"

He took another step forward, spread his hands. "What do you need? I should think a better base of operations is in order. And, dare I risk offending you, a bath, perhaps."

"Why would you do this?"

"I represent an organization with an interest in funding unusual projects."

I snorted again. "Whose army do you arm?"

"Only our own. My name is Bahram. Come back to my apartments and we can discuss things in more civilized environment."

I hovered.

"Please, my friend. I promise you I am concealing nothing. And even if I were you are more than capable of defending yourself. Please, come and have a drink with me and allow me to explain my interests."

So I went. I rode in a fancy automobile half a block up Fifth Avenue and then proceeded up to the luxurious penthouse apartment of Bahram Siraj. As I took a seat he fitted a fresh cigarette into a long holder, smiled beneath his inky black mustache, and directed a mute Indian to prepare our drinks. The Indian tried not to wince at my scent as he handed me my glass.

"I suspect that you are a private man," said Bahram. "I can respect that. However, you must appreciate that if we are to get on with any measure of civility we will have to exercise some amount of trust."

"Granted, sir."

"Thank you, sir. I do not know whether you recognize my name but I will not mince words, as it is said; the Shah of Anwar is my father. My father is a man of great vision, and he has never let convention or criticism dampen his enthusiasms. He is also a man of uncompromising morality—"

I held up a hand in interruption. "Slow down, Mr. Siraj. You're wasting your breath if you want me to join your religion. I don't care if you're a Whirling Dervish or a Secret Saint of Prester John—I don't do clubs."

The corners of Bahram's mouth tightened subtly. "Clubs, indeed." He sipped his drink. "I can assure you, sir, that religion is entirely beside the point. My father acts as a man on Earth—a man with a great power of wealth who seeks to use it for the betterment of all mankind."

Now I smiled tightly. "He must encounter much scepticism."

"Altruism is indifferent to scepticism, because it requires neither the faith nor the kudos of others. As a vigilante you must appreciate this, or you would not act."

"Vigilante? I'm a superhero, like in the comic books."

"Yes, you are," agreed Bahram, nodding as he leaned over to ash his cigarette. "And I have been authorized to support you in that role for a period of five years, provided you accept, of course, and provided you remain dedicated to serving the public good."

I squinted. "I already have some money. In Switzerland. I just haven't been able to drop by lately, on account of the war."

Bahram grinned. "Then we could help you to regain access to your funds. It pleases me for you to present us with something we can do for you immediately."

"All this for a monster?" I sneered, looking around at the fine furnishings I was soiling with my dirty overcoat. "What do you get out of it?"

Bahram drained his glass and put it down gingerly on the bar. He walked slowly across the room, stroking his mustache, then crouched on the carpet beside my chair. "My friend, to be completely honest with you, I will tell you. I will tell you what this means to me: my father's love. If you wish to doubt my father that is another matter. But as his envoy I assure you that all of my cards are on the table. I ask only one thing of you tonight. Trust me. Trust me just a little, so that before my father I am not failure."

I sighed. I crossed my legs and looked out the window. With a grunt I turned back and finished my drink. "I am Lallo," I told him. "And my life is longer than history."

And you know what? We became friends, Bahram and I. It was a kind of friendship I hadn't had since pre-Imperial Rome, a kind I'd forgotten I could enjoy. We'd shoot the shit about anything or everything and go to baseball games and throw back drinks together. We stayed up late and got each other excited about ideas that were centuries or millennia old. My anecdotes about Socrates left him in stitches.

I appeared in public in an alabaster masque, rubbing elbows with the glamorous and seen. I explained to them all how I had been burned by gas in the Great War, and then we would all have an easy jab at the Germans. The girls all laughed. We listened to jazz and drank martinis.

Good times.

At night I patrolled Manhattan and interfered in its ugliest squabbles, separating the defenseless and guileless from the violent or greedy. I wasn't really interested in bank robberies or car theft, but assault and residential burglary frequently inspired me to action. I worked hard.

Sometime around mid-century Bahram invited me back to the palace in Anwar to meet his father. I experienced the nadir of my dignity cowering like an infant through every minute I spent aboard an aircraft, my hands clapped over my ears and my eyes squinched shut, humming. The thrum of the engines spoke to me like a stampede of mammoths, quickening my pulse and filling me with terrifying animal passions.

After the first leg of the journey Bahram arranged for a curtained area on the plane so that I might have privacy while I quailed.

The Shah was very fat and very jolly, and I liked him right away. He had a grey beard and wore a funny hat. "Lallo—I have so anticipated our meeting!" he cried, waddling across the red carpeted hall to embrace me. Then he turned to embrace his son. "Truly Bahram," he said, looking at me, "this treasure of a man you have found is a credit to you. I am so excited to have him here!"

I was fed and watered, shown to my gorgeous quarters and there I slept the sleep of a baby. In the morning was a large breakfast at which we sat cross-legged around a large square table and I was introduced to various colourful guests of the establishment. In the afternoon, a walk through the gardens.

Indeed it would not be until the evening that the Shah would guide me on a private tour of the universe that existed deep underground beneath his palace, showing me wonders I had not seen in all my long years alive. From all that I beheld that night one conversation sticks out in my memory, and I'm curious about it still.

It occurred as the Shah and I strode along a catwalk high above a pit where workers were busy assembling a metal skin over a long, conical superstructure. "Do you know what this is, Lallo? It is a rocket!"

I frowned. "A missile?"

"No no," he chuckled, putting his arm around my shoulder. "This is a vehicle for transporting men and materials off of the Earth, and into space."

I rubbed my jaw thoughtfully. "What might a man do in space, Shah?"

"Anything he wills, for whoever reaches a planet first will be its king."

"You will capture the Moon, then?"

The Shah scoffed. "The Moon we'll leave to the Soviets. The focus of our project is Mars. However, this rocket will not make that journey. It will simply deploy a small radio relay in orbit about the Earth."

I looked out at the mighty rocket taking shape beneath us and tried to imagine it in flight. Could nothing stop the ambitions of the short? Could they even dream to

scratch the stars? I chuckled again. "It's a wonderful dream, Shah. When do you expect to actually reach Mars?"

Now it was his turn to laugh. "My friend," he said, "we are already there."

On the way back from Anwar, Bahram and I stopped off in Geneva to go to the bank. We got a bit of the runaround until Bahram used his powers of persuasion to elicit the fact that my accounts had been liquidated to Israel as reparations for the holding of Nazi gold. The bank had preferred to keep the Nazi gold because of certain influential Nazi clientele currently in hiding, figuring that the chances that I would show up were small. It had been a hundred and thirty years since my last deposit, after all, while the Nazis were still a going concern.

Fucking Nazis.

In 1966, during an attempt to rescue a woman from an overturned car, I was struck by a transport truck skidding on the icy Brooklyn Bridge. It was Christmas. I was compressed against a support pylon by the snow-coated grille, and even as it was happening I knew it was bad. Very bad.

Somebody in one of the stopped cars had carols playing on the radio.

I remember the flashing lights of the ambulance and then nothing else for long, cloudy time. My nightmares were garish. Over a course of days I awoke and slowly recognized that I was in a hospital. I surmised that Bahram was taking care of me.

Much of my body was encased in plaster.

Most notably, my right arm was sore despite its total absence.

Prester John strode into my room and took a seat on a chair beside the window, tugging his slacks into position carefully. "It's a miracle you survived," he said primly. "Thank God."

"Thanks, God," I mumbled.

"Very good," nodded John. "And now you can thank me, who saved you from what promised to be nothing short of a dissection at the hands of New York's medical authorities. You're in my private hospital, here in California."

I sniffed, looked around. "Nice place."

"Yes. And costing several hundred dollars a day. To whom shall I direct the bill, by the way?"

"The Nazis."

He frowned. "I can see I am being too oblique. I'm asking after your employer."

"Uncle Sam. I collect food stamps."

Prester John stood up. He brushed his nails briefly on his suit jacket and then turned to linger at the jamb. "I can, and will, make things very difficult for you. This is, you understand, a hospital. We have many tools at our disposal."

"Fuck you, John," I said. "I remember the Inquisition. Do your worst."

And he did. I will not dwell on it, but I will say that the Inquisitors never knew what John knew—they never knew how far they could've pushed me. So I'm not really ashamed to say that I broke. I did. In time I came to tell John everything I knew about the Shah of Anwar. Every scrap of memory exported and, in the end, readily and enthusiastically. I hoped that if I complied I would be killed.

Instead I was dumped by the side of the road in Minnesota, naked and nearly mad.

By begging in rags I raised the dimes I needed to use a payphone. Though I have never been very good with telephones and the like I had managed to burn a few

combinations into my mind. It didn't take me long to run through them all. All wrong numbers. The Shah had severed all ties. I was on my own again.

But this isn't a sad story. Like I said before, most hardships are easier to bear when you have a mission...

Ella was living in Philadelphia when I found her again, although living must be defined broadly for the statement to be wholly true. What remained of her was housed in a nursing home, hooked up to wires and tubes and machines. I wandered into her room with a scrap of telephone book folded in my hand.

"You're sly," I said, "but not sly enough. Give me a few centuries, I'll find anyone."

Her breathing apparatus clicked. "Lallo, Lallo, Lallo," she wheezed.

