

Jack

Sam

CHANGE

A NOVEL

DAVID DENNISON

Abys
g
s
probably
white
Earth

things
another
fucking
w
lee
w

could
Shift
need
head
truck

book

on
know

“Shit Happens”
-Unknown

Preface:

Shit happens...

A professor once asked me to explain time in front of his class of nearly seven hundred chronologically caged students. His name was Nahoto. Nahoto was considered to be the smartest being ever to live on that world. He was also a philosopher and a celebrity. You have no analogue. Nahoto foolishly claimed to be a prophet. I, in turn, mistakenly considered him a friend. He was three hundred and fourteen years old. At that time his people had an average life expectancy of forty-four years.

They were a small race, generally less than four feet tall. Their skin was pale but had a greenish tint to it. They had two arms, two legs, two dark blue button sized eyes and two stubby rather useless tails. They had no noses. Their mouths were smaller than yours and contained many rows of sharp teeth. Most words they spoke would seem more like grunts than language.

They wore no clothes. They were newly civilized. Most of them still lived in elaborate caves. Many of the caves protruded from valleys. The largest valley was where their primary settlement established itself. Two hundred years prior to Nahoto's lecture on time, an entirely purple magnificent manor of boulders, rocks, pebbles, and clay like mud was constructed to be his home in honour of Nahoto's longevity. He was regarded as ancient even then. It was the most beautiful building that had ever been built on that planet. On his world purple was a sacred colour worn only by heroes.

The mud on his planet was purple. Heroes were said to be from the mud: constructed out of need, and destined to return to the mud until needed again.

The boulders, rocks and pebbles on Nahoto's planet were purple, grey blue, white, green and black. On occasion they were even gold and silver.

Most of these rocks were very smooth to the touch, and only seldom would anyone cut himself or herself on a rock.

Like Earth, the solar system containing Nahoto's planet had one medium-sized relatively boring yellow sun.

There were four noticeable seasons, and on the continent where Nahoto's people dwelled only two very short seasons ever achieved extreme temperatures. The two seasons, which both lasted about twenty-five days, were easily met with traditional shelters.

If a death had resulted from these seasons it was probably of the too young, the too old, the feeble or the sick. That world was a veritable Eden.

My voice thundered from the sky that time was change. Nahoto disagreed with me that time was change.

Nahoto instead believed time to be a trap.

He believed that time was constantly trying to kill him and everyone else. I tried to explain to Nahoto that although change often leads to non-existence, existence was once again inevitable, but he laughed at me. He even speculated that I was the one that set the trap. It hurt me when he laughed and accused me so unjustly. This was a long time ago when I was much more naïve.

Nahoto attributed his old age to being cleverer than the so-called trap of time. He explained that because he would allow time no opportunity to kill him he would live forever—barring a natural disaster. On his planet, unlike Earth, catastrophes were rare. Nahoto's students studied every word and habit of his hoping to prolong their lives as well. It worked. Nahoto's more diligent students actually lived longer than usual.

Increasingly, however, Nahoto's lectures were becoming merely a mad man's musings about his obsessive strategy to avoid death. His identity faded as his plot consumed him.

Nahoto never left his palace's grounds. He lectured from a podium fitted to a stage at the tip of his estate into a valley that had been fitted with solid rock benches. Of course his stage and podium were constructed of purple rock.

Nahoto had not left his property in over one hundred and fifty years, and even before then he was weary of travelling far from home. Nahoto encouraged people to view him as long as they did not step, even one foot, onto his property. He pretended that he demanded this isolation for protection of a rare flower that grew on the fields of his garden, but really this request was crucial to Nahoto's state of mind. He feared others to be his primary source of danger.

Nahoto's devoted followers met his request most graciously since the mosquitoes on his grounds were unbearable. Being stung was a common occurrence for his audience, anyway.

Nahoto's obsession demanded that on his land he know exactly, within an inch, where everything was. He thought that this was the only way to protect himself from the clutches of time.

Nahoto once challenged me to a public debate.

It was to be the first philosophical debate of its kind on that world. Before this they had only theorized on topics related to physical needs or simple rights issues. Everyone gathered around the podium eagerly awaiting answers to life's big mysteries. I would not argue with him, as he had become stubborn and pompous. On my opting out of the discussion Nahoto declared himself to be wiser than even I. Fearing an eventual struggle for his power, Nahoto's people's sort-of king's two hearts failed. Although he was generally considered very old the sort-of king had once viewed and loved Nahoto as a caring father figure, and could not stomach living in a world with the thing Nahoto had turned into.

Nahoto declared himself king of his people.

He treated his people unmercifully. He wielded his powers unethically. He called out, "If I should not be your king then why should I live so long?" This was his reasoning to his people for an absolutist rule. It was his reasoning for all of his desires. I called out that it was because of something on his land.

It wasn't the rare flower if that's what you're thinking.

The flower was studied a dozen times over many of the planet's years by the closest thing they had to botanists (they were farmers really) and was grown in five isolated gardens yielding no regenerative effects whatsoever. It did taste good in salads. Sometimes it was even grown with the same soil as in Nahoto's garden. Nahoto knew this. The process used was remarkably sophisticated for such savages.

You must understand that once I really considered Nahoto my friend. Once I thought him to be amongst the bravest, smartest, most moral and compassionate individuals to cross my path. He propelled his people through ages in decades. The emptiness he became was his former person's polar shadow.

Nahoto was special to me, but not for the reason he became special to everyone else.

Nahoto screamed, "Miserable cloud beast, then why am I so old?"

Knowing that I was about to shatter Nahoto's reign I hesitated. I wished right then, as much as I would ever wish, that change would stop. I had loved Nahoto as a younger brother for over two hundred years. I had hoped he would rule his people with a nurturing palm, and not an iron fist.

I should tell you now that Nahoto's land was located on the garden he was most fond of throughout his life. There was once a hole in a field near the flowers, which opened to a fissure in the rocks underneath, which, in turn, ran clear to the cave he grew up in. It had been sealed for an awfully long time since then. Nahoto used the tunnel often as a child to visit the flowers. Nahoto

loved the flowers very much.

Nahoto screamed, "Do you need time to find a convincing lie?"

From the clouds I thundered, "Tyrant: where is the man who led his people to fire? You have endured because I have willed it. Up until now I believed that someday you would shepherd your people to glory. The powers I allowed you to hoard belong to the people you neglect. The mosquitoes on Nahoto's land are actually rare tiny bees, and their sting contains venom that has allowed his longevity."

A great gasp let out across Nahoto's world. Inevitably the bees would be cultivated, hoarded or destroyed. They, like man, were now past the point of establishing equilibria. I knew inevitably Nahoto would lose face. Inevitably, on that world, there would be progression and recession. I can tell you that change continued unabated.

I would not see it though for then I left his world. That was over twenty thousand years ago. I imagined Nahoto simply sank into purple mud.

I tell this story quite often. I tell it to you raw, cold as it was and as simple as it was. I do not tell it normally in English though; that is the only change I have made.

Change

A Novel

By: David Edward Dennison

©2018

Edited By: Brian Dennison

PART ONE

We are all lost.

Change:

I suppose the journey began about 13.8 billion years ago when nothingness gave birth to change. Then came the bang. Then galaxies flew apart as if shot from a confetti cannon. Then your own personal disc accreted and gave birth to your home. Then, and only then, were the conditions just right to bring into existence humanity. What's done is done.

You people are hysterical. You fantasize about aliens when life exists in three places other than Earth you can easily reach, even with your primitive technology. Don't worry, I wouldn't dream of spoiling the surprise of where it is. You'll find it when you are ready. I'm kidding: Titan, Europa, Mercury. Booyah!

Change is the only constant in the universe. Great debates have raged over space and time as to the origin of change. The wiser creatures that have popped up across the cosmos, through the process of change, did realize that nothingness itself was a product of change, and was itself merely a temporary reaction to everything before it. Change is inevitable. It has been the principal guiding force of all that has come before us. It too is the motivation of our story. Sometimes I hate change. Sometimes even I hate.

Meet Boy, Meet Girl

An alternate start of this story could be birth. From complete darkness, darkness so familiar that it seems seeing black is an unwavering constant, there is a sudden alien blinding light, then coldness, then dryness and then your first image. You view a cult in blue plastic in a smelly white room.

There is so much screaming you can't think straight, all from you. You think, "Who am I?" Your first clear thought. You want to go back in. You feel unsafe: such is life. You feel cheated: that's just your first Monday. You feel trapped: no wonder since you're born into an institution. You are a number at birth. #139 on some data sheet.

The very first thing that's done to you is that the doctor spreads your legs apart gently and shouts, "It's a boy." Now you're deaf, you're smelly, slimy, exhausted, cold, scared and blind. No wonder you'll spend the rest of your life trying to get between a woman's legs. "Welcome to Earth, Henry," your mother manages before she passes out on the spot. Paul smiles at you, with tears in his eyes. He says nothing, but shakes your hand as best as he can. He grabs a cigar out of his pocket. You instinctively like this guy. The nurse whisks you away.

Where's your mom? Where's your dad? No wonder you'll spend the rest of your life trying to get between a pair of legs. You're off to get a baby blue hat.

Or this story may have begun with Jack being born. Same darkness, same blinding light, same coldness, same slimy dryness and what appears to be the very same cult in the very same smelly room. Someone should've cleaned it. You also think, "Who am I?" You are so angry you scream. That fucking bitch did this to you. You'll hate her forever.

You feel cheated, you feel trapped and the doctor becomes the very first in a long list of men to try to get a look at your twat. He was lucky, but next time you'll be ready. He chuckles, "It's a girl." Already you're earning 70% of your male counterpart.

You have no father waiting for you. Your mother says, "You're so beautiful my Jaclyn," but you can read in her eyes that she's just happy to have you out. From now on you'll bide your time until you're able to get your revenge on some other innocent mistake. Happy Birthday Jack. This is your destiny: to have your legs spread open, surrounded by strangers, your shame on display to the world, and no man to rely on. The nurse rushes you away. 'Bout fucking time. You're off to get a pink hat.

But this is not the story of one. This is a tapestry of yarns. No being's birth, no matter how important they may seem to themselves, or become to others, should seem more important than the collective. There is one bang whose consequences must take precedent over all others.

Who am I?

I am someone not something. You'll have to excuse me if my words are clumsy or if my punctuation is vulgar: English is not my first language. English is my... never mind how many languages I speak. Language is meant to express ideas. Formalists can go fuck themselves. The point is I am not some infallible dictator who demands allegiance. One of the key messages of this book is that infallibility is either everywhere or nowhere depending on your point of view.

Who, what, where, why and when are the words that begin most questions asked in English. The right questions are never asked. "Who am I?" is the first question mulled over by the vast majority of everyone. I still ponder who I am. I have met personally only a handful of mammals whose first question was not, "Who am I?"

One of them was from Earth. She pondered, "What am I?"

She was an orphaned albino squirrel. She lived in the Trinity Bellwoods area of Toronto, Canada. She wandered away from the park and got lost. She was so cute...omg!