I sat down beside her bed and touched her deeply lined chocolate brow. "You've looked better," I admitted.

"You too."

We talked for a long time, she and I, mitigated by the slow pace of her respirator. We both cried, especially when we talked about our boy and how sick he had been. We exchanged stories about our various missing or battered parts, and showed each other a spread of languages, living and dead. I tried not to make her laugh because it caused her machines to beep in alarm.

We held hands. "You've always been my favourite nightmare, Lallo," she told me.

The afternoon waned and twice the nurse had tried to shoo me off. When she threatened to call security I looked to Ella imploringly. "What can I do for you, Ella? I have the power to break any rule. Do you want me to take you away from this place?"

She shook her head. "This is not my life. My life ended two thousand years ago. It is time to stop this charade life. It is time to put an end to the monstrosity. We have no right to it."

I licked my lips nervously. "You want me to end it for you?"

Her feeble head raised from the pillow, her eyes suddenly ablaze. "End us all, Lallo. Stop Prester John. Stop Moses. Stop the next me, and the next you. You know we are bigger than this life, and we break it when we thrash. You know."

I kissed her on the lips as she died at my hand. I left through the window, which isn't as easy as it used to be. I grunted a lot. Christ!

Ella was right. I did know it. And now I am bent to my plan.

As I was the first so shall I be the last.

My circumstances are humble these days, that's true. It's more of a squat than a hideout. It leaks when it rains, but I have umbrellas for my bookshelves. I spend a lot of time reading. I dig back and I also keep current. I follow news of the growing machines of influence of Prester John and Moses and Ra Sum and Aum and the rest of us, adding pins to my maps and drawing connections on my charts. I can so easily spot the long now, just by the shadows they cast in the records and the footprints they make in economies. I've even spotted a couple I'm pretty sure the Holy See doesn't know about. I observe, I synthesize, I plot.

I bide my time.

Our day is over. This is an age where any individual fist can wield the fires of thousands of years worth of work and sunlight in an instant, an age where even the short stumble under the burden of their power. Lest we create new gods after so many millennia fleeing the old, the long must go.

I will reap them, and the short will have their inheritance.



THE BARRINGTON HOUSE

Bianca was a bad girl, and the neighbourhood wanted retribution.

There was Rachael Lippenbaum, who had suffered repeated attacks of gum in her hair. There was Arnold Drober, who was pushed in the muck every day he was unlucky enough to meet Bianca at the bus-stop. So too was vengeance craved by Leon Archibald whose books had been thrown on a roof, and Amanda Weller whose dress had been torn. Geoffrey Penobscot, Susan Chow, Merrick Inderwater—all angry. But first in line was Dini Butler who had never fully recovered from her involuntary inclusion in a wet T-shirt contest in front of all her classmates when Bianca got a hold of the caretaker's hose at school.

"Bianca must pay," she hissed to the cadre of conspirators assembled in the alley behind the town grocery store, sharing stolen cigarettes and passing between them one lukewarm can of light beer borrowed from Mr. Butler's garage fridge.

"I hate her," contributed Arnold Drober, his pants splashed with mud from an encounter earlier that day.

"We all hate her," agreed Amanda Weller. "She's a lesbian or something."

"I know, eh?" chimed in Susan Chow. "She's like on hormones. What's with those boobs? Who does she think she is?"

"We're not here to bitch," said Merrick Inderwater firmly. "We're here to make a plan. We're here to teach Bianca a lesson once and for all. Right Dini?"

Everyone nodded. A few of them coughed, awkwardly balancing cigarettes between their short, child fingers. Even the kids who hated Dini Butler had showed up, demonstrating their willingness to attach themselves to the perceived lesser of two evils given a cause sufficiently compelling.

For his part, Merrick had found himself unable to go against Dini's bidding ever since the wet T-shirt incident. He woke up damp nightly, possessed by throbbing afterimages of the stark visibility of her training bra. "Okay then," he continued. "What do we do, Dini?"

"We strike on Hallowe'en," said Dini, turning to look at each of them in turn. "It's the perfect cover for pranks, and we're going to prank her big." She paused, licked her lip-glossed lips twice quickly, took a deep breath. "Bianca's going to spend the night in the Barrington House, and we're all going to make it happen."

At mention of the Barrington House there came a collective gasp, followed by more coughing. Dini waited patiently for the air to clear. Every kid in town had heard

the stories about the derelict mansion on the hill at the end of Barrington Road—whether depicted as haunted or peopled by witches or gangsters, the consistent theme was dread.

“I heard Jordan Cottle’s uncle killed himself there in like the sixties or something,” whispered Geoffrey Penobscot. “He hung himself in the dining room after his team lost the pennant.”

“That’s where Fast Andre and his gang killed the kids they kidnapped after the Big Bank Robbery in nineteen seventy-seven,” said Leon Archibald with certain authority, adjusting his glasses. “The sheriff didn’t even find their bodies, because Fast Andre cut them up and fed them to his dogs.”

“My sister says Fast Andre still lives there.”

“No way—my dad says no one can live there because the poltergeist keeps them out. If you look in any mirror in the house your face looks like it’s melting off. Seriously.”

“I heard there’s toxic waste in the ground under the house, and it makes the animals turn all rabid and stuff, and that’s why witches do their rituals there, like all naked and perverted and gory on the solace.”

“Solstice.”

“Whatever.”

Dini raised her hand for order. “Know what?” she asked rhetorically, brow raised. “I bet there’s *nothing* in the Barrington House. I mean, not *really*. The point is that everyone is scared crapless of it, even stupid Bianca. We don’t need anything to be there—we just need to lock her in and let her imagination do the work.”

There was a general murmur of assent.

Dini took a deep breath, which nearly caused Merrick to swoon. “Now,” she declared, “let’s decide who’s going to do what.”

Bianca was also the subject of discussion in her own home. It was being explained to her in no uncertain terms that she would be obliged to spend the Hallowe’en evening accompanying her younger siblings from house to house around town, protecting them from candy-nabbers, pumpkin-smashers and the pranks of drunk teenage hooligans.

Bianca frowned deeply. She had rather hoped she would be one of the pumpkin-smashing, drunken teenage hooligans herself. She was only thirteen but she ran with a high school crowd, and she had been looking forward to Hallowe’en as an opportunity to demonstrate to them just how hardcore she really was. She had been intending to go on a bad-ass free-for-all, and had even been contemplating letting Mark Norbert feel her up under her shirt.

For a week she’d been collecting drabs of liquor from various sources to combine them in a large juice bottle, and spiriting cigarettes away from behind the counter at the Smoke Shop while Mark distracted Eileen or Doris or whatever old hag was working there that day.

“Bianca, are you even listening to me?” cried Mother.

“Yeah, Mom,” groaned Bianca, rolling her eyes and snapping her gum. She glanced over at her siblings with a pained expression: her white sister India and her yellow brother Mike smiled back uncertainly.

“I’m going to be a eukaryotic cell,” squeaked India.

“You are *so* lame,” noted Bianca.

“What are *you* dressing as?” challenged Mike, his eyes swimming through the thick lenses of his Scotch-taped glasses.

"I'm thirteen, Mike," snapped Bianca. "I don't dress up for Hallowe'en anymore because I'm not a little kid like you."

"I'm ten," Mike defended himself sullenly.

"Exactly," agreed Bianca.

Mother sighed. "Could you at least *try* to be civil to your brother and sister, Bianca? *Please?* This is an opportunity to show your father and I how mature you can really be. Don't blow it."

The sun began to set. Bianca fumed. Father and Mother helped get India and Mike into their costumes—the former ensconced in a transparent sac of cellular goo made from a refitted pool toy, and the latter feeling rather dashing in his black trenchcoat and sunglasses. Bianca sneered, "What're you supposed to be? The tax man?"

"I'm Neo from *The Matrix*," said Mike. Then he added, "Whoa."

Bianca clucked her tongue. "You do know that you're never going to get laid as long as you live, right?"

India furrowed her brow. "What's laid?"

Ten minutes later they came to the park at the centre of town, crossing paths with other bands of costumed kids carrying bags for candy and little cardboard boxes hanging around their necks for UNICEF pennies. The merry-go-round in the north-east corner was spinning, ridden by little witches, werewolves, droids and Spidermen. "Can we go for a ride on the way home?" asked India, tugging Mike's hand as she looked up at Bianca.

"You can do whatever the f you want," said Bianca. "I'll meet you back here at eight thirty, okay? And don't be late or I'll f'ing kill you."

Mike was anxious. "Mom said you were supposed—"

"I *know* what Mom said," replied Bianca icily, drawing a hand down her round, brown face dramatically. "Did you hear what I just f'ing said?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"Good. Take care of India, Mike. Don't get into trouble. I'll see you at eight thirty."

Mike and India watched Bianca stride away from them, crossing the park, lighting a cigarette as she was progressively occluded by the rows of leafless oaks. India was concerned. "Doesn't Bianca want to trick-or-treat?" she asked Mike.

Mike shrugged. "I guess not."

"But we're still going to go, right Mike?"

"Yup." Mike stared after Bianca sadly, then turned back to his little sister.

"Yup, we sure are. Let's go. We can start on Western, then walk toward school."

India grinned and gave Mike her hand again. As they walked her cytoplasm sloshed and her UNICEF box rattled with starter pennies she had begged from Father. They plowed through a pile of crispy, russet leaves, kicking at the flotsam in the day's last golden light. "I bet I'm going to get Lifesavers," India predicted.

"I bet," agreed Mike distantly, eyes cast over his shoulder in the direction Bianca had gone.

He smelled trouble.

Bianca sauntered into the graveyard, feeling sassy. She was wearing her white jeans that hugged her booty, and had undone her cardigan to the level that made Father mad. She threw away her half-smoked cigarette in favour of a new one so that it would last long enough for her to clear the gates and find her friends. She wanted to make an

entrance as she presented her juice bottle of indiscriminately mixed liquors, and she felt an appropriate bad-ass prop would be to have a smoke dangling from her lips defiantly.

The moon was a sliver of a crescent. The night was dark.

She kept a sharp eye out for the caretaker, glancing side to side while she sallied between the graves, reaching out to drag her fingers along their rough edges. As she approached the Sugarwood Mausoleum she heard voices—a burst of laughter, a bottle breaking, urgent commands to keep quiet.

“I think I hear something,” said Jordan Cottle. “Shut up, guys.”

Bianca flattened herself against the side of the tomb and crept slowly toward the corner, then leapt out with a yelp. Her friends screamed and Bianca fell down laughing. “Jesus Shitrod!” cried Tabitha Hendrick, spitting out beer. “Bianca you’re such a *bitch*.”

“I know, I know,” giggled Bianca, pulling out her juice bottle. “And this bitch is a bartender.”

“Rock *on*,” grinned Mark Norbert. “If I drink one of more of these warm goddamn diet beers I’m going to puke.”

Bianca blushed invisibly at his praise, passed him the bottle. He swigged, declared the contents repulsive, and then swigged again and passed the bottle on to Jordan. Bianca sat down next to Tabby, who was working over something carefully in her lap, a bottle of beer pinched between her chubby thighs. “Whassup, ho?” asked Bianca in a friendly way.

“I scored some weed,” mumbled Tabby. “You going to smoke it with us?”

“For sure,” said Bianca carelessly, quailing inside.

She watched with wide eyes as Tabby presented a fat, misshapen log of rolling paper, grey in the feeble light. It took Tabby five matches to get it lit, enduring the barbs of the others as she did. She drew in deeply and then exploded into a coughing fit, holding the joint at arm’s length as she doubled over to hack. “Frig,” she commented hoarsely.

Bianca took it next and repeated the act, fidgeting to conceal the fact that her hand was shaking a bit. While she coughed and her eyes swam with tears Mark plucked the joint away from her and dragged on it, then frowned. He looked over at Tabby dolefully. “This is *oregano*, you idiot.”

Tabby squinted at him, uncomprehending. “What?”

“It’s goddamn *oregano*, Tabby. It’s a goddamn *spice*.”

“Does it get you high?”

Mark rolled his eyes. “You put it on pizza.”

“Shitrod,” said Tabby sadly. “I paid ten bucks for that. I frigging hate Andrew Arlen now.”

“You bought from Andrew Arlen?” chuckled Mark, swigging from the liquor bottle as it came around again. “Jesus, Tammy. You’re stupid *and* fat.”

“Hey, shut up,” suggested Jordan.

“Whatever,” countered Mark.

Bianca looked up over Mark’s head and saw that Xavier had arrived. He was dressed as Satan. The first thing he said was, “You queers don’t even have costumes?”

“You’re wearing a costume?” snickered Mark. “You’re gay.”

“It’s fuckin’ Hallowe’en, dipshit.”

“Relax, man,” said Jordan. “Somebody get Satan a drink.”

“I can’t believe you bedwetters don’t even have costumes,” grumbled Xavier, leaning against the rightside pillar of the mausoleum’s dried-leaf carpeted portico.

“You’re probably drinking jungle juice too, eh?”

Bianca tucked the mixed liquor behind her leg. “There’s beers, too, Xave.”

“Girls don’t get to call me ‘Xave’ until they’ve touched my junk, Bianca,” said Xavier coolly. “And you’re too young to even know how to touch junk, so shut up and make yourself useful by throwing me one of them beers, eh?”

Bianca passed him a beer sullenly. Even with red-paint and a fake goatee slathered over his face Xavier was still too good looking to make direct eye contact with, so when she sat back down she scooped closer to Mark, facing Tabby. “Tell him about your weed, Tabby,” said Bianca, raising an eyebrow, eager to redirect Xavier’s attention. He was their chief—a tall tenth grader who knew no fear.

“Let’s just forget about it,” said Tabby.

“Oh yeah, Chubs tried to smoke us oregano,” guffawed Mark. Bianca laughed with him, batting his knee playfully.

“Like a pizza,” she added.

“Don’t call me Chubs, you asshole,” glowered Tabby.

Xavier smirked as he withdrew a joint from his pack of cigarettes. “Hey, do you kids want to *do* some *drugs*?”

Mark chortled. “Why sure, Satan!”

Bianca feigned nonchalance as she apprehensively followed the progress of the lit joint around the circle of friends. When it was her turn she saw no alternative but to take a haul. She told herself it would be just like a tobacco buzz only stronger, probably. She drew in the acrid smoke, her eyes watering instantly. She passed it on as she fought the urge to retch, her vision scintillating from oxygen deprivation.

She exhaled, mastering the cough reflex by the skin of her teeth.

“So, we going to go pumpkin smashing?” asked Mark as he passed the joint on to Xavier.

Xavier nodded. “Fuckin’ right, man. I just want to get my buzz on. Bianca, give me a hit of that jungle juice you’re hiding, will you?”

Bianca complied with only minor difficulty, her limbs feeling heavy and distant. Her breathing sounded too loud in her head. Jordan passed the joint to Tabby who passed it back to Bianca. She tried to take a shallower drag this time, but even so her head was starting to feel weird and wooly. She blinked and rubbed her eyes.

She leaned up against Mark. He put his arm around her, his fingertips gingerly brushing the strap of her brassiere.

For a moment that felt an hour long Bianca took in the scene in front of the vine-choked mausoleum, lingering with dreamy emphasis over the details of the shadows cast over everyone’s features. Suddenly she noticed how malevolent their expressions were, and she began to worry that they all thought she was nothing but an annoying, mouthy kid who they tolerated having around simply to have something to make fun of later. They were all staring at her now, frowning and angry.

“*What?*” she demanded finally, looking wildly between them.

Jordan snorted. “What what, Bianca?”

“Why are you all looking at me like that?”

Tabby squinted. “Like what?”

“I wasn’t even looking at you,” said Jordan, baffled.

“She’s fishin’ out,” opined Xavier.

“Just calm down,” suggested Tabby.

“I’m sorry, a’ight? Whatever I did or said, I’m sorry you guys,” Bianca said nervously.

“What the hell is she talking about?”

“I already called it, you homo—she’s fishing out.”

“Just breathe, Bianca. Breathe slow.”

Mark squeezed her shoulders warmly and Bianca took a couple of deep breaths, watching idly as Jordan and Tabby turned away and started to make out, lips smacking clumsily. Xavier smoked a cigarette, regarding with intent interest as the loops of fume in front of his face were briefly illuminated by the ember as he dragged. “Smoke is so fuckin’ cool,” he philosophized.

A dog barked. And then again, closer.

Xavier looked up. Jordan and Tabby paused. Bianca froze. “That’s not...” trailed off Mark, looking around apprehensively.

The yammering hound was closing in on them quickly, its voice echoing off the stones. On the breeze behind it they heard the caretaker, Mr. Phelps. “I know you’re in here you punks!” he shouted. “Find ’em, Grizzle! Go on, boy! Bite yourself some punk ass!”

Before Bianca could even process what was going on everyone had leapt to their feet and run away, leaving nothing but a lone can of beer glugging out its last contents into the leaves at her feet. “Oh my shit!” she cried, panic fluttering behind her sternum and taking her breath away.

She chose a direction and bolted. She tossed the jungle juice and it smashed against a grave. She plunged blindly through a thicket of decorative shrubs and then stumbled, looked up and was terrified by a statue of an angel. She rolled to her feet and pressed on wildly, suddenly too disoriented to find any of the cemetery gates.

She came up against the high fence along Sir John A. Macdonald Avenue just in time to see Xavier’s red costume dropped down the far side. “Xavier!” she whispered fiercely, “help me get over!”

Xavier hesitated only a second, Grizzle’s fervent barking bearing down on them. “Sorry kid, you’re on your own,” he said quickly and then turned around and pelted away down the sidewalk.

Rage choked Bianca, making her eyes tear. “*F you, Xavier!*” she screeched so hard it hurt her throat.

She instantly regretted it, of course, a cold sweat breaking out under her sweater as she heard Mr. Phelps change direction and come crashing through the bush directly at her, calling his dog after him. “I smell punk!” the old man shouted.

Bianca raced along the edge of the fence, keeping low, wincing at every snapped twig and kicked stone.

She came up short, startled by her arrival at the south gate. She slipped through and then jogged up the sidewalk, eyeing the graveyard interior anxiously. She felt nervous and strange, and she couldn’t help but continually rub her hands over one another even though it did not soothe her. She tried to light a cigarette but dropped it into the gutter. “F,” she said, the sound of her own voice surprisingly loud in the empty street.