Who am I? From the time of their very first breaths human beings would ask it out loud if they only knew how. It was the first question I ever contemplated. It was the first question Jack and Henry ever pondered. It was the first and last question Sam asked himself.

Sam sat at a desk. He cried unashamedly. This was normal for him. He was unkempt, with oily black hair and stubble. His shirt read, "Life sucks then you die," in brown. His shirt was otherwise white. His pants were faded navy blue cargos. He was a very strong 23-year-young man.

In his room, much as with his appearance, everything was chaotic. The desk had papers everywhere. The month-old bed sheets were ruffled, and a jacket was clumsily laid on the floor as if it had been mistaken for a rug. A fireplace enclosed leaping flames which crackled uneasily.

There was a piece of paper in front of Sam. He had a pen in hand.

On the paper were the words...

"The truth is I just never thought I'd be this lost. It wasn't supposed to be this long or this hard. I miss Anne. I know I'm going to hurt people and I'm so goddam sorry. I guess I can't see a point to my life anymore. I'm only ever happy when I'm stoned. I love you mom and dad and Henry. I'm so sorry Henry. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I'm so lost."

It was signed simply "Sam." Two tears fell on the sheet of paper. Sam folded the paper and addressed it to "Dad." The noose was hung already. Sam likely thought, "Who am I?" waiting for his neck to snap. Before his death Sam was basically dead already. Sometimes shit just keeps happening.

Anne

Many years ago an 18-year-old girl named Anne had a heart that stopped abruptly. There were no warning signs. Anne was once a child prodigy. She was an incredibly gifted violinist and possibly the best mathematician for her age in North America. She was crazy smart by earthling standards. She had the world before her. Sam loved her very much. When Anne's heart stopped Sam's heart stopped. Anne was at a grocery store when she fell. The tile floor was glossy and reflected the white glow of the grocery store's fluorescent bulbs.

The last thing Anne heard was "Emergency on Aisle 2," over the buzzing intercom. Sam's shell saw the entire illuminated scene.

Why?

The question of "why" is generally fruitless. Metaphorically however I suppose it can have merit. If the answer to the question of "why" is processed and changes (those that can be made to make, what is perceived as, positive

change to the answer) are made, then “why” is fruitful. If the changes that can be made render the question unnecessary then a “why” question may be fruitful also. If knowledge learned can benefit you then ask away. If you wonder why an 18-year-old mathematician has to die then I can only offer the fruitless and forlorn answer of “change.” If you wonder why her slacker boyfriend then should die I must as well offer the uncomfortable answer of change, very horrid change. Both fruitlessly and fruitfully, for better or worse, most questions begin with “why?” It's as if creatures think the accumulation of knowledge will somehow provide answers to the big questions that have no absolute truth. The realm of grey is more prominent than that of black and white. “Why” questions often complicate. You will never perceive an objective truth. Sometimes things simply are. There is no truth in feelings. Always things will change.

Change:

Most of this story is perceived to take place on one road. Most of the events that I have told you about surrounding Sam and Anne I have learned from Henry.

I will try to keep my focus to the story of Henry, Jack and myself. I can't promise anything. If this all seems very confusing it will make, as you say, “more sense” in time.

I don't know why Henry, Jack, the hitchhiker and I were on that road that night; I hope there is a dimension of fate in coincidences that even I can't fathom. Or maybe that's worse; perhaps the beauty of a coincidence stems from its signification of the interaction of seemingly unconnected variables, and the discovery they are linked, not by fate, but through choice.

If you want to know what I really think, it's that all life on earth does lead to a single resounding truth. You're going to the ground and eventually you're going back to the star, whether you like it or not. This is your fate. Fate is death. Choice is life.

The Road

A truck drove on a blank rural road with no other signs of civilization present. Thick woods lined both sides of the passage. Dead leaves of various colours and shapes were scattered on the ground outside. The truck's high beams streamed light onto the upcoming black of night. The truck even then was old, worn, covered with bumps and nicks; a pair of oversized fluffy lime-green novelty dice hung from the rear view mirror. If the dice were viewed head on they would have made snake eyes. The truck's driver was a male and its passenger was a female. The truck's overhead light was left carelessly on. The spastic sound of the behemoth's struggling gas-guzzling engine was very nearly unbearable.

Henry and Jack

The driver was Henry. Henry's hair was short and brown. He had a goatee. His eyes were blue. He had a silver eyebrow ring which was shaped like two circles that merged into one. Henry had hoped for a bronze ouroboros ring, but they were out of stock at the local tattoo and piercing parlour. He wore brand new midnight blue stonewashed boot-cut jeans, tan suede loafers, a white dress shirt with nearly invisible baby blue stripes, and a tan corduroy jacket he had found at a thrift store. He was tall. He was 23.

The passenger was Jack. Her hair was long, brown, and luscious. Her eyes were green. She wore a little black dress, a black cashmere cardigan, and a black and green crystal bead choker. She had a green fabric painted dragon on her black canvas handbag and wore emerald green heels that sparkled when light glistened off of them. She had pink lipstick on. She was short. She was 23 also.

Henry and Jack were best friends and had been since they were 6.

Henry and Jack were lost.

Henry was squinting, fixated on the lit up road surrounded by near darkness. He had a cigarette clenched between two shaky fingers. The smoke danced and escaped through his window, which was open only slightly. The windshield wipers squeaked and mosquitoes vanished off the glass.

Jack stared frantically at an utterly unremarkable road map, turning it, hitting it in frustration. She said, "We're lost."

Henry took a puff, exhaled, and said, "We aren't lost."

"We're fucking lost," fumed Jack.

"We aren't lost. Just have patience," replied Henry.

Henry unrolled his window, took another puff and breathed out. He flicked his cigarette butt onto the barren pavement.

"Patience? My patience ran out two hours after starting down a road—" (she then pointed at their supposed location on the map) "—that's supposed to be 20 kilometers long!" Jack exclaimed, and then she insisted, "We're really fucking lost Henry."

"Could you turn the light off? I can't see the road," questioned Henry.

Jack, captivated by the map, was stubbornly inactive. Henry switched the light off. Jack moaned, "I need to find out where the fuck we are," and turned the light back on.

"The road is unmarked, we're surrounded by multi-coloured trees; there's no signs. Turn the light off, stop swearing and calm the fuck down," demanded Henry.

Jack rubbed her eyes, and cried, "The road should have ended over an hour ago."

"I can't even see the road," argued Henry.

Jack ignored Henry; she once again stared at the road map, frustrated. An instant later she folded the map calmly and threw it to the floor in a tantrum. She dropped her head, and ran her fingers through her hair.

Henry smirked and once more switched off the light.

"I just hate being lost. I was supposed to be home hours ago. My mom is going to kill me," murmured Jack. Jack had a gift for drama.

Jack looked down at the clock.

The clock read 4:20 a.m.

The clock was digital and every once in a while it would flicker. The numbers were displayed in red. Before that day the numbers never flickered.

"It's four twenty in the morning! I have work in five fucking hours," complained Jack. Jack swore whenever possible, because constant profanity made Henry uncomfortable.

"We can ask that hitchhiker for directions," said Henry snidely.

In the distance, through the darkness, the featureless figure stood in the middle of the highway, with his thumb out as if to hitch a ride.

"What?!" screamed Jack.

"We're lost," Henry calmly agreed.

"He's probably just waiting to gut us like fish, steal our car, and then him and his dirty drifter pals will be eating pretty for a week. Or worse..." feared Jack. She looked over at Henry and explained, "I'm not ugly Henry."

"I'll just ask for directions, just like that last guy," reasoned Henry.

Jack rolled her eyes and complained, "And those were great directions, weren't they stupidhead."

"It can't be... It can't be..." managed Henry alongside a look of terror.

The Figure

The figure ahead materialized itself as male, roughly thirty and scrawny. He had a mouth full of rotten and missing teeth, which he offered in a sinister smile. He was dressed in unfashionable tattered clothing, namely ripped and worn jeans, a faded mostly red plaid shirt, and a navy blue jacket which looked like an insignia was ripped off of it. He was all grunge. He held a flask. He will be known as...

The Hitchhiker.

The hitchhiker was a scarecrow on an asphalt field.

"What?" Jack questioned.

We'll get to "what" later.

Jack's head lifted, her face turned blank and she said, "That's the same guy!"

Henry grabbed a compass from the dashboard: the compass pointed north. Bewildered, he put it back. He argued, "It can't be: we've been driving north for twenty miles since we saw him. He's walking south. It can't be." Henry measured in miles whenever possible because Jack (the more ostensibly staunch Canadian) hated it when he did.

"I know it can't be, but it is him. Christ, we are lost. Why the hell did you follow his directions?" demanded Jack. This was a very fruitless "why" question.

Henry turned to Jack and said,

"His directions were, 'Keep going straight.'"

Henry's eyes quickly returned to the road, his foot slowly rose from the gas pedal, and they began to slow down.

"You're slowing down?" questioned Jack.

Henry braked: they stopped entirely. He roared, "He's in the middle of the road."

"FUCK," shouted Jack.

The hitchhiker slowly started towards the passenger side window — Jack's window.

"We're not picking him up," vowed Jack under her breath.

The hitchhiker tapped on the glass. Tap... Tap... Tap... He tapped three times. Jack, although frightened, clumsily rolled down the window.

"Couldn't find your way?" the hitchhiker asked.

"No. I haven't seen any roads, or signs, or much of anything really," answered Henry.

"But we did see foliage," added Jack with gusto.

The hitchhiker spoke slowly in a distorted, deep and raspy tone, "No

matter, you can't find your way from nowhere. You follow the signs, reluctantly, but they lead nowhere. Over and over again, never moving, always lost."

Flux

Everything on the road was unstable. Time itself appeared to be inconsistent. Sometimes it seemed like everything was happening all at once. Sometimes it seemed like moments had already happened and were merely repeating themselves. Both Henry and Jack felt déjà vu even though they had, to their knowledge, never been on that road before in their lives. They had taken the road as a means of avoiding traffic congestion caused by a car crash. They remembered that much.

Henry and Jack remembered...

Jack had been staring frantically at a road map bickering with it in frustration. Henry, with his cigarette clenched between two uneasy fingers, had been driving half blind. The overhead light was still on. Jack had said, "We're lost."

They remembered that Henry had puffed on his cigarette and asserted, "We aren't lost." He had then thrown his cigarette butt out onto the lonely highway.

They remembered Jack had stormed, "We're fucking lost."

They remembered Henry had appealed for Jack to have patience. They remembered Jack's rant about how and why she had none left.

They had the strangest feeling that the universe itself was forfeit. They felt the laws of physics themselves had betrayed them. They felt that absolutes had been proven wrong by lipstick chicken scratched equations on cocktail napkins. They felt something like that.

They felt like what was happening to them had already happened, but was happening wrong.

Jack was afraid.

The hitchhiker was stationary outside Jack's rolled down window. "We missed a stop sign because of that light," Henry deduced as he looked over in the direction of the now pale Jack.