She started to regain herself as she came to the corner of Sir John A. and Barrington Road, by the parkette donated by some dead rich person’s children years and years ago. She planned to sit down on the wrought-iron bench to catch her breath but stopped in her tracks when she saw that the Grim Reaper was loitering there, standing in a pool of his own shadow beneath the orange light of an antique-style street standard.

She forced a fake chuckle. “So even Death trick-or-treats, huh?”

The Reaper said nothing.

“O-kay,” she drawled, frowning. “Nice talking to you.”

Bianca walked on past the parkette, continuing east on Sir John A. She had not proceeded too far before she detected the scrape of an additional set of footfalls. She glanced back over her shoulder and saw the Grim Reaper there, walking a few paces behind her. “I don’t have no candy,” she said as casually as she could, the hairs on the back of her neck standing up.

The Reaper said nothing.

She increased her pace slightly, and so did Death. After half a block she started to feel stupid for being creeped out by some moron in a costume, so she whirled on her heel and crossed her arms, facing her follower. “You think I’m f’ing scared of this crap?” she challenged.

The Reaper stopped, regarding her behind his skull masque impassively. She could see no pupils glint through the dark eyeholes.

“What the f are you supposed to be, anyway?” she continued defiantly. “The ghost of f’ing Helen Keller or something?”

The Reaper said nothing.

Bianca turned around again to continue walking but was startled by the silent presence of another fully-masqued trickster: an Imperial Stormtrooper from the *Star Wars* movies was blocking the sidewalk ahead, white armoured arms crossed over his chest. “Happy Hallowe’en,” said Bianca darkly, attempting to push past him.

The stormtrooper grabbed her. Before she could even resist the Grim Reaper slunk up from behind and secured her arms behind her back. “What the hell?” she spat, struggling against the two of them.

A black cyborg wearing a plastic masque of a pale faced infested with wires and cables stepped out of the bushes beside the road, arms extended toward her. A synthesized voice crackled out of the masque tinnily, “*We have analyzed your defensive capabilities and judged them to be inferior to our own.*”

“What is this? Jesus crap—let go of me!”

In a matter of seconds the ring of costumed kidnappers closed in around her. The hood of her sweater was pulled over her head and the drawstring pulled tight, cinching the material around her face and covering her eyes. She started to kick out but felt herself picked up, her flailing feet bound together by somebody’s strong arms. She would have screamed then, but the stormtrooper’s black-gloved hand clamped over her lips. She tried to bite him but her teeth met only plastic armour, clicking ineffectually.

She ended up biting her own lip as she was jostled along.

“*Resistance is futile,*” noted the cyborg’s recorded voice.

And it was.

An hour later Mike Zhang Cuthbertson and his little sister India stood on the edge of the park at the centre of town, eating candy and wondering after Bianca. Mike shot the cuff of his trenchcoat and checked the Indiglo face of his digital watch again. “I guess we should just go home,” he mumbled.

“Can you take the wrapper off my Tootsie Roll for me?” asked India, her mouth already filled with a Mars bar, a half-sucked green lollipop stuck to her arm.

“Bianca’s going to be in so much trouble,” said Mike, dutifully unwrapping the Tootsie Roll and handing it back to India.

They were about to set off when Queen Amidala appeared from the corner by the pizza store, clutching her robes out of the way as she ran toward them. “Mike!” she cried, “Mike Cuthbertson!”

“Yeah?” Mike called back.

“Your sister’s in trouble!”

When she arrived before, huffing and puffing, Mike recognized the harried royal as Sarah Bleeton, who was in his grade at school. Mike thought she was pretty so he focused on her wig instead of her face as he asked, “What do you mean? How did you know she ditched us?”

“Some kids took her, Mike!” gasped Sarah, leaning against the merry-go-round as she fought to regain her breath. “Paramjit says he saw them put her in the Barrington House and then nail the door closed with her inside!”

Mike felt dizzy. The Barrington House!

“Who would *do* that?”

Sarah shook her head, her ornamental wig canting dangerously. “I don’t know, I don’t know. What should we do? Should we go get your parents?”

Mike bit his lip pensively. “I think we’d better go get her out of there right away,” he decided, his stomach turning over queasily. “She’s got to be scared out of her mind. Let’s go. Come on, India!”

Queen Amidala, Neo and a candy-eating eukaryotic cell ran along Western, turned up Sir John A. Macdonald, and made a beeline for Barrington Road. At the top of the hill they arrived winded to find a small crowd of kids clustered in front of the looming shadow of the famous house: Dr. Evil, Freddy Krueger, two Pikachus and three Agent Smiths. One of the agents held up his hand. “You don’t wanna go near there,” he pronounced carefully.

“You give me that juris-my-diction crap, you can cram it up your a,” grumbled Mike, pushing past the gawkers.

“Merrick’s there and he said he’s going to kick anyone’s ass who tries to get in the way,” warned Freddy Krueger.

Sarah hesitated, putting her hand on Mike’s shoulder. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Somebody’s *got* to do something,” he declared, brushing off her hand and marching on. “Watch India, will you?”

Mike slipped inside the rusted gates and up the overgrown walkway to the shadowed verandah. He stopped at its edge, hovering by the bushes. Wearing a long black cloak Merrick Inderwater was sitting on the railing. Standing around him was an Imperial Stormtrooper, a Borg and Cruella DeVille. “How long are we going to leave her in there?” Merrick was asking.

“All night,” said Cruella. “Somebody can bust her out in the morning for all I care.”

Mike recognized the voice of Dini Butler. The next one to speak was Arnold Drober, dressed as the stormtrooper. He said, “What if she gets hurt or something?”

“What, like crapping her pants or something?”

“I don’t know Dini, I’m just worried that—”

“You’re always worried, Arnold. There’s nothing in there but old furniture. Forget about it. Let’s get out of here.”

From inside the ancient house came the distinct sound of Bianca screaming, suddenly and briefly. The kids on the porch all exchanged looks. “What was that?” breathed Arnold.

“She probably just found a mirror,” guessed Dini. “Come on.”

She led her crew off the verandah and down the path, very close to Mike who held his breath and kept perfectly still. The shadows passed him by, though there was one straggler; the stormtrooper lingered, looking up at the derelict mansion. He took off

his helmet and peered at the upper storey, his brow furrowed.

"Dini," he whispered. Then louder, "Dini!"

"What is it *now*?" called Dini from the end of the walkway.

"I think..." he swallowed loudly, still staring. "I think I just saw somebody *in there*. Upstairs. Somebody's in there *with her*."

Merrick swore under his breath. "You're imagining things, you dork. Let's go."

Reluctantly, Arnold turned away from the Barrington House and replaced his helmet as he jogged to catch up with his co-conspirators. Mike waited for a count of a few seconds and then emerged from the bushes, hovering at the steps up to the verandah, eyes locked on the mouth-like front doors of the house, criss-crossed by two-by-fours nailed crudely into place.

He gulped, and then gasped as the bushes beside him rustled. Then he heard the distinct sloshing of India's cytoplasm, little plastic mitochondria knocking against the insides of her inner-tube. "India?"

"Where's Bianca?" she asked.

Sarah appeared next, her royal gown covered in burs and thistles. "India!"

"I just heard Bianca scream," said Mike, his mouth dry. "And Arnold Drober said he saw somebody in the window upstairs."

"There couldn't really be anyone living in there, could there?" asked Sarah quietly. "I mean, not *really*."

Mike frowned. "I don't know."

"What are you going to do?"

He chewed his lip nervously for a moment, then nodded to himself as he came to the inevitable conclusion. "I have to go in after her," he said.

"No, Mike!"

He sighed grimly. "Holy crap I'm scared," he admitted.

"I should run back and get your parents."

"No," he said firmly. "You stay with India. I've got to go in."

"You can't, Mike! What if there really is someone in there? It's way too spooky."

"If we're scared out here, imagine how Bianca feels," he said.

Sarah let out a long breath, and then pressed her pumpkin-shaped flashlight into Mike's hand. "Oh my gosh I can't believe you're going to go in."

"Yeah," agreed Mike, his voice cracking. "Me neither."

With that he climbed the creaking steps up to the verandah, walked along until he found a boarded up window, and then pulled on the weathered plywood until it split along a nail and revealed a hole just big enough to squeeze himself through.

As Sarah and India strained to see him in the gloom, Mike hauled himself up and disappeared into the hole.

Mike found himself in a small room, surrounded by the looming shadows of furniture covered in moldy sheets and hemmed in by the grey-blue sparkles of deep gloom. His eyes fought against the dark for a moment before he remembered Sarah's pumpkin-shaped flashlight.

He turned it on, projecting a fuzzy jack-o-lantern face through the clouds of dust he had raised with his clumsy arrival through the boarded-up window.

Mike sneezed. The motes sighed away, tumbling.

It was just a room in an abandoned house. Nothing more. It was not filled with unusual things—just old cabinets and chairs. For a moment he felt like giggling,

and steeled himself with his newfound lightness.

Ghosts, after all, were not *real*.

Buoyed with this confidence he wiggled his way to the door and turned the knob. It squeaked alarmingly but Mike was able to laugh at himself for jumping. He slipped into a wide corridor lined with staring faces, and after a fuller examination with the flashlight's beam revealed them to be a series of grimey portraits in oils, it took a more sustained effort to slow his thumping heart. "It's just a house," he repeated to himself. "Just walls and trash."

Unbidden his mind found references from movies and spooky books about "just walls" somehow *absorbing* imprints of living souls, especially when those souls were upset. His skin crawled. He suddenly couldn't help but think of the walls of the narrow, picture studded corridor as invisibly soaked with echoes of human misery.

He tried to keep the flashlight beam low, because otherwise it seemed like all the eyes in the portraits were fixed on him, and malevolent.

Mike emerged into the main hall.

A faint glow entered from a pair of dingy skylights partially covered by leaves, lending the hall a colourless, surreal quality. The front doors were to his left, nailed closed by a Bianca's captors. He rattled the handles experimentally, and wondered whether Bianca and he would have enough combined weight to smash the doors open without hurting themselves. He doubted it.

Something scraped around behind him. Mike spun, his jack-o-lantern of light peeling around the hall's many shadowed corners. "Bianca?" he whispered hopefully.

Silence.

Mike reckoned the house was likely to be populated by vermin: squirrels and mice, voles or bats. He couldn't let himself jump at every little noise—not if he expected to get through this without bursting into panic. He took a couple of deep breaths.

Twin staircases with broken risers rose around the sides of the hall, leading to a second floor railed landing. The flashlight was too feeble to probe any further details, so Mike dropped it down to the mouth of another corridor running off of the hall. Where did he dare go?

He tried to put himself in Bianca's shoes. Had Mike been shoved in through the front door and then heard it nailed shut behind him, where would he go?

He puzzled over this for a moment, and then opened his eyes wide and gasped. Bianca's shoes! He pointed the beam down at the hall's floor of cracked tile and fished around until he found his own footsteps in the dust. He backed away from the front doors, hunting for another trail leading away somewhere.

And then he found it: the slurred outlines of Bianca's Nikes, headed straight for the rightside staircase.

"Why would you go upstairs?" Mike said aloud, wandering cautiously forward while opening up the gloom on the second storey with his beam. "Bianca?"

He paused at the mouth of the second corridor, opposite the one he had come from, peering into its black infinitude. He was startled when his jack-o-lantern glow flickered across two eyes. He wondered if it were another portrait.

The eyes blinked.

Mike took an voluntary step backward, changing the beam angle and losing sight of the reflected points. He sought them out again and revealed two pairs, one now much closer, accompanied by a scuttling sound.

"Who's there?" croaked Mike, and then, before any answer might come, he

lost his nerve and dashed up the staircase, wishing more than checking that he didn't put his foot through a hole in the rotting wood. The entire staircase creaked and groaned loudly, as if in warning of imminent collapse.

At the top Mike dropped to the floor, rolled over and trained the flashlight on the mouth of the corridor just in time to see a fat raccoon amble out. It sat on its haunches and stared at him with its ringed eyes, blinking and sniffing.

Mike sighed. "I'm such an idiot," he mumbled.

The raccoon skittered away, its claws clicking on the wood. Another raccoon followed. In their wake Mike noticed rolls of fog or smoke oozing from the mouth of the dark corridor. At first he thought it was dust, but it continued to thicken, now dense enough to show his beam as distinct illuminated rods of triangle eyes, nose and grinning mouth.

Mike got gooseflesh. He couldn't look away.

An airy voice moaned quietly, rising out of the silence in a precise and slow crescendo that made Mike second guess its reality three times before the sound was too clear to ignore. It made his hair stand up.

Similarly, he doubted that he could detect a glow in the vapour coming from the corridor until it saw the fuzzy shadows it cast on the high, stained walls of the hall.

Light but distinct footfalls were coming down the corridor at a painfully slow but terrifyingly certain pace. The moan came again, this time louder and more plaintive—a mourning wind arriving on a bed of fog, chased by something that knew Mike was watching.

Before he even knew what he was doing, Mike fled.

He desperately tried one door after another until one gave way before him, spilling him into a velvet black darkness, utterly featureless, the air cold. He hit the floor and spilled onto his back, kicking out until he found the door and heard it knock shut. Then he set to feeling along the floor for the pumpkin-shaped flashlight, his heart pounding. He refused to look up to even attempt to penetrate the darkness until he had a way to ply it.

He found it. It wouldn't turn on. With shaking hands he felt out the battery compartment and pressed the lid in more snugly. The lid clicked. The plastic pumpkin turned bright orange, its features shining out. Mike allowed himself a small smile.

He was in a nursery. It was windowless, close and Victorian, filled by too much furniture. An uncovered crib stood in the middle, its sheet in a pile beside it. A doorway on the far wall appeared to lead into a larger bedroom—the master bedroom.

Searching the floor again, Mike saw Bianca's scuffs in the dust leading to the master bedroom so he began to cross toward the door. He heard a faint rustle. "Bianca?" he ventured, his voice quavering. "Bianca, it's Mike. Let's get out of here."

When the rustling sounded again it seemed to be coming from the crib. Mike froze.

Reluctantly he looked sideways, and then even more reluctantly let the flashlight beam follow. It played over the fallen sheet, over the ornately carved bars of the crib's side, and then revealed a pile of old, dirty blankets resting inside. The blankets moved.

Mike nearly dropped the flashlight again.

He was telling himself how it must be a squirrel until the thing under the blankets began to quietly sob. The pile rustled again, and a weak, bubbly infant's cry surfaced from beneath it.

The room was very, very cold. Mike could see his own breath.

He felt as if it might pee his pants. His legs were made of iron, like in a bad dream.

With a mighty push of imaginary courage he managed to force himself to shuffle past the crib, wincing in dread when he came closest to it, trying with everything he had to ignore the rustling and sad gurgling. It sounded as if a baby were choking in there.

A board creaked beneath him and baby cried louder. It could *hear* him.

Overwhelmed by a mix of feelings Mike turned away and plunged into the master bedroom, sussing out each corner with his flashlight as quickly as he could: a canopy bed, stacks of boxes, more covered furniture, rolls of carpet. He closed the door to the nursery behind him, muting the eerie crying.

"Bianca!" Mike called as loudly as he dared.

Something primal demanded that he put more distance between himself and whatever it was wailing in that crib, so Mike sidled along the wall until he came to a door that presumably led back to the landing overlooking the hall. He tried and found it locked.

The next door he tried was a closet. His flashlight showed him a row of moth-eaten suits and moldy dresses, swaying in a distressingly human way in the wake of the aggressive way he'd pulled the door open.

A tiny, senseless, mammal part of Mike bleated to him to hide in the closet. Hide and wait for morning light.

He intellectually dismissed the notion, but never the less found himself reluctant to leave the closet. He decided for the purposes of curiosity to see what kind of a hiding spot the closet truly offered, so he timidly stepped forward and pulled aside the row of clothes with the end of the flashlight, revealing a dark face with wide, crazy eyes.

Mike screamed as he'd never screamed before, his throat involuntarily making noise as he fought to gasp for air. He fell over himself backward, arms flying before his face.

The pumpkin flashlight hit the floor and winked out, spinning off into a corner.

Mike kicked himself backward across the floor until he hit the bed, releasing a snow of dust from the saggy canopy that startled Mike into a fresh shriek. He stuffed his knuckles into his mouth to make the noise stop.

He could still hear screaming. It wasn't his.

"*Bianca!*" he shouted into the darkness. The scream faltered, so he shouted again.

The scream faded. Raspy breathing. Snuffling. "...M-Mike?"

Mike said nothing for a moment, his entire body vibrating. He clenched his jaw and his fists to steady himself, his eyes squinched shut and back tensed. He was finally able to draw a real breath. "Yup," he squeaked at last. "It's me, Bianca. Scared shitless."

"I'm f'ing scared shitless too," she groaned.

"Come here," said Mike.

"Where are you?"

"Follow my voice."

"I can't even—I don't know where—"

"I'm coming to you. Stay still."

Bianca jumped when Mike found her. He awkwardly put his arms around her

and gave her a hug and then, after a pause, she lay her head on his shoulder. He could feel her fighting against tears, muscles working.

"Everything's going to be okay, Bianca," said Mike.

Bianca lost the battle and sobbed. She had not let anybody hug her in a couple of years. She clutched her hands together over her mouth as what seemed like an impossible amount of wetness welled out of her eyes. For a moment she knew no shame before her brother, and allowed herself a kind of moment usually held strictly aloft. A layer or two of false, desperate dignity dropped away and Bianca found she could suddenly breathe more freely.

"Mike, there's something—I don't—like a ghost or..."

"I know. I saw it, too. And the baby-thing."

"Oh f, oh f...I heard it. Can you hear anything now? I can't hear it. Oh f Mike, maybe we should save it. Whatever sick freak put us in here, put that baby in here—I thought I was going to die, Mike."

"It was *kids*, Bianca. *Kids* put you in here. It's just a mean prank. They didn't kidnap a baby."

Bianca paused before speaking, which was uncharacteristic. "Who would *do* that?" she asked sadly.

Mike swallowed. "I didn't see them all. Dini Butler was there. Arnold Drober. Merrick Underwater."