The hitchhiker advised them, "The signs are all around you. Just keep your eyes open, you'll see them soon enough." As he said this Jack caught a whiff of his breath; it smelt like death itself.

Henry grabbed his wallet and took out a wrinkled twenty-dollar bill. He offered it to the hitchhiker and said, "Here, take this, get yourself a warm meal."

The hitchhiker did not take the money. He did not move. Instead the hitchhiker simply objected, "You don't get it son, around here there's no use for money or food."

Chills ran down Jack's spine. She winced.

"Suit yourself," said Henry. He put the wrinkled bill back into his wallet and his wallet back into his back pocket accordingly. He hid his fright better than she did.

"Henry I have to get home, it's..." began Jack, and then she looked at flickering digital digits and finished, "Henry your clock has stopped."

The clock had stopped at 4:20 a.m.

Henry rolled back his sleeve to reveal a watch. He read the time to himself as 4:20 a.m. He said, "My watch has stopped also." He took a cigarette from the pack in his right pocket, placed it between his fingers as he had so many times before, brought his hand to his mouth, and sparked the cigarette.

The hitchhiker chuckled eerily.

"There's no use for time out here either," taunted the hitchhiker.

"Let's just go alright?" pleaded Jack aside to Henry.

"It won't do nothing, there's no way out, the signs lead nowhere, you're just trapped here, always will be, but I can help you though," instructed the hitchhiker.

"No thanks, I need your help like I need a bullet to the brain,"

announced Jack abrasively.

Henry's right foot lifted from the brake pedal and slammed on the gas pedal.

The hitchhiker was left behind in a cloud of smoke.

The hitchhiker hollered, "Silly girl, you'd need my help just as much if you had one," as Henry and Jack peeled away. They heard him. It seemed almost as if his voice hunted them.

Jack rolled up her window.

In the rear view mirror Henry glanced at the hitchhiker, chuckling like a madman.

The road was vacant.

The two drove onwards, in utter silence except for the struggling engine and Henry sucking on another deteriorating nicotine sausage. Even the mosquitoes thinned and Henry flicked off the windshield wipers. The windshield had greenish yellow streaks over it. Finally, as a tear fell from her eye unnoticed by Henry, Jack broke the silence with a trembling whimper. The whimper eventually broke into an audible sentence.

Jack whined, "What signs, there's nothing but maple, oak, birch, pine, and spruce?"

"We are fucking lost," admitted Henry.

Jack was exasperated. She could feel words caught in her throat. The will to speak them however was floundering as her discontent flourished. She looked over at Henry.

He looked back at her and slowed the truck down. The truck came to a halt.

"Does this look like Kansas to you Toto," laughed Jack to Henry nervously.

Henry tried the truck's radio but could get nothing but static. "We're at most an hour away from the 'burbs, we should be getting something. Where's the elevator music and skanks of the week, what's happening?" wondered Henry.

"What time did your watch stop at?" questioned Jack.

"Four twenty."

"That's the same time as the clock."

Henry began to show no regard for lung cancer.

Henry inhaled smoke deeply into his waiting lungs and then ejected it out the window. He threw the cigarette out the window. He then uncharacteristically rolled up the window completely. He took a deep breath from the stale, slightly smoky, truck air. He opened the glove compartment and popped back a couple of breath mints. He sprayed pine air freshener he found in the glove compartment concealing an ounce of the strongest, strangest, stickiest, most colorful pot on the planet. The weed was termed "Technicolor."

Jack coughed. Jack picked up the map from the floor. She switched on the overhead light and unfolded the map. She returned to abusing it vigorously.

Henry's eyes dashed towards Jack and he was preparing objections for their safety but was muted by how pretty she looked in her dress. She was preoccupied with her map of Southern and Central Ontario. For a moment he even awarded himself the rare privilege of eyeing her cleavage. He had it memorized. Her head began to raise and his eyes met hers and he nagged, "Turn the light off, I can't see the road."

Jack's head bowed once again and she returned to studying the map. "I need the map so I can figure out where we are. Just try not to crash into a maple tree alright stupidhead?"

Defiantly, and with a trademark smirk, Jack once again turned on the light with the flick of a switch. She bit her lip but Henry was as oblivious to it as she was to the extent of his interest in her breasts.

Most days Henry was convinced that Jack thought he was a bad looking, good-natured, well read, country bumpkin. Her actions and words ratified this assumption. In truth, to her, he had a boyishly handsome face and beautiful deep blue broken hearted eyes. She earnestly was no fan of the grotesque goatee, however.

Henry rubbed his eyes and said, "We're lost. We're surrounded by trees. The map isn't going to help. Turn the light off. That annoying light isn't going to help either."

Jack yelled, "We're lost." Her eyes would only leave the map long enough to survey the road for some hint of where they could be. Jack may as well have been navigating the Sahara by map.

Henry snapped back, "It's dark and I'm not going to crash over that damn light."

Jack ignored the persistent, now irritated, Henry.

Henry looked over at her. He assumed her obstinacy was part of a power struggle. Henry composed himself.

"Turn the light off, please."

"I'm afraid of the dark Henry. The map isn't going to help. I'm afraid of the dark," confessed Jack. She raised her head and stared into his eyes.

Henry was caught off-guard. In response all he could muster was a shameful, "Oh."

"It's embarrassing," said an embarrassed Jack.

"I'll pull over and we'll sit in the light for a while. It's bound to be dawn soon. You can nap if you want to. The worst that'll happen to us is you'll have to call in sick for work tomorrow."

That was not the worst that would happen. Their ordeal that night was only beginning.

"It's okay Jack," said Henry. After a while Henry whispered, "I'm sorry."

"I haven't told anyone that," said Jack meekly. Jack would never have told anyone else that.

Henry's foot slowly lifted from the accelerator. They began to slow down. He pulled over to the side of the road. He braked and they stopped.

"There are no signs, no houses, no birds, no lights, no exits, no car tracks, no fences, no pathways, no litter, and no planes overhead. Where are we?" enquired Jack. She closed her eyes and rested her head on the side of her headrest closest to Henry. She laid her hand on his. She could feel his pulse race. She felt encouraged.

Henry said, "I can remember an old rusted dirty stop sign and then a flash."

That was not what he should have said.

The two friends sat in the light pulled over by the side of the road.

Jack couldn't sleep. Her night was a rubix cube and she couldn't even get the first side. "How could both the clock and your watch have stopped at the same time? How was that time 4:20? 4:20 for fuck's sake. The last I remember it was around 3. How can we keep running across the same hitchhiker? How come we haven't come across anything or anyone else?" questioned Jack.

"How come it feels like we've been here before when I know we haven't?" wondered Henry.

How?

The question of “how” when answered honestly allows us to understand process. It is perhaps the most instantly gratifying question. In practice the question of “how” when asked too often can take the mystery out of life. There is an art in choosing why and when to ask “how” questions. The answer to “how” questions can make the universe expand or shrink in a few precious syllables. In almost every dialect, in most every language, of nearly all “intelligent” beings, on the vast majority of habited planets, there is a form of “how” question.

“There was an intersection up ahead,” said Henry.

Henry remembered that they had come across an intersection on the road. He remembered that Jack had been bickering with the road map and trying to find the crossroads on it, but failing because it was unmarked. The memory felt buried. He had to strain to make out the details.

“What are you talking about?” Jack snapped.

“Don’t you remember? It happened just like this,” explained Henry. He took the cigarette pack from his pocket. He opened it. He began to question his mental stability. He grabbed a cigarette and lit it.

“Wait...” started Jack.

Henry was hoping that she was about to tell him that he had been driving for too long. He began to hope that he was hallucinating. Or even that he had fallen asleep behind the wheel.

Jack looked over at Henry.

Henry was paying service to his pacifier.

“I was saying that I needed to find out where the fuck we were. You said something about how I should turn the light off and stop swearing and calm the fuck down,” revealed Jack. She looked confused. “Then there was an intersection. It wasn’t supposed to be there. You were saying it was right there so it probably was. I said that I couldn’t find it on the map. You said that I couldn’t find us on the map and that it could have been any of the

intersections. You wanted to turn," remembered Jack out loud. She smiled nervously. "Am I dreaming?" she asked. "Am I going crazy?" she asked also.

"I was just wondering the same things about myself," said Henry.

Sanity

Sanity is a myth. The saner beings out there are the ones who realize everything is totally apeshit.

Henry had wanted to turn.

"You were saying you needed air so we stopped at the intersection. I wanted to turn but you were convinced this road would get to the highway eventually. I thought you had finally snapped. You said you 'wanted to finish what you started,' whatever that means. I agreed, reluctantly, as long as we turn back if we saw nothing. How long has it been? We were just about to go outside when I said I had to turn the lights off. You told me you were afraid of the dark," remembered Henry.

"You said, 'That's actually cute,'" noted Jack.

Henry smiled. He reassured her, "It is cute."

Jack shrugged. "No, no it isn't," she said.

The friends silently thought about the crossroads.

They remembered it vividly, eventually.

Jack had leaned against the truck.

Henry had paced back and forth on the road. He had pointed out, "This is the first intersection we've seen since we started down this damn road." He then rubbed his eyes.

Jack had argued, "The map said this 'damn road' would lead us home, stupidhead."

Jack took a deep breath and turned off the light.

She had no interest in trying to piece together cryptic memories. "Let's just drive alright?" she pleaded. She rested her head against the side of her headrest furthest from Henry and closed her eyes tightly.

So they drove.

Henry was pushing 80 km/h. It was the fastest he was willing to go considering the dots on the road seemed to dissolve after sixty feet.

"Where the hell are we?" demanded Jack.

Henry looked over at Jack for only a second. "We'll be alright. I'll get you home fine," promised Henry. He looked back at the road.

"Fuck me."

Everything moved swiftly, but time itself seemed to slow down. Change itself, or possibly fate, lagged like a computer program. Reality shattered just like glass. Jack raised her head. She saw what Henry saw. There, through the darkness, nearly a hundred feet away from them, the hitchhiker stood in the middle of the road, his right thumb out in a drunkenly unstable attempt to hitchhike. His left hand unsuccessfully concealed a flask.

Henry's foot left the gas pedal. They did not slow down. Henry's right foot slammed on the brake pedal. They did not slow down.

"You're going to slow down, right?" Jack blurted out anxiously.

They sped up instead. They were going 90 km/h, then 100 km/h. Henry tried the emergency brake but nothing happened. He tried to swerve but the steering wheel would not budge.

The hitchhiker took a gulp from his flask.

"I'm trying to brake, I'm trying to stop!" asserted Henry.

"Oh God," shrieked Jack.

They hit the hitchhiker.

Henry remembered a stop sign.

It was old, rusted and dirty. He remembered rushing by it. He remembered an intense feeling of immediate guilt and nervousness. He then remembered a bright light and everything fading to white.

Oh God.

I am fascinated by journeys far more than destinations. The process of change interests me more than the momentary products of it. I must confess that I was watching as everything happened on that road. I enjoyed it, too. I could also see their memories. Their minds were open to me. I feel a measure of guilt that I did not explain that to them then, as I always had to others. They slowly began to remember and relive their most precious secret moments. I soaked everything up like a sponge. Gods shouldn't have such powers.