"*Inderwater*," corrected Bianca. "You retard," she added warmly.

"Whatever."

Bianca sighed with relief, relaxed a bit, leaning her back against Mike. "So the baby-thing is just part of the prank, those twisted assholes."

Mike hesitated. "...Yeah, I guess so."

"It's all a trick," she said, nodding with growing confidence mixed with a thread of cathartic rancor. "Those f'ing *freaks*. F'ing Dini. F'ing shit-faced *Gap-skank* Dini."

"Okay: revenge later. Let's escape now," said Mike. He crawled across the floor, sweeping his hands out until he'd retrieved the pumpkin-shaped flashlight. He turned it on. "I know a way out. It's downstairs."

Bianca frowned. "Do we have to go past the baby-thing again?"

"I think so. But, like you say, it's just a trick, right?"

Bianca nodded firmly, accustomed to feigning confidence. "Right. Bastards. Let's go. Here, gimme the flashlight."

Mike dutifully handed the flashlight to his older sister. He was smiling. He felt enormously relieved to be able to hand the mantle of leadership over to a senior figure. Though he had needed to reassure Bianca to snap her out of her fear, now he was happy to be reassured by her. Maybe the baby-thing *was* some kind of a contraption Merrick and Arnold had made.

Bianca opened the door to the nursery and strode in, Mike at her heels. She pointed the flashlight.

The crib was empty.

"Bianca..." said Mike slowly, "did you see anything else, um, like downstairs?"

"I saw eyes in the dark, and heard moaning. Like ghost moaning kind of crap. Must've been one of those spooky Hallowe'en CDs you see at the dollar store."

"Let's just run by that part quick, okay?"

Bianca rolled her eyes. "You're such a wimp, Mike."

Mike said nothing. They crossed the room and opened the door to the railed

landing overlooking the hall where Mike had fled the apparent apparition. As they emerged from the nursery Mike's eyes were glued to the mouth of the corridor at the bottom of the curved staircase, seeking any sign of supernatural menace. "Can we go down the *other* side?" he asked Bianca, turning around.

Bianca was indeed looking at the opposite flight of stairs, the flashlight hanging limply at her side, illuminating the floor.

What had caught her attention was the pale woman draped in shredded white robes, standing at the edge of the landing while clutching the sickeningly loose form of a dead infant to her breast.

She opened up her mouth and wailed, reaching one arm out toward Bianca and Mike. The arm was translucent.

Bianca peed her pants. She tried to scream but could make no noise. Her knees turned to jelly and she fell backward into her brother, who caught her with a grunt. Then he folded and they both hit the floor heavily. In a scampering panic Bianca rolled over and lobbed the pumpkin-shaped flashlight at the reaching, weeping wraith.

The flashlight struck the wall, cracking. It went dark as it bounced down the stairs.

The woman took no notice, regarding them with out-stretched arms but proceeding no closer. Her the fringes of her robes drifted as if blown by a breeze but her hair was dark, wet, heavy, matted. Mike stepped closer. Her eyes were just sockets, and Mike stared into them. They flickered. He detected the characteristic stutter of a video disc switching layers.

He put his hand on his sister's shoulder. "It's fake, Bianca. You were right."
"What?"

Mike stepped right into the apparition, then turned in place until he found the source of the projection: a square of glass inset into the wall over their heads just inches from the output spout of a dry ice machine. "It's a video projector shining on a cloud of movie fog."

The apparition wailed again, startling them both. Mike stepped to the left and, after a pause, the woman in the projection turned to face him. He repeated the experiment to the right. "Motion detectors," he concluded. "They must be wired up to the navigation controls of a laserdisc player or something."

Bianca furrowed her brow. "Is Merrick Inderwater smart enough to do that?"

Mike shook his head. "This would be a pretty big deal to set up."

"Then...who?"

Mike pursed his lips grimly. "Let's just get out of here, okay?"

She nodded mutely.

They went down the stairs and Mike led Bianca through the corridor to the room where he'd first come in, made somewhat more difficult by the lack of a flashlight. Mike worked his way to the boarded-up window and felt blindly for the corner he'd broken aside. He frowned.

"What's taking so long?" hissed Bianca.

"The hole's gone," said Mike, knocking on fresh plywood.

Even muffled through the wood they both instantly recognized Geoffrey Penobscot's low guffaw. Someone else snickered, possibly Merrick. "Oops!" called Geoffrey; "guess it's time for Plan B, eh Cuthbertsons?"

Mike clenched his teeth. "Those jerks!"

"F'ing bastards," contributed Bianca darkly. "What do we do now?"

"We find another way out," said Mike. He chewed his lip nervously. "We'll just

have to find another window we can kick the wood off of. We'll try a bunch of them. There's nothing to be scared of anymore, right?"

"Right," confirmed Bianca. "Just tricks. Can't hurt us."

"Just tricks. Let's go."

They stepped back into the corridor and found themselves confronted by a furry shadow that growled menacingly. It only took one bark-punctuated lunge for Bianca and Mike to break into an all-out run to the other end of the corridor. They threw open a swing door and scampered inside a large kitchen, the echoes of their progress suddenly dully metallic. Mike turned around and leaned against the swing door. He was shaken roughly as the dog threw itself against it. "Bianca, help!"

"I can't see a damn thing!" yelled Bianca desperately.

"You smoke!"

"What?"

"Don't you have a *match*?"

Cursing herself for own stupidity, Bianca withdrew a box of matches and broke two against the side before successfully igniting the third. She held it aloft and turned in a tight circle. "There's a little place to hide!" she said to Mike.

Mike glanced over. "It's a dumb-waiter. Yeah, okay. Ready to make a break for it? One...two...*three!*"

Bianca picked Mike up and stuffed him inside the boxy, shelf-like opening of the dumb-waiter as the barking dog burst through the swinging door and raced toward them, claws sliding on the tiles. With a yelp Bianca simultaneously burned her fingers with the match and jammed herself into the dumb-waiter after her brother, fumbling to draw the hatch closed behind her.

A split second later the dog's flailing claws could be heard scraping at the hatch. The beast whined.

"That dog is no trick," muttered Mike, compressed uncomfortably.

"No shit," agreed Bianca. "What're we gonna do, Mike?"

"Climb," he said. Wedging himself between the narrow walls of the chute Mike wiggled upward, inch by inch. By reaching up as far as his fingers could stretch he felt the lip of the dumb-waiter's next station on the floor above. He scooched up further and then knocked the hatch open. He reported his progress down below and then worked his way higher.

At the top he rolled out of the dumb-waiter and hit the floor with a thud.

He was still staring agape at the room he found himself in as Bianca struggled to fit her hips through the hatch, panting hard. "What the f...?" she murmured after hitting the ground, looking around.

There were in a compact anteroom in a series of connected apartments, every wall lined top to bottom with bookshelves, overlapping water-stains running between them. Several of the bookshelves were topped with ragged umbrellas, positioned beneath the ceiling's most explorative cracks.

The windows were covered by heavy curtains. There were dozens of candles. On the far wall hung a map of the world annotated with hundreds of tiny notes in scrunched, childish capitals with no spaces between the words.

Bianca blinked. "What...the f...is *this*?"

Mike wandered into the next room, finding a water-warped desk surrounded by more piles of moldering volumes. An ancient mechanical typewriter sat on the desk beside a stack of typewritten pages held down by a brick. Mike pushed aside the brick and read from the top page:

To me, she was beautiful.

By today's standards she'd win no pageants, that's true. Back in those days we liked our women womanly—lumbering hips, pendulous breasts, belly of plenty—and by that metric she was a goddess. In fact, on more than one occasion she was used as the model, or at least the inspiration, for hand-sized carvings in bone or stone meant to incarcerate the spirit of fertility for our admiration...

"I think it's some kind of a memoir," said Mike, looking up.

"Yeah, but *whose*?"

Next Mike stepped up to an elaborate assembly of strings and bells in a multi-chambered wooden frame between two bookshelves, each line marked with a scrawled label: KITCHEN, DRAWINGROOM, SERVANTSHALL, CELLAR...

As he looked on one of the strings tugged and its corresponding bell tinkled: MUSICROOM. Then the one next to it: WESTCORRIDOR. Mike squinted, furrowing his brow. "Whoever it is, I think they're moving through the house now."

"How can you tell?"

Mike pointed as the KITCHEN bell rang, then he scampered back into the first room and stuck his head in the dumb-waiter. At the edge of perception he could detect the low murmurs of a man's gravelly voice, apparently talking to the dog. Mike turned back to Bianca, eyes wide. "He's downstairs getting the dog."

"We should get out of here," said Bianca urgently.

Mike nodded. He picked up a candle and rushed to the end of the library-apartment, cautiously prying open the door and looking out into the corridor, holding the guttering little flame out ahead of him. He paused, and Bianca crashed into him from behind. "Go, go, go!" she hissed.

At the end of the corridor was a flight of curved stairs, the shadows playing and turning as a heavy-footed someone carrying a candle slowly, laboriously shuffled their way upward. Mike was paralyzed, blocking the doorway, his sister pushing against him.

A cloaked man came into view at the top of the stairs, a large dog at his heels. The candle he held illuminated a slice of his face beneath his hood, and Mike saw that the flesh there was twisted and ruined, scarred and lined.