They brake after hitting the hitchhiker.

Before that road Henry had never caused a car accident. This never made him careless as he knew firsthand how much damage a crash could entail. He was a paranoid driver. His life had been shaped by car wrecks. His father died in a family sedan and one of his childhood friends had died while drag racing his sweet sixteen present. Henry had just lived one of his greatest fears. The truck was built (cough) tough. It had barely a scratch on it. There was no blood.

Jack looked at the rear view mirror. She could see the hitchhiker sprawled out on the road behind them. She switched on the overhead light. The inside of the truck was coated in yellow light.

"I tried to slow down. I tried to stop. I tried to turn," urged Henry.

"There's nothing you could have done," assured Jack.

"I could have stopped arguing over a dumb light."

"What would that have done?" enquired a puzzled Jack.

"Everything, don't you remember?"

"Remember what?" asked Jack. She grabbed Henry's leg. His eyes raced to his leg. This was entirely atypical of her. "We need to go see if he's alright," she pleaded.

"I have a funny feeling he is," predicted Henry. He reached for his pack of cigarettes. He looked inside the package. He rolled down his window an inch. He grabbed his flimsy orange dollar store lighter and lit a cigarette. The only pack of cigarettes he had brought with him was almost full, despite his chain smoking.

"After we hit him with a truck?" questioned a now VERY perplexed Jack.

"It wasn't the first time," said Henry. He inhaled some burning tar to no relief.

Jack looked at the side mirror closest to her. She could see the hitchhiker stand up. In tiny text, at the bottom of the mirror, she read, "Objects in the rear view mirror are closer than they appear." A look of horror overtook her face.

"He can't be standing," an amazed Jack said. She blinked and then added, "He can't be walking towards us."

Jack then remembered that they had already hit the hitchhiker. They had been arguing about the overhead light. Henry was distracted from the road. She remembered the stop sign as Henry described it. She remembered Henry trying to swerve but hitting the hitchhiker. The hitchhiker was pulled under the wheel and died swiftly. Jack remembered oncoming trees and then a huge flash of white.

The hitchhiker's last words were:

"Shit happens"

He was apparently very drunk and had wandered into the middle of the road. He saw the truck coming towards himself. He could have avoided

the truck if he had only walked out of the way. It didn't seem like he cared if he would live or die. All he did was tip his flask back.

The hitchhiker then stood outside Jack's window.

He tapped on the glass three times. Tap... tap... tap... Jack, although jittery, rolled down the window.

When the window unravelled it revealed the Grim Reaper.

The Grim Reaper was a skeleton draped in a cloak with scythe in hand. He was huge. His skeleton looked like it belonged to a giant, or a grizzly bear, or some other form of nightmare creature. The skull was too large to be human. His cloak was black, leathery and perfectly tailored to his overwhelming bag of bones. He looked menacing. Henry and Jack were deeply unnerved, as anyone would be.

Henry and Jack had a glimpse of the truck.

The truck was crashed into a tree next to the road on which Henry and Jack had first hit the hitchhiker. I don't know the name of the road. I know that the truck was approximately an hour away from Toronto, Canada, and that it was mid fall, 2008. The truck's high beam headlights were the road's only source of light save the stars and the moon. The hitchhiker was a smear of red that lasted three meters and consisted of bones, chunks, paste, and liquid. Part of the hitchhiker was still between the wheel and the truck. The windshield was covered in blood.

The Grim Reaper said,

"There was a stop sign that you missed. A man was in the middle of the road. You swerved, but hit him. He died. You crashed into a tree. You died.

You must come with me.”

The road that Henry and Jack were on wasn’t really a road at all.

PART TWO

“You have always been what you will be and you will always be what you have been.”

-My father figure

Coincidence

One cool overcast spring afternoon rain threatened an otherwise blissful day for a then six-year old-Henry. Henry's dad, Paul, was taking him to the park since he had extended his vacation as a precaution for the storm that had just past. They decided to go to the park along Brian's Lake dubbed "Oakwood Park" as opposed to the newly constructed "Lakeside Park" that was actually encompassed by cookie cutter condo complexes and oak trees. Lakeside Park was nearly a kilometer from any body of water and even then it wasn't specified which lake it was supposed to be beside.

The walk to the park alone had taken the better part of an hour. Along this journey scattered black, grey and white clouds eventually blocked out any traces of blue from the sky. Henry didn't care considering he had the undivided attention of his dad. Sam was over at a birthday party for Pamela, a classmate from his second grade class. Henry and Sam always fought for Paul's attention. As a testimony to his character Paul never played favorites.

The destination of the endeavour, as far as Henry was concerned, was a children's playground that would be the envy of any child's escapist fantasies. It had drawn eager kids from hundreds of miles away for over seventy years. It had been completely reconstructed four times, but each time in the mirror image of the original design. This simple error of the contracted carpenters who first created the playground was even copied in the sake of authenticity.

The sandbox that formed the ground of the play area was undeniably a 20 by 50 foot toy itself. Alongside the perimeter of the rectangle, a flat piece of oak, roughly a foot wide, served effectively as 140 feet of weatherproofed bench for parents who were intimidated by the thought of sandy shoes.

Although there were eight swings (two sets of four swings parallel to each other along the width of the rectangle) and two independent metal slides, the oak playhouse was uncontested as the centerpiece of the playground. This was likely, partly, as it was in the center of the playground.

The playhouse stood 20 feet high at its highest and was fashioned to resemble a castle. There were three different levels, or floors if you'd prefer, to the castle in total.

The castle had three metal slides attached to it, two decorative cast iron cannons and a metal poll for sliding down.

The playground was called "The Sand Castle".

The Sand Castle was Henry's favorite place. It appeared empty then. The clouds had scared off less determined children. Henry walked towards it with a huge smile on his face. He ran around, jumped up and down and suddenly stopped sharply.

Paul was content to sit down and gaze southwards towards the lake and ponder the small troubles of his tiny bookstore. By a strange coincidence, a woman twenty feet away was seated woefully wondering over projections of the coming quarterly while listening to an audiotape she had bought at Paul's bookstore. She was the manager of the local branch of a major bank.

Little drops of rain, the sound of thunder, and distant lightning bothered Paul and the woman both.

Henry was worried by the sound of a child crying. He lay down on the oak floorboard and peered through a hole that separated two such floorboards. He could see through the peephole a little girl, in a white dress, clutching her left arm with her right.

To Henry she looked like a princess.

"Hi," said Henry.

The little girl saw Henry in his blue jeans and red t-shirt and found him horribly derivative.

"Hi," said the little girl as she cried.

"What's wrong?" asked Henry.

"I hurt my arm," answered the little girl.

Henry climbed off of the playhouse to a crawlspace under the first level that was roughly four feet tall. The crawlspace was mostly closed off but had a three-foot-long opening along both sides of The Sand Castle. The little girl was obviously in a lot of pain. Henry thought she was beautiful.

"My name's Henry. I'll go get your mommy or daddy," said Henry. Henry turned and began to run.

"Henry," called out the little girl.

Henry turned around and stopped briefly.

"My name's Jaclyn," informed Jack. She offered the best smile she could.

The Grim Reaper was motionless outside Jack's window.

Jack huddled close to Henry. Henry's cigarette had burnt to the filter but he hadn't noticed. As heat reached his fingers and the smell of burning fiberglass flared, he flung the filter out his half open window.

"I do not wish to harm you. You must come with me," said the Grim Reaper. His voice was hollow and deep.

Henry appeared calm and strong. He thought he had to protect Jack. The events of his drive were eating him from the inside out. "What do you—what do you want from us?" demanded Henry sternly.

"You must be brought before the pearly gates and await the judgment of God," matter-of-factly answered the Grim Reaper.

Henry, dumbfounded, covertly shifted into drive. He was non-compliant. Jack was expressionless. She felt akin to a phone number that had been dialed and not in service. She asked, "I'm sorry did you just say await the judgment of God?"

"You must come with me," ordered the Grim Reaper. Neither his voice nor his being ever betrayed emotion. He hadn't made any threatening motions. Still he was not the sort of bloke one would like to run into half-drunk late night in an alleyway.

Henry slammed on the gas.

Henry and Jack sped off. They searched the road desperately for any sign of help.

The Grim Reaper followed on foot.

Henry visited Jack at a hospital.

The hospital was built in the early 20th Century. It was called something along the lines of The Royal Children's General Hospital of Central Western Ontario.

Henry was bored.

It was a fairly long drive to the emergency room from the Sand Castle, roughly 45 minutes as it was three towns over, but the hospital specialized in treating childhood injuries and ailments.

It's still there to this day. It's filled with kind-hearted doctors and nurses fixing tiny broken bones, curing diseases and helping out in various other capacities.

Henry cared squat about physician's intentions, they were the needle wielders.

Jack's room was typical of a private hospital room.

It was white, bright, quiet, clean, cluttered with machinery (most of it entirely unnecessary), and utterly dull for six year olds.

Jack lay on the hospital bed. Her arm was in a fiberglass cast. She was dressed in a tiny hospital gown and covered in baby blue blankets. She was watching children's programming and secretly plotting her plan to change the channel to the sitcom of the six people who inexplicably wind up in the same situation weekly as soon as "Nurse Deadpan" (as Jack had dubbed her nurse Jill Sanchez) finished her next rounds. Jack just wanted to watch the dumb one,

the crazy one, the creepy one, the pretty but worst one, the even dumber one and the normal but inexplicably single one.

Jack also wanted to be outside. It was sunny out.

Henry walked through the door.

"Hi," Henry said with a smile.

Jack turned off the TV via a huge rudimentary grey remote that was chained to her bed. "Hi," she giggled.

Henry sat down on a fluffy cream coloured faux leather armchair next to Jack's bed. He had an orange backpack with him. He put it down next to the chair.

"I wanted to make sure you were alright. Your mommy said I could come visit. My dad's just outside," explained Henry bashfully.

Shyly and with the volume of a mouse Jack whispered, "My arm has to be in a cast for a whole six weeks but the doctor said it was good that I got here so fast."

"I, uh, I brought you some crayons and paper. I remember when I had the chicken pox I got really bored," revealed Henry. He went through his backpack and grabbed crayons, pencil crayons and a notebook. He handed them to Jack. He also handed her a children's book entitled "The Thinking Thimble". The words read...

The Thinking Thimble

There once was a thinking thimble.

All day and all night he protected against

Tiny pin pricks for illegal immigrants.

He was very, very, VERY humble.

He would think about different thread.

If someone asked he'd say

"All colours, all beautiful, all day."

I hope you can get what he said.

That was two ounces of steel,

Who knew so much about how to feel.

Enter the belligerent talking sewing pen with sheet.

Every single second of the day he ranted,

While he coughed, and stammered and panted,

How he hated to do a red thread pleet.

It didn't really make sense at first,

But then he started spreading lies.

He said red thread attracted flies.

Later things got a lot worse.

On purpose he was hard to thread with red.

More than once, the immigrants bled.

Thinking thimbles are governed by talking sewing pins,

This makes for a violent world,

Maybe if this perspective twirled,
The sewing pins would pay for their sins against skin.

Jack hadn't read it before.

Nor had many others. Paul had written it and done the illustrations himself. It was never published; as with most of his books it had been rejected on the grounds that it tackled subjects considered inappropriate for preschoolers.

However, parent death and terrifying worlds where anthropomorphic animals are racialized or divided through social stratification seemed just fine and dandy to the publishers.

Jack Smiled.

She said, "Thanks." She put the colored pencils, the crayons, and everything else down on the particleboard bedside table to her right.

"Green's my favourite... my favourite colour," said Henry.

"Mines black," said Jack.

Jack stared for a second at the first page of the notebook. She picked it up. "What's this?" she asked. In the picture a boy and a girl played on "The Sand Castle."

"I drew you a picture on my way over here," Henry answered as he walked around the bed to point at the picture. "That's me, and that's you, and we're playing at the park and your arm is all better," laughed Henry.

They drove on.

Jack was motionless and quiet. The overhead light was still on. Still they were coated in an artificial canary yellow.

Henry, squinting, searched for something on the road except for vegetation and death. "God you were a cute kid," admitted Henry.

Henry had forgotten how freckled faced Jack used to be.

"So were you," said Jack.

Jack had forgotten how small and fragile Henry once was.

"Did you also just remember when we met and the hospital?" asked Henry.

"Yah," responded Jack with a raised brow.

"That's kinda odd," said Henry.

Jack pointed out, "Stranger things have happened tonight."

"Huh," said Henry.

"What?" Jack asked.

"Well it's just... it's just pretty cliché isn't it?" wondered Henry.

Education

Education is important. Unfortunately, high schools in North America are often more interested in societal conditioning. One person barking orders while a group follows them conjures images of: fascism, cults, corporations, monarchies, churches, and jails. Sociologists have written volumes on totalizing institutions.

Did you enjoy high school?

What you learn in high school sticks with you your whole life.

You learn to complete projects at command. You learn not to challenge the status quo. You learn that it is in your best interest for the teacher to like you or you fail. You learn strange is punished. You learn friends are the most important THINGS in life. You have a boss and you aren't even getting paid.

As great a person as your teacher was, as passionate about education as they may have been, they were being paid to pacify you. Teachers are the critics of children. They are being paid to separate the future business leaders

from the fry cooks of tomorrow. They try to section off the cogs from the hobos.

In high school good sheep herd themselves.

I just want to open your eyes. As an outsider, perhaps even an intruder, I can see that you've settled for pre-existing institutions. Teachers should be working for children and not against them. The failure of student's reflects their teacher's failure. Teachers should be more accountable to their students.

There is a growing trend towards standardization in North American schools. Many embrace this trend as a step towards equality and uniformity. Do you really want your sons and daughters to be the same as your neighbours? All children should receive an education of equal quality, but shouldn't that education be tailored to their individual talents, skills, interests, and functionality? The next Shakespeare shouldn't be written off as deficient because he bombed his calculus examination or even his almighty SAT. Standardized education turns children into characterless robots. A's, B's and C's personified. The funny thing is that later, in university, the focus of institutional education does an 180 degree turn towards specialization. I can't make sense of this.

Propaganda is being taught in classrooms across the world right now. Everything, at bare minimum, has a spin. You should always remember that history is a story (his, none the less). You should remember that history, and science for that matter, changes. Don't worry, propaganda has always been taught in classrooms. Creationism didn't just spring up.

At one point it was taught in North American high schools that students should be afraid of the big bad Reds. That sounds like a wolf's propaganda to me. They managed to convince children that somehow their wobbly desk would shelter them from an atomic bomb. You can't blame the wolves. They need to eat too.

Remember duck and cover.

Remember banned books. Odds are you have no clue what Dresden was, or why it must never happen again.

Remember book burnings? Wall-sized televisions and closing public libraries foreshadow the coming darkness.

Look at Socrates. When he put things as they were he was charged for corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens and sentenced to drink hemlock. He pointed out that the wisest man realizes he's unwise.

I guess my point is, eat, drink, breath, birth and fuck. Those are your true responsibilities. Believe me, the differences between you and your political authority, or your religious leader, or a warlord, a humanitarian, or a celebrity are nothing compared to your similarities.

You are an animal. You are not special. You are only astonishingly lucky.

You were all, in part, Olympic quality sperm once. You were all the best of the best of a few inches of pussy.

We're all lottery winners when we're born, hatched, conceived, or whatever. We all have the winning ticket: existence. What you do with life is how you spend your fortune. You should spend that vast wealth expressing what little individuality you have and helping, not hindering, others in expressing theirs.

What are you doing with your gift?

I don't understand why anyone would settle for the pyramid structure of your class system, your corporations and your political system. There is too much wealth on that world for the rich people of your present to be allowed to hoard it.

Corporations are simply make-believe. They are intangible. Why do you allow them to thrive while poor children in Africa die? Tear down the treadmill of production. The world, your world as it stands, exists because of a consensus that can be broken. Cease the spreading of the contagion that is

American cultural imperialism. Allow others to be different and separate from you. Accept difference, don't just tolerate it.

In America, right now, there are two types of people, those who talk about money because they are rich and those that talk about money because they are poor. Is this really what you think life is all about?

Say no. Rise up. Cut apart your credit cards. Take your money out of banks. Try to buy only out of necessity. Don't work for an unethical company or boss: work and suffer with your neighbours, domestically and abroad, for a future that doesn't require oxygen masks and hazmat suits. I don't advocate communism, but I do advocate a shift towards increased cosmopolitanism AND local community. Although I believe in meritocracies I think those at the top on Earth should have less than they do and those on the bottom need more. Why can't the spectrum of personal wealth simply be further condensed?

You should be searching for corporate accountability and transparency. You should not only worry about you and yours. How can you be content with how crappy cable television is?

Quite frankly there should be revolution on your world. This is real, it's TV that's fake. Fair trade coffee isn't real. Buying green-washed products does not exonerate you from global socio-economical responsibilities. CAPITALISM IS NOT A SOLUTION TO END SOCIAL STRATIFICATION. Marx's surplus value exists alongside surplus suffering.

I suppose you could argue all's fair in love and war.

If one person can't make a difference, then make friends. There is always a bias. There are no absolute truths except change continues.

Do you think that your greed is stronger than your will to be better than you are? Are you that weak?

Do you really think that some must suffer in order for others to thrive? It's not childish to think otherwise. It's childish to grab the ball away from others and shout, "MINE!"

But I digress...

High School

In his teens, and afterwards, Henry was not a fan of school. He loved to read and lived to draw but could never stand criticism. It was at the point when he decided he could write better than his English teacher and draw better than his Art teacher that he deemed his efforts to be wasted on conforming to established rubrics and attending to trivial assignments.

He was destined to be a dysfunctional “D” student because of lack of will and not, as was often attributed to him, lack of skill. Very fancy, formal looking, pieces of paper, with gold stickers on them (which demanded only effort and not conviction of belief), withheld his passage to more challenging faculties of academia.

Henry lacked the foresight for societal necessities and would pay for it time and time again. When Sam died it was hard for Henry to even convince himself to go to school let alone attend to every meaningless project. When your brother’s just died, just committed suicide rather, an essay concerning who your favourite Victorian novelist is, and why, seems nonsense, no matter the weight of it. Henry quoted Dickens almost daily, but that’s not the point. He attended half his senior classes baked out of his skull. The other half he didn’t attend at all. He kept reiterating that eventually he would make it on his own. He barely graduated high school.

Jack knew what she needed to get out of school. Sure, she realized that it was mundane, mismanaged and melodramatic, but it was her gateway drug to a career in journalism. With minimal effort she was able to graduate near the head of her class.

Jack’s biggest challenge in high school was the amount of time she spent in movie theatres, or drunk, or high, when Henry convinced her to “skip off.” Incidentally this was also Jack’s biggest challenge with relationships at that time of her life. To most of their classmates, the friendship between the very different Henry and Jack, was an anomaly to be gawked at, gossiped about and discouraged.

Everyone totally thought they were doing the nasty.

Both Henry and Jack were convinced they were dead.

Henry continued to drive. He paid the road less attention. He noticed clouds ahead. In the distance he could make out a light. It was bright enough that he switched to low beams and turned off the overhead light. He was well aware that he was driving towards the light.

Jack turned to him and looked like she was going to say something, but she stopped at the thought that the overhead light was probably, or at least partially, responsible for the doomed afterlife before them.

They thought that luminosity had killed them even though if not for the supernova of high mass stars they would never have existed. Cursing light makes as much sense as yelling against your voice. Not that making sense is important. Some of you still think the Earth is less than 10,000 years old, which is a hell of a lot younger than me. Some of you, therefore, must think God can travel faster than the speed of light, even though that's scientifically impossible.

Those of you who look up at the stars and think of magic and God should probably purchase a textbook on introductory astronomy.

For flat Earthers I suggest an airplane ticket.

Jack's palms were sweaty.

This was not only because of the road or the fact that she thought she was very probably worm food.

Henry was mildly angry.

Henry was very rarely angry. He had some choice words revolving in his brain for whatever, or whomever, he may encounter once they reached the end of the road.

I instantly remembered a bar I had never been to.

Snow fell outside a lively pub, painted entirely brown, in which people entered ambitiously and left sedated. Colourful signs made from thin fluorescent tubes lined its windows offering a variety of forms of cheap domestic beer. I had the weirdest feeling that I had been there a hundred times.

I recollected one of those times with particular clarity. Momentarily I realized that it was one of Henry's memories. For me, the distinction between my mind and his was dissolving at an alarming speed. Jack's thought process was significantly different from mine: it was an "other" experience, entirely.

Inside there were fake road signs and Christmas lights. A mounted warthog's head hung over the bar. Next to the warthog's head hung a mannequin's head that was sculpted and painted to look like the then current and unpopular President of the United States. Over a hundred bottles of liquor hung behind the counter. There was everything from 12-year-old scotch to peach schnapps. One bottle of illegal verte absinth, the grand wormwood-enabled good stuff, was hidden at the bottom of a large wooden box otherwise full of peanuts.

The tables, chairs and stalls, all bright red and small seeming, looked like they were stolen directly from a diner. The bar was once actually a children's restaurant called...

The Land of Munchkins

The Land of Munchkins was established in 1951 and closed controversially in 1987. It was decorated with imagined scenery, costumes and

house decor from The Wizard of Oz and other works of fantasy featuring little people.

Everything was designed for those of short stature and would feel cramped, or unfulfilling, for an adult of normal height. If you were tall you were uncomfortable.

The owners, a former grade school teacher named Herb and his wife Sally, had dreamed of opening the eatery since reading the Wizard of Oz in early August of 1939. They read it to each other at a diner whilst eating pie, late at night. It was their first date. As quaint as it was, Sally's mother called her a whore when she eventually came home. Her parents had debated phoning the police, and were only dissuaded upon phoning the diner.