The eyes, however, were not cruel. They were wide and brown and warm. Those eyes locked on Mike's now, and the hulking shape paused, leaning into a walking stick.

"I hear footsteps!" cried Bianca. "Is there something there?"

"No," Mike said in a clear, unfrightened voice. "Nothing's here. Just some stray dog, I think."

"Does it see you?"

"Yes," said Mike, his eyes still locked with that of the cloaked figure. "We should go back the way we came, leave this old house alone."

"But the door's nailed shut!"

Mike glanced down at the hammer hanging in the monster's scarred hand. "I don't think we'll have a problem," claimed Mike. "Let's just go."

The man nodded. Mike nodded back.

He withdrew into the room and shut the door, then led Bianca quickly back to the anteroom and opened the hatch on the dumb-waiter. They scrambled inside and dropped down, emerging into the dark kitchen. Mike carefully drew the candle out of the dumb-waiter and lit their way to the swinging doors.

Bianca did not let go his hand. Mike realized that he was the leader once again.

The passed quickly through the corridor and came out into the hall. As Mike had promised, a pile of rude two-by-fours lay beside the now functional front doors among a smattering of bent nails. Without so much as a look around they wrestled open the doors and stumbled out onto the verandah.

The night was still and cool, the sky sprinkled with keen stars.

Mike blew out the candle and put it on the porch, then carefully closed the front doors. When he turned around Bianca was watching him closely despite the dark. "What lives in there, Mike?"

"I told you, nothing. A dog."

She sneered and shook her head. "I know you and India think I'm stupid, Mike, but I'm really not. I f'ing *saw* the hairs on the back of your neck stand up." She paused, then continued more quietly. "You were just protecting me, weren't you?"

Mike said nothing.

"F it," she said at last, breaking the silence. "If it's so scary you didn't even want me to know, maybe I don't want to know."

"Okay," whispered Mike.

"Mike?"

"Yeah, Bianca?"

She mumbled something.

"What?"

Bianca sighed. "You're a helluva little brother, Mike. Don't make me say it again, okay?"

Mike nodded, smiling a little. "Okay, Bianca."

They sussed out the hedges by the verandah and the walkway but Sarah had already taken India home. Together they made their way out to the sidewalk and then turned back to look at the tall, looming silhouette of the Barrington House. A curtain on the third storey was tucked aside just a tiny bit, an indistinct shadow peering from the window, framed by flickering candlelight.

"Goodnight, Monster," said Mike under his breath. "And thanks."

"What did you say?" asked his sister, starting to walk down the hill toward home.

Mike shrugged, following her. "I said happy Hallowe'en, Bianca."

She snorted. "Yeah, right. The happy part will come when I figure out just how I'm going to get back at those assholes for trapping me in there. That was *sick*. I never did *anything* to deserve that—I mean, not *really*. F'ing Dini Butler, I *hate* that bitch."

"Sometimes maybe you could be a little nicer," offered Mike.

Bianca started to snap a harsh reply but stopped herself, perhaps feeling more humble on the subject of harassment. She patted her pockets and came up with a cigarette. "You're right," she said softly. "Want to try a cigarette?"

"Nope."

"You wimp."

"You're the one who peed your pants."

"Shut the f up."

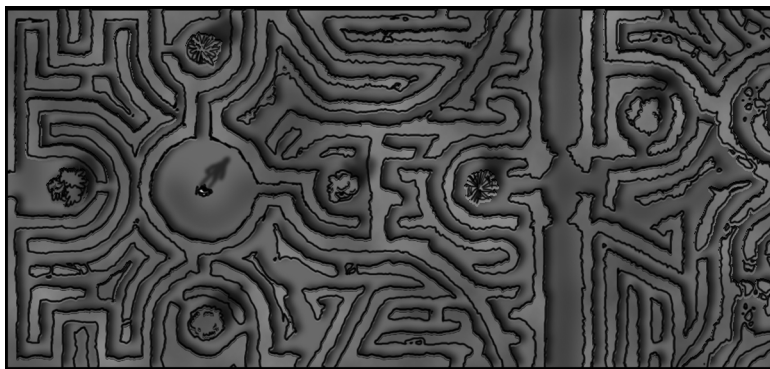
They veered around smashed pumpkins in the road, kicking aside the occasional dropped candy or squashed chocolate bar. Mike jammed his hands into his pockets and swaggered contently. He'd never felt closer to his older sister.

"Happy Hallowe'en, Mike," Bianca mumbled around her smoke.

“We’ll get them next year.”

“F’ing right,” Bianca agreed. “F’ing right, Mike.”

The kids walked home. The night waned. And the legend of the Barrington House grew.



ROBOTS BURY THE DEAD

There should have been rain, but rain isn't something they do here.

I was the only man in the cemetery—besides my brother, of course, whose presence was mitigated by death. The other mourners attended only by proxy, translucent holographs projected over the bodies of the robots whose senses they commandeered.

The silver carapace of one robot winked in the sun as its head drooped in an attitude of misery, the overlaid features of my sister grimacing, ghostly tears vanishing into the air as they dripped from her jaw.

"...And so we commend his body to the ants, so that his vessel might give new life and new glory to this cold world."

The last words were spoken. The pastor's projection faded. Six robots with somber grey armour assembled around the coffin and took hold, their metal fingers clicking against the wood. They heaved in perfect concert without so much as a nod for ready, and the coffin was gracefully propelled toward the waiting hole.

"Goodbye, Vim," I tried to whisper, but didn't.

And then it was done. The coffin sank from sight and bumped quietly on the bottom of the grave. The robots in grey took spades to the waiting pile of rich, black soil and began to industriously move it into the hole in a neat six-part clockstep. The others, now denuded of their puppeteers' shadows, regained themselves and walked away across the grass between the tombstones.

I hate funerals.

I tried not to look up as I crossed the crowded plaza outside the cemetery gates. Everyone else seemed indifferent to the cloudless black void hanging over our heads, punctuated by the unholy striped eye of Jove.

My head was pounding. When I waved to hail a ride my tie kept bobbing up in my face. I blew at it in frustration. "Taxi!"

A car pulled up and the hatch yawned open. As soon as I was inside we were aloft. The driver found my accent hilarious. Despite this, an understanding was reached and I was gratefully released from conversation with him.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and closed my eyes, trying to find solace in the lulling motion of the ride. I had almost succeeded when I was jostled roughly against the glass. "Fornicator!" bellowed the driver angrily.

Warning chimes sounded. I opened my eyes in time to see another car whip by overhead, the thrum of its alarmingly close engines shuddering through the cabin. "Are you trying to kill me?" I asked.

"Listen Martian," he replied brusquely, "you want to get there today or you want to get there tomorrow?"

I smiled tightly. "You might not know: it isn't polite to use that name."

The driver snorted and turned back to the controls. "Oh, I know alright."

My brother's estate was in another dome—smaller, older, opaque. The apparent sky overhead was even tinted blue, because the pioneers of this moon thought they would miss the real thing more than they did. I was relieved to be free of Jupiter's stare.

Whether it was in fact night or day on Callisto's surface or even how such things were reckoned in the Joviat was unknown to me. It had been less than a season since I had graduated from business school, and my first official errand for the family's interests was to attend to the affairs of my eldest brother's passing so very far from home. I was alone, and I had never felt so alien.

I was determined to demonstrate my efficacy, however, and thereby once and for all earn the family's trust. I would show them I was no longer the baby—I was a man of business.

At the estate gates I was greeted by a tarnished bronze robot whose identification code was illegible beneath the grime on his shoulder. When he bowed clods of dirt dropped off his flexing shins. "Fiscalite Sander Yi, welcome to Sanderfield's Wild," he said in a tinny voice.

"I'm here to look after the closing of the estate," I told him.

"The staff is aware, sir. Pre-liquidation cataloguing has already commenced. If you will follow me, sir, I will show you to the study."

The dirty robot bowed again and then set off between the gates. I wondered how badly things had gone awry for the staff to be in such a state of disrepair. I was further concerned by the unruly tangle of plants that seemed to have taken over the grounds. I had been told for years that Vim ran some sort of fancy gardens at Jupiter. I'm not quite sure what I had imagined but it was surely something more grand than the artless miasma of green I saw on either side of the drive.

We entered the house. Various low-grade robots were industriously ferrying boxes into neat stacks, or rolling tapestries, or checking knick-knacks against glowing manifests. None of them spoke. Like the robots at the funeral their duties were somber and many, a wake for a house heralded by the organized removal of its contents.

I was escorted by my bronze guide through the busy main halls and into a spacious, sunny study with walls that undulated gently in the breeze. There were two desks in the middle of the room—one messy, one clean. Arrayed around them were shelves and shelves of informatic plates, spines arranged by format and density.

On a sofa by the window sat an expensive but worn robot with a blanket over his legs. He wore a faded green tie whose end was weighted down with decorative beads. I batted my own tie down from my face as it bounced up in low-gravity slow-motion, inspired by the inertia transmitted from my body as I came to a surprised halt.

"Oh!" I said. And then, "Hello?"

The leather on the old robot's face and neck was wizened by long use, and it creaked as he turned toward me. His inscrutable black eyes fixed on me after a strange moment of wandering. "...Vim?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"My name is Yi," I told him. "I'm from the family."