When Herb went to war, that night was why he fought.

Waitresses at the diner dressed like Dorothy and waiters were costumed as the cowardly lion, the scarecrow or the tin man. The garments were all hand stitched by Sally.

At the drive-through window sat the Wizard of Oz. His face and hands were always, when he was working, painted green. The Wizard was also the manager.

The food served was miniature traditional diner food. Children's favourites included the eighth pound cheeseburger and potato skins, popcorn shrimp, wolf chops (pork chops), grilled cheese sand-witches, bacon-and-tobiko breakfast and BBQ baby corn on the cob.

The eatery bore a striking similarity with the "Land of Munchkins" or "Munchkin Country" from the Oz books by Frank L. Baum.

The building itself was shaped like the Emerald City. The lettering on the building spelt "The Land of Munchkins" with every character a different colour. The path leading from the parking lot to the restaurant was constructed from yellow brick.

For a very long time the diner was the most popular restaurant for children in the whole region.

Enter Little Shifty Eyes

If you've heard of Little Shifty Eyes, forget what you've heard. The Shifty Eyes concerned here did not have his own syndicated children's television show. The Shifty Eyes described here was not one of the largest donors to Children Without Doctors. He was not the wine connoisseur he is today. He didn't own any stables or satellites. He had not yet founded a multinational corporation. He was not knighted. He was not high society.

Little Shifty Eyes was, to anyone that knew him then, a horrible good-for-nothing drunk. He hit prostitutes even though they were the only women who would touch him. He would pick fights with children. His only friend was a runt beagle that he beat repeatedly. He was a Junior High drop out.

Across town it was common knowledge that Little Shifty Eyes was responsible for, and proud of, impregnating a 13-year-old girl.

All of his hardships, according to him, stemmed from him being too damn short. That's why, he thought, he was poor, and a drunk, and a smoker, and unmarried, and a bastard. No matter why people actually didn't like him, Shifty Eyes would blame it on heightism. Little Shifty Eyes blamed his mom's height for why he never met his dad.

Little Shifty Eyes, halfway into a 500ml bottle of spearmint flavoured mouthwash, wandered along the Trans-Canada highway looking for something to do. He was particularly depressed on account of being banned from his shelter due to thievery. He thought that day would be his last. He had 20 dollars to his name and even that was only because he had finally done what he swore he wouldn't: Little Shifty Eyes had sold his dog Buck to a farmer for enough money for cigs, mouthwash and a couple cheap meals. He couldn't even beg, as nobody pitied him as much as they disliked him.

The billionaire you know, this was his last \$20. You want proof there is no God, enter Little Shifty Eyes.

When Little Shifty Eyes saw the sign for The Land of Munchkins he laughed.

Before that day Shifty Eyes had always avoided the restaurant. He hated children. He hated the term, "Munchkin," as he had been labeled one his whole life.

Shifty Eyes was not mentally stunted, he just made bad decisions and had a 'one against the world' attitude.

Nearly everyone who talked to Shifty Eyes talked to him slowly on account that he was small. It's as if they thought it would take time for the sound to travel down to his level. Worse than that though was that people who were young enough to be his kids would talk to him in a paternal tone.

That day Shifty Eyes was through running. Shifty Eyes wanted to peruse his kingdom. He walked up the yellow brick road. He stared up at the emerald city and gasped at the size of it. Shifty Eyes, who had never left town, had never seen a taller building.

When Shifty Eyes arrived at the door he was taken aback because the knob was at his level. It almost brought a tear to him. That small thing was enough to make him feel more human.

He pushed the door open and felt like he left his black and white world.

He was awestruck. A Dorothy, who was very courteous and pretty, helped him to a table. The booth was only slightly too big, but he had never fit one so well. The Dorothy brought him a mini coffee and a few tiny sugar-coated donuts. She said, "On the house of course." Shifty Eyes started to cry.

This was the real Land of Munchkins, not the one from the papers.

Little Shifty Eyes was not the first dwarf to visit the diner. The Land of Munchkins, or Munchkin County as it was often referred to, was a popular tourist attraction for little people across Canada. Since business was swell, and servings were small, the owners decided to honour the contributions of little people to the arts by allowing all adults shorter than four feet tall free meals forever. There were no exceptions and no conditions.

If this was political incorrectness it was the right form of it. This did come out in the trial but it only made things worse. The testimony of hundreds of little people would not change anything, either. Shifty Eyes's lawyers made it out that the Lancasters gave away free meals to dwarfs in order to create a kind of zoo.

They would argue the Lancasters were running a freak show.

Shifty Eyes just cried and cried and cried. Herb, who happened to be at a nearby booth, was concerned. He walked over to Shifty Eyes and asked, "Is everything alright?"

"Is this some kind of gag?" Shifty Eyes questioned.

"No sir. It looks like you've been through a lot. Your meal is on us, and any other meals you eat here."

Shifty Eyes couldn't believe it. He had probably never been called sir before in his life, except sarcastically, by the law, a telemarketer, or through a smirk. He recognized Herb from the TV commercials for Munchkin County on the local channel. He asked, "What's wrong with you?"

Herb just laughed. He had a strong jolly belly laugh, just like Santa Claus is supposed to have. He said, "Well I guess I never learned to be cruel." Then any trace of humour vacated his face. He explained, "I just don't think it's very Christian the way you little people are treated. I'm just doing what I can about it."

Shifty Eyes, full of tears, mumbled, "Thank you."

Herb grinned, "Now what can I get you, sir?"

Shifty Eyes, without even hesitating, answered, "A job."

Herb didn't know what to say.

Shifty Eyes was dirty, he was wearing stained and smelly clothes, he otherwise smelled strongly of mouthwash, and he had a horrible reputation. Herb didn't even need any more staff.

"I won't let you down. I'll never be late. I'll show up clean and I'll be mannerly. I swear on my mother's grave I'll do good by you."

Herb objected, "Well, I don't know."

Shifty Eyes told Herb his biased version of his life. He, of course, left out the 13-year-old girl.

Herb whispered, "That's a sad story, son."

"Please, sir, please. If you don't help me I'm dead. I have twenty dollars to my name and a long list of enemies. I never really had a chance. I sold my dog today, sir, for twenty dollars. Please sir."

The problem is that Herb was too good a man for his own good. He was one of those rare Christians who got the message. He of course would suffer for it.

"I'll start you off three times a week, four hour shifts. You can sleep in one of the unused rooms upstairs. I'll get my wife Sally to bring you by some clothes," instructed Herb.

This was Little Shifty Eyes' chance.

This is why you never trust a midget with shifty eyes.

Shifty Eyes was given the choice of what he wanted to dress like and HE chose a munchkin. He showed up on his first day of work sober, clean, cheery, and early. He worked hard. He learned fast. He tolerated the kids and

even enjoyed himself. It was the first solid day of work he had ever done. This was when the picture of him in his munchkin costume, the one famously shown in court and on so many newspaper front pages, originated.

For two whole weeks Shifty Eyes was a productive member of society. His peculiar smells vanished and his attitude slowly improved. It was like a fog lifted from Shifty Eyes' thoughts: he was doing math in his head for the first time in years and at times was overcome with spells of happiness. What Shifty Eyes was feeling was his first instance of normalcy.

It didn't last. One Friday Herb handed him an envelope with his real name, Ron, on it. The sour look on Shifty Eyes' face betrayed that he had already resigned himself to having been fired. Herb said, "Oh no son, it's good news." Little Shifty Eyes had received his first paycheck. It amounted to two hundred and forty three dollars and fifty-seven cents.

Shifty Eyes had been living in relative luxury on tip money and couldn't believe that he was due a windfall of two hundred and forty three dollars and fifty-seven cents. After he cashed his check he had the most money in his pocket that he had had since his mom died. Little Shifty Eyes didn't know what to do with so much money. He got Buck back. He bought a whole carton of cigarettes and smoked like a chimney. He bought a 1.12 litre bottle of triple distilled vodka and drank like a fish. He spent some time with a cheap prostitute and screwed like a Robinson screwdriver. This is the man who is now married to a 22-year-old bulimic Scandinavian supermodel.

Little Shifty Eyes began showing up to work late and hung over. At first Herb let it slide, but it lasted a whole week. One day Little Shifty Eyes showed up still drunk, barely able to walk and with bloodshot eyes. He smelled of cologne and cognac. He of course was called into the manager's office.

As soon as the fireproof steel door, with employee safety sheets taped on it, was closed there was animosity written on the Wizard's green face. His real name was Nick Armstrong according to his bronze nameplate: he was young and professional-seeming. Herb's look was worse: his was one of disappointment. Before Shifty Eyes knew it he was fired. Nick had never liked him. One last paycheck was all he got.

The words, "This is a family restaurant. We can't have people like you around here," reverberated in Shifty Eyes' brain and warped until their context changed, from just vilification of Shifty Eyes' behaviour, into blatant prejudice against his short stature.

That's when Shifty Eyes went straight for the nearest lawyer's office. The rest, as you say, is history. The trial was never fairly represented in the media.

Nobody listened when Herb informed everyone that in the Oz books there were munchkins of all heights.

Shifty Eyes later founded a crooked association which supposedly represented people of minority groups who were discriminated against. The association was never fully exposed for the unethical tactics it encouraged, and it still exists to this day.

His success at the markets, which was rumored to be due to insider trading, was never proven to be more than luck.

The townspeople knew the truth. Where they are "pulling a Shifty Eyes," now means betraying your benefactor for increased profit. Shifty Eyes was Judas incarnate save that he earned considerably more than thirty pieces of silver.

Herb lost everything because he tried to be a good Christian. As you say, no good deed goes unpunished. At no point during this ordeal would Herb seem to question his faith. The poor dumb bastard.

The clouds covered them.

The road was the same as always.

The overhead light was off.

The engine roared on.

The truck only shot out low beams.

The dice made snake eyes.

Jack asked, "Do you want to know my deepest darkest secret?"

Henry joked, "I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours."

Jack whispered, "I can trust you right? It's really dark. I only found out a few years ago, myself. You aren't going to judge me, are you? Don't smile. Nobody knows this, and it isn't flattering."

Henry assumed Jack was overreacting as usual. This was the sort of lead-in that Jack would typically employ before explaining she couldn't snap her fingers. Henry answered, "I'll always be by your side Sancho. Nothing will change that. Apparently not even death."

Jack shot Henry a grave look. This was serious. Henry said, "Jack, it's me."

Jack trusted Henry more than anyone. They were best friends. They were closer than family. Jack decided to trust Henry with the family secret.

Jack's eyes watered. She cupped her hands and held them in front of her mouth.

"Little Shifty Eyes is my biological father and my older sister Tammy is my biological mother."

Henry was surprised. He questioned, "Really?"

"Yeah. Tammy was the 13-year-old girl that Shifty Eyes raped at knifepoint and impregnated. By the time Tammy came forward there was no hard evidence to prosecute that dwarf dildo-monger, considering he told the police it never happened and this was 1986. She chose to have the baby. I'm the baby."

At one point Little Shifty Eyes literally owned, amongst a thousand other pieces of real estate, a factory in Mumbai that made sex toys out of low grade plastic. Shifty Eyes was likely responsible for thousands of cases of cervical cancer. If you have any sympathy for Shifty Eyes consider this: he exploited a workforce that had, due to malnutrition, never grown as tall as they should have.

Henry reached over and grabbed Jack's hand. "That's just genetics though," said Henry. He added, "I can't imagine what Tammy's gone through."

Jack had been raised by her grandmother, with Tammy for a sister to avoid scandal.

Jack said, "It just sucks to know I'm related to that bastard. I'm worthy of a tabloid article or daytime television." The episode would probably have been titled, "My midget billionaire father raped my teenage mother at knifepoint and now wants a paternity test." In reality Shifty Eyes was likely unaware he had a daughter.

"I'm of the mind that what happens to us and the choices we consciously make determine who we become."

Jack sighed, "You probably think I'm a freak."

Henry said, "You know I'm not that shallow."

"Your turn, What's your secret?"

Henry didn't actually have a dark secret; or rather he had several, but she already knew them. He reluctantly blurted out, "It's not the same kind of secret. I mean you know about Paul and Bret. You know about Sam. You, you know I see a therapist about all that. It's more, something that you don't know. Something I recently told myself I'd never tell you."

"Ok, so what is it?"

"I haven't had sex in over a year."

Jack complained, "But that doesn't make any sense."

"I've dated since then but it never went far. Often girls wanting to pad their resumes would suggest we were more than we were and I didn't want to call them on it. Small town girls want to seem attainable so that they can find a fellow to settle down with. Who can blame them since the small-minded people around here will only hire them as waitresses or for retail positions? Also, I didn't want people to call me gay just because I chose not to sleep with girls I went on a date with. I wanted to come clean, but it just grew and grew... I mean as more time past. I decided to just keep the secret. We're probably dead now, so I figured it wouldn't matter if I told you."

Jack was very upset. She yelled, "You lied to me."

Henry didn't understand why Jack was so enraged. "I didn't. I only omitted information. Truth is it just always felt like the wrong girl." And then an awkward silence fell upon them both.

In the bar.

There were eight bar stools, three pool tables and seven different vintage coin-ops. The sound system was quite impressive when it wanted to be which was whenever requested. Of the three barely legal waitresses that worked that night Henry had dated two.

Few people considered Henry a man-slut or a casanova, but some did talk about his love life behind his back: it was just a small town where he was one of the few bachelors his age, and there was nothing to do but speculate on who had slept with whom. Henry could count the number of women he had slept with on one hand. He was only twenty-one then. If Henry wanted to count the amount of girls he had kissed on one hand he would have needed a magic marker or a calculator.

Henry's reserved demeanour and mysterious mind proved invaluable assets when trying to get a date on a Friday night. Some girls go for the brooding type. His reserved demeanor and mysterious mind also explained why he had never been in a serious relationship.

Henry and Jack had never kissed.

Many people just thought he was shy. Henry considered himself more neurotic than shy. From my vantage point he just seemed the quiet and damaged sort. The nervousness was symptomatic of his pain. Of course I was seeing his life through his vantage and the human mind has a way of warping everything.

The Wiz

The bartender and owner, Nick Armstrong, was dubbed "The Wiz," as he was the very same Nick who once served as the manager of The Land of Munchkins and as its makeup-adorned drive-through attendant.

The Wiz called the waitresses his wiz-kid witches. He only employed college girls. The only problem he found with his hiring strategy was that the girls were smart enough to ignore him. They soon found out he was a big softy at heart, despite his tattoo-covered arms and ripped physique.

When Nick bought The Land of Munchkins he altered the exterior only by taking down the pre-existing sign, painting the building brown and raising the doorknob a foot. The end result was that "The Shithole" looked as if it was an explosion of fecal matter being expelled by the Earth itself. The term "going to get shit-faced" was uniquely specific in that town.

Henry and Jack were seated at a booth. They always sat at the same booth whenever possible.

Jack was eyeing three photographs behind the bar. One was of Shifty Eyes. Above it was written in white, "Denied drinks." The other two photos were of Herb and Sally. Above those were written, "Always free."

If a stranger were walking into the bar, and turned to look at the pictures, it would be perfectly reasonable for them to assume that the owner gave away drinks to all seniors and barred any small person's admittance.

This happened with annoying regularity and started a number of brawls.

Sometimes people would mistake Shifty Eyes for a small child and were shocked that such instructions were necessary that close to the city.

Henry stared up at the President's maniacal head.

Minds off on a tangent

When I finished writing my story, I reread it and came across the sentence I wrote about the booth they sat on. I meant to say that the booth they sat at was generally the same booth but that they always sat together. That just didn't seem clear. Sometimes I have problems with your spelling, words and grammar. I am very thankful for spell check. Sometimes I create ambiguous sentences in the sake of flow. The flow of words is very important where I'm from and I realize when comparing my writing to most of your current novelists that flow is not very important in English, or thought of as something different altogether.

When I compared my spelling, word usage, and grammar with many of your contemporary writers I found that spelling, word usage, and grammar are not very important either. Sometimes this is a conscious effort from a brilliant writer. Sometimes instead this is a result of the conveyor belt approach to writing employed by many romance, horror and young adult authors.

In many of your textbooks on writing I came across passages which suggested that flaws and characteristics are important to style.

On earth most things revolve around how they are done instead of why they are done.

Think of the importance put on the format of academic papers.

Think of big haul trucks lined up and jumped by motorcycles.

Think of deep fried Turducken.

To best capitalize on this I decided to implant my story in the mind of some poor very flawed shmuck who was a wannabe writer.

At the point when he first wrote this page the poor young shmuck had been struggling to write a novella for eight months, after failing to raise the finances to make the film he had been planning on making for the past four years (when he was a wannabe filmmaker), entitled *The End of The Road*.

The screenplay he wrote had nothing to do with him being my pawn and all things considered he felt pretty sore about the whole endeavor.

I just thought it would be interesting to offer mankind a relatively unbiased non-fictitious or omniscient first person narration that could refer to and state blankly the inner workings of third person characters' minds. Where I'm from this is all very done and boring. This story needed to be told.

The shmuck's name was David Dennison. He was a horribly inexperienced novelist. Hopefully my story has character and flaws and made Dave lots of money so he wouldn't have to go through anything like this ever again.

The Basic Law of Time Travel

The Basic Law of Time and its Alteration (L of T&A for short) states that before one should travel through time he/she should first determine whether or not he/she already has travelled through time.

Alteration of Spatial Solidarity Agony (ASS Agony), an offence punished by slow torture, castration, a light breakfast, and then death, all while dressed like a bonsai tree (or known commonly as Slow Torturous

Death (STD)) consists of knowingly breaking the L of T&A: making a change to time that has never been made before.

The Agency of Individuals Dealing Solidarity (AIDS) is what kills those who commit ASS Agony. AIDS is very deadly. After hiding from AIDS for 20-25 Earth years almost everyone who is guilty of ASS Agony offences die at AIDS' hands.

Dying of an STD is a horrible way to go.

Only in English are these acronyms considered potentially offensive and it is suspected that English has been itself shaped by an ASS Agony offender so that somebody will finally do something about the ruthlessness of AIDS.

Most beings seem to feel that the problem of AIDS is the problem of those who commit ASS Agony and fail to realize that each year hundreds of millions of beings across the universe innocent of ASS Agony die at the hand of AIDS' men and women.

AIDS is no laughing matter.

I would like to point out, before anyone gets in a huff, that an agency responsible for slow torture, castration, a light breakfast, and death, all while dressed like a bonsai tree should hardly be compared to an earthling sexually transmitted disease, which was probably created by the same ASS Agony offending being who shaped English to slander the good name of an agency dedicated to preventing the use of BLACKHOLES.

In all honesty, in all my heart's sincerity, no man, woman, or child should ever have to suffer because of the earthling disease of AIDS. I hope they find a cure.

There are numerous differences between the two forms of AIDS.

The most major difference between the organization of AIDS and the

disease of AIDS is that the organization supposedly intends to prevent catastrophes whereas the disease is a catastrophe in and of itself.

BLACKHOLES

One of the causes of BLACKHOLES is PARADOXES!. It is a universal law that whenever a BLACKHOLE is mentioned in any language it must always be emphasized, (This doesn't normally apply to humans as the law only governs an interplanetary koiné or an interplanetary traveler speaking in an aboriginal tongue.) Another universal law is that PARADOXES! demand even more attention than BLACKHOLES, for the sake of addressing cause instead of symptom. PARADOXES! exist when an object or being from the future travels back in time and breaks the L of T&A by successfully altering spatial solidarity.

BLACKHOLES are generally believed to be a universal failsafe mechanism. Instead of the Universe simply vanishing, or rather being afflicted with whatever a PARADOX! may deal out, a hole erupts through which the PARADOXICAL planet or vessel of any kind sinks into a dimension that has already ceased to exist or contains too many left-handers.

Little is known about what would happen to the planet or vessel. It is illegal to report on a past PARADOX'S! happenings. I don't even know how these BLACKHOLES pop up, or more accurately, in. I've already said too much. This is the sort of thing that old men in a corner pub talk about, late at night, on pan-galactic space stations.

More beings have passed through BLACKHOLES than have died smoking cigarettes. It really is that serious.

I know simply that this sort of BLACKHOLE is not the same as a BLACKHOLE created by a high mass star collapsing beyond the capacity for neutron degeneracy pressure to overcome gravity. Basically what happens there is that gravity, which is moving near the speed of light, overcomes the highest density possible of neutrons and continues to collapse indefinitely. I can't make it any simpler than that. Didn't you learn this in kindergarten?

Instead the sort of BLACKHOLE we are actually concerned with is the result of the firing of a weapon developed by the Universal Solitude Army.

The Universal Solitude Army

The Universal Solidarity Army created the failsafe mechanism of BLACKHOLES (supposedly first firing the weapon upon the discovery of a PARADOX WORLD!!) in order to help preserve democracy. The Universal Solidarity Army is one of the richest organizations in the known universe and consists of a coalition of the wealthiest and most willing planets. Any spectators, who raise questions as to why the Universal Solidarity Army should have the largest battle fleet, space fleet, invasion fleet and/or merchant and entertainer fleet while they are starving, generally disappear at light speed.

Sometimes they're just labeled interplanetary terrorists and brought to a prison world. Any claims of offenses under intergalactic regulatory agreements disappear thanks to the Universal Solitude Army's P.R. firm. Since the development of the doomsday weapon no world has willingly gone to war with the Universal Solitude Army.

Although on record the Universal Solitude Army insists that they do not support torture in their current wars (or, rather, 'interplanetary police actions,' torture is probably their primary function).

Insurgents run rampant against the Universal Solitude Army and insist that democracy was never supposed to equate fascism.

In total the Universal Solitude Army controls 52 resource worlds and 3 prison worlds. Most of their resource worlds, which were not acquired through trade, were found shortly after their population left, or assimilated into the Universal Solitude Army, or assimilated into the Universal Solitude Army's willing planets, or disappeared completely.