"You've come to close down."

"Yes. I...wasn't aware—"

"I am Ready Farmer. I am caretaker of the wild."

I frowned. "I was led to believe Mr. Farmer was a human being."

"Your brother frequently did me the courtesy of misrepresenting my status, in order that I might act more freely."

I blinked. "Why?"

Ready Farmer seemed to sigh as he looked down for a moment and adjusted the fold of the blanket in his lap. "Because he was my friend, and he loved me," he said at last.

An ancient model with rusty curlicues engraved on its torso wheeled in a silver tea service and invited me to partake. As I made use of each utensil to prepare my cup it was taken up by the robot, wrapped in a plastic envelope, and passed to another robot who packed the envelopes into a box labeled TEA SERVICE, SILVER, ARESIAN, ANTIQUE.

Ready Farmer regarded me sedately. Behind him was a floor-to-ceiling window that looked out over a knot of twisted vines and choked bush. "Unbelievable!" I couldn't help but exclaim, shocked at the estate's squalor.

Ready nodded. "Indeed, sir. This is the largest wild in the Joviat, covering over ten square kilometers, sir."

"This—is part of it?" I squinted at the clots of green. "It looks like a mess...like he's just let everything grow all willy-nilly."

"Indeed, sir. It is a wild."

"It looks utterly unmappable."

"Indeed, sir. Mapping is forbidden."

I raised my brow. "How curious. Whatever is the point of such a garden?"

"Sir, it is a wild. The point is to create a space in which people can get lost."

"Get lost?" I sniffed. "What do you mean?"

"The state of being lost occurs when a human being becomes sufficiently confused as to facilitate a complete break from navigational orientation."

"Like being drunk?"

Ready shrugged, tarnished shoulders clanking against his collar. "I am sorry sir, but I cannot validate that analogy."

"Why should anyone *wish* to be disoriented?"

"It is a rare luxury on an engineered world, sir. I am told it allows one to feel...natural."

Two sepia robots stepped between us carrying a large holographic portrait. "My great-grandmother!" I cried. "My goodness it's been a long time. I'd nearly forgotten her face."

Ready cocked his head. "Shall I hold the robots, sir?"

"Hold them?"

"Perhaps you should like to retain the portrait for the family." He raised his hand and flexed it significantly. The sepia robots froze in their tracks, hovering beside the tea service box.

"I..." I trailed off, looking into my great-grandmother's eyes. "I was not instructed to bring anything back with me to Ares."

"Very well," replied Ready, flexing his hand again. The sepia robots marched

the portrait out of the study and out of sight. I felt a quivering pang of loss, and coughed to break the moment and regain myself. "Pity," said Ready. "It was once a treasure of Mars."

"Please," I interrupted gently, "let's leave the old names behind—Imperial Mars is over, and Mother Ares has risen. There's a new spirit downwell and a new peace for every world that wants it."

"The Joviat's memory is long," said Ready.

I smiled tightly. "Yes. Of course."

Ready Farmer looked over his dented shoulder and out the window, the diffuse fakelight casting soft shadows across his crinkled features. "The forfeiture of this wild is a tragedy. I despair that I lack your brother's eloquence to defend it to you."

I sighed and spread my arms helplessly. "It would make no difference. I have no authority. But I'm sure my brother's legacy will not be quickly forgotten if these 'wilds' are as important to the Jovians as you suggest, Mr. Farmer."

The robot shook his head. "It takes a special vision to divorce a project like this from architecture—to free it from design and intent. It is no mere maze, not a vegetable manifestation of a game, not a labyrinth for promenades. Its plan is organic and wily, its paths dangerous. Only your brother's charisma and influence won the loopholes in legislation and fought back those who would try to shape it into a park. This wild is your brother, Mr. Sander. He understood the need for Jovians to have respite from order and sensibility."

"It sounds mad."

"It is arguable that some degree of madness is beneficial to a society as a prophylactic against stagnance, demophobia and *horror urbana*."

I flushed, not sure whether that was a reference to the riots at Huo Hsing. I let it go. No use letting a robot get my goat. "How long has...the wild been closed to the public?"

"A week, sir."

"It's empty, then."

"Possibly, sir. There may yet be visitors out there."

"Lost, you mean?"

Ready nodded. "Yes. Some people die for the experience, sir. Me, for example. I was due for an upgrade, but it seems now it will not come."

"What will happen to you?"

"I shall die."

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. I drained my teacup and put it down. A robot picked it up, wrapped it in a plastic envelope and arranged it in the box on the floor. The lid was closed and the box carried away.

I stood up, slapping my tie flat as it drifted up to tickle my chin. "I will take a moment," I announced, and left the study.

On a balcony overhanging a shallow valley of splintered trees felled by rushing muck I smelled the damp, random air and wondered whether Vim had been the sanest member of the family or, as more usually characterized, the least so. I wondered about his wild and his devoted artificial protégé, and caught myself violating the spirit of the place by trying to find landmarks in the dome's imperfections by which I might retain my orientation were I to wander below.

I rested my elbows on the ledge and leaned out over the green. What if

something great was in my hands, and I was even now acting as a party to squandering it? Could the idea of being lost truly be a treasure to these Galilean upwellians, an artifact of a more primeval existence forgotten in the paradises of the inner worlds?

Was it rational to stand up for something I did not understand?

I started to go back inside the house but stopped. I turned in small, pointless circle and fiddled with my tie. I coughed. And then I slipped my telephone out of my pocket and found a node in the downwell tissue. I patched in and listened to the interplanetary static hiss between the clicks. The recording agent connected and said, *"Approximate transit delay twenty-eight minutes."* I cleared my throat.

"This is Yi. We're making a mistake on Callisto. And—I'm putting a stop to it. There is something here, mother. There is something to Vim's gardens. Something important. And I'm not sure I can live with the decision to end it all without understanding what it is we're meddling with. Please don't be angry. I feel...I feel that I must do this. Vim is owed that much. By all of us."

I folded away the telephone. I took a deep breath, and then pulled off my tie, stuffing it into my pocket carelessly. Laugh if you will but for the first time in my life I felt fully a man.

Standing tall, I strode back inside to announce the stay of execution for Sanderfield's Wild.

There should have been tears, but tears aren't something robots do.

A metallic quartet was ranged around Ready Farmer's chair, his blanket folded in a neat square on the floor. They worked without comment or expression, industriously detaching lifeless limbs from his still torso and packing them in a box labeled simply SCRAP.

They broke down each component: digits from hands, palms from wrists, arms folded at the elbow and wrapped in plastic. At last the dumb head itself was carefully separated from the neck and packed snugly between two leather-padded feet and a scratched section of pelvis.

"Stop," I tried to whisper, but didn't.

The box was lidded, sealed, and freighted away. I tracked it sadly, my arms hanging limply at my sides, my left hand tickled by a bloom of abandoned tie sticking out of my pocket.

Too late, too late!

I sagged. I shrank. And then I wept for Vim, and then for myself.

A robot touched my elbow. "Sir, may I be of assistance?"

"No," I said brusquely, stepping away from the reach. I cast my gaze out the tall windows over the wild once more. A moment of numb cloudiness passed through my mind and when it cleared I found myself making a brisk pace for the main hall. I heard robotic footfalls trailing me. I veered around a stack of boxes and began descending the front steps into the courtyard two at a time. Ahead: a wall of mad green.

"Sir, where are you going?" called the last steward from the porch.

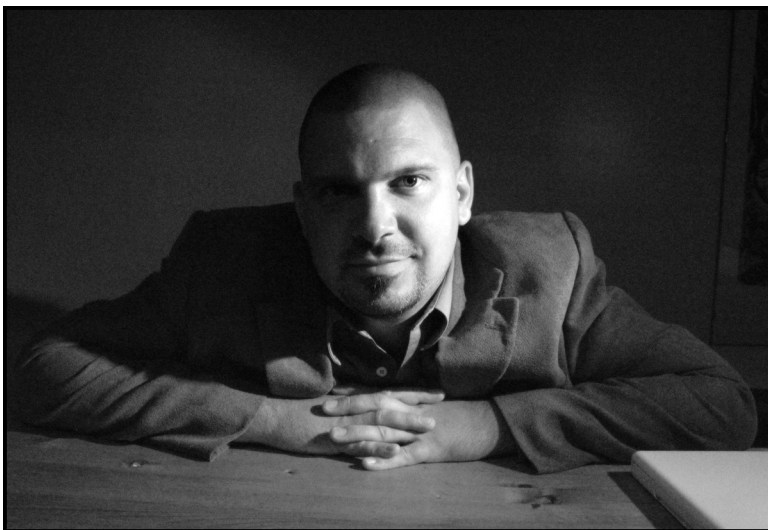
I licked my lips and drew my jacket tight.

"To get lost," I said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cheeseburger Brown is a verbose and profane idiot who habitually leaks excess typing on to the Internet for free consumption. He is the author of illustrated storybooks and pulp scifi novels about robots and spaceships, with aspirations to one day write something even pretentious people could like.

Mr. Brown lives in a century-old schoolhouse in rural Canada with his wife, two children, and several large dogs. His favourite colour is Prussian Blue.



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