Large portions of the Universal Solitude Army often would vanish inexplicably before the resource world became vacant and reappeared directly after the resource world was colonized. Later these same tactics emerged in

more distant quadrants of space. Any major planets that found these coincidences fishy would often be the subject of a potential PARADOX! and risk vanishing completely into a BLACKHOLE. Sometimes instead these major planets would become prison worlds for the Universal Solitude Army.

For the most part the Universal Solitude Army was backed by public opinion. The aboriginals who occupied foreign resource worlds were considered primitive by the public and treated with no more respect than your average American would grant a hamburger, an Afghani they encounter at the airport, crude oil, or soft wood lumber.

The Universal Solitude Army further enslaved many worlds and peoples through its controlling shares in Multi-planetary corporations. This trend continues to develop and has caused some critics to remark "Even the Universal Solitude Army doesn't know the scope of companies in its pocket." These critics were impossible to reach for further comment.

Increasingly, as the Universal Solitude Army expanded, it found outright ownership and administration of primitive worlds less cost effective and efficient than simply controlling the planets' inhabitants' behavioral patterns.

They still conducted interstellar highway starship speed checks, vessel checks, weapons check and inebriation checks but found it unnecessary to set up a permanent base on every obscure third universe "jungle sphere." It was much easier to convince the planets' creatures of brand supremacy and to simply buy the pre-existing political power. Instead of sending military powers they sent miners, manufacturers and other resource exploiters. They also conduct random raids with information they buy from local informants.

The new paradigm is that: markets rule the customers, small governments own the markets, large companies own small governments, and a handful of creatures at the top own more than everyone else combined.

None of the planets consumed by the Universal Solitude Army's BLACKHOLES were recognized by AIDS as being afflicted with actual PARADOXES!.

Henry thought about his world.

Henry stared up at the then current American President's grinning head.

He thought about how Western political administrations' puppet media often controlled their populous using a lot of the same propaganda tricks employed by Nazi filmmaker's Josef Goebbels, Leni Riefenstahl and Fritz Hippler. Henry thought about how some of the speeches he saw through News outlets were similar fear mongering rants to Hitler's if you just substituted "terrorists" for "Jews."

Henry thought of how governments would use buzzwords like "terrorism," "terrorist," "democracy" and "government intelligence" in a hypocritical fashion or in bold face lies.

Thomas Jefferson said, "falsehood will travel over the country while truth is putting on its boots."

For the record they never did find WMDs in Iraq.

Henry could not fathom how the American populous would allow it's hatred of Osama Bin Laden to segue a war between two radically different nations because of relative geographical proximity, a similarity in skin tone and the hate slogan "terrorist" touted from an oil tycoon with obvious interests.

Firemen will tell you fighting fire with fire doesn't work.

There are no evil men, only men who commit evils.

"One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."

Henry was Canadian, White and Male so he felt free enough to think that. Henry was also smart enough to realize that generally war and killing will only create more war and killing.

"Oh Canada"

Canada is so cold that in winter your nads attempt to recede back into your body and so boring that comparatively New Jersey is exciting.

Canada is renowned for strong beer, resources, hockey, potent pot, maple syrup, independent films, beavers (shaven and unshaven), comedians, calling something that isn't bacon bacon and always apologizing. In Canada it is legal to marry your first cousin.

Yet, somehow, Canada is still unnervingly boring.

Henry thought, "If Osama had been caught earlier we wouldn't be so afraid of him."

He thought further the fear of Osama would not be so easily exchanged for the fear of Saddam if they could not create the conception of a coalition of Middle Eastern gun swingin' terrorists at large. Confederate flag wavers in turbans. They hid the fact that some of the people with guns were just farmers worried about their land and families. That probably wouldn't poll well.

Atrocities beget atrocities. Death is death: a capitalist democracy is not justified when forced at the end of a bayonet, a land mine, drones, machine guns, pistols, planes, tanks or bombs. That isn't democracy. So Americans have the right to rifles in case the King of England tries to enter their houses but Afghanis and Iraqis don't have the right to defend their land?

He thought "Death may bring freedom, but who are Americans to be the judge, jury and executioner of waning foreign freedoms in an age of the patriot act, racially biased airport searches, spy satellites, secret torture camps, war, an abysmal minimum wage, celebrities who are famous FOR BEING CELEBRITIES and GPS on our cellular phones."

This was even before American airports started taking pictures of peoples' melons and noodles.

War shouldn't exist for any reason let alone luxuries proclaimed necessities. Nobody needs a fifth car. Everyone is justified in defending themselves. Try explaining to a dying child that it was for the greater good. Henry didn't blame the soldiers in the slightest; in fact he thought they were victims also. If there were jobs in construction, and no jobs in killing, these men and women would be building. Even as things stand many soldiers should be commended, as builders first.

Henry was distracted from the comical representation of the President of the United States of America by Jack gulping down her third pint.

Jack was an ultra-lightweight. She only drank heavily when she was unhappy. She only drank heavily around Henry. She only drank heavily around Henry when she wanted to talk about why she was unhappy. She smiled and signaled the closest witch for another pitcher of impossibly cheap ale.

Jack saw that Henry had been staring at the head. She knew how much Henry hated war. Jack knew Henry's dad had stories about war. Jack could feel the pain in the room when the subject of war came up around Henry's family dinner. Jack heard the punch connect from Bret's three-fingered fist to Sam's face when Sam jokingly mentioned that if all else failed he could always join the army.

Jack was unhappy, but so was Henry, and she knew it.

Jack was studying Henry's face.

Henry was determined to get to the end of the road. He could feel Jack's eyes on him.

Jack just wanted to finish what she had started.

"Sorry," apologized Henry out of the blue. He began to seem very upset. His eyes watered and his face became flushed.

"What for?" enquired Jack.

Henry laughed a hysterical laugh and replied, "For getting you killed."

"Henry as far as I'm concerned that hitchhiker was responsible. He was either too drunk or stupid to just walk out of the way of the truck. Natural selection doesn't just apply to beetles in the Galapagos."

Jack wrongly attributed the hitchhiker's reaction to Darwinism instead of to a fear that fate may actually exist.

The pitcher was left in the middle of the table.

Henry poured two pints; one had entirely too much head; he took it for himself. He gave the perfectly poured pint to Jack.

"So how have you been really? I haven't talked to you in nearly a month," said Henry.

"Alright," answered Jack. She sipped her beer.

"Well how's the boyfriend treating you? How's the freedom of getting out of this one horse town?"

Jack took a big gulp from her glass. "Look can we not talk about me?" she requested. She brushed away hair from her eyes. "My life's boring. I wanted to talk about you. How's the truck doing? What are you doing these days? When am I going to get a chance to read these literary masterpieces I keep hearing of?" asked Jack. She took another giant gulp.

Henry's gift wasn't painting or writing.

Henry's talent was daydreaming. Henry's fine motor skills botched the realization of his mind's eye. When Henry received compliments on one of his sketches, or a short story he wrote, he would invariably think them sarcasm.

He meticulously composed pieces and would agonize over minuscule imperfections which plagued his canvases and pages. Everything was just a little different in his head.

Artists and writers are communicators. Henry was still learning how to express himself.

Henry was a visionary. He was a medium who hadn't mastered any medium.

Henry had recently written three short stories.

The first was entitled "The Private I" and the second was tentatively called "The Maniac and His Toaster." The third was "The Lemonade Stand".

"I wouldn't call them masterpieces. Just your—your average run of the mill misunderstood scribbling," stammered Henry.

Jack took a sip from her beer and already it was half empty or half full depending on your point of view.

"Jack are you sure you're alright: I can't remember you ever drinking this much or this fast."

With a slight slur to her speech Jack said, "I'm enjoying myself Henry, shooting back the beers with you here. I'm having some fun. I'm just trying to reminisce about the good ol' times. Now, let's drink to that."

Henry and Jack clinked glasses together. They said, "Cheers." Henry downed his pint. Jack spilled a bit as she downed the rest of hers. They both laughed.

"I apologize, but I'm going to be an ass and have yet another smoke, Jack," said Henry. He grabbed his pack of cigarettes from the table and pulled one out. He lit it.

Jack poured two more pints from the pitcher. The pitcher was then nearly empty. Jack questioned, "And you're worried about me?"

At that time smoking was illegal in bars in Ontario. Inspectors were bribed easily enough in towns that small and only came around rarely. For the most part nobody cared.

Want vs. Need

Need a smoke? Need the list of health problems that come alongside it?

Need something to drink? Not if it's a diet soft drink. That yummy sugar substitute today may mean 5 lbs. off in a month or 5 years off your lifespan.

Need that new SUV? Not if you develop breathing problems thanks to smog.

What you truly need is responsibility. What you really want is to avoid it. You missed the legal print that says your actions have consequences.

You need some sun? Some skin cancer?

New computer? Your old one is better than the mechanized brick at seven-year old Ronald Job's community center in Detroit. That one serves 100. There are fights over who gets to use it. People have died. Ronald Job's dad joked his son was the newest Job in Detroit.

You aren't satisfied? Why should you be?

In America everyone has the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Not happiness itself! The damn fine print is at it again.

Many of you go to work in order to afford to go to work tomorrow. All I can say in condolence to you is that the rich assholes who take for granted all those things they were given in adolescence, that you don't have, will be treated by the carbon cycle as your equal in the end. Animals treated as animals. There's no escape. "Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust."

Wants are temporary while needs are inescapable. You may want to transcend nature, but nature needs you to fail.

Jack rested her head once more against the side of the headrest closest to Henry.

Henry continued to drive.

Jack passionately said, "He's going to come back for us. He's not going to stop. He blames us for the hitchhiker. He doesn't look like heaven's welcoming committee." She looked over at Henry with puppy dog eyes. Jack questioned, "What are we going to do?" She then receded into the fetal position. Jack wished she had worn magical slippers instead of ordinary heels.

"We're not going to hell. Look at me Jack," said Henry.

She did: Jack looked up at Henry. Her bone char black hair covered her eyes. Her 8-bit green mascara bled everywhere. She had been crying once more.

Henry brushed the hair away from Jack's face. He grabbed a bottle of water from the cab behind him and then the box of tissues that was next to it. He moistened the tissue with a bottle of water in one of the cup holders and washed where the mascara had run on Jack's face. Henry couldn't help being rendered mute for a moment, he was defenseless: Henry was captivated in the primal forest of Jack's pained green eyes.

"We're not going to hell. We're not bad people. We'll get through this. I'm not going to let anything more happen to you," said Henry.

Change is unstoppable.

Contrary to all evidence before them Jack could not help but believe him, at least for a while. "I want you to know Henry. You have to know; I love you," confessed Jack.

Jack had finished what she had started. She had deliberately chosen that road to work up some nerve. She hadn't spent four hours getting ready for some party. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her mascara continued to bleed. She hid her face in shame.

Henry was speechless.

Back at the bar heads did spin, stomachs jumped and speeches ran.

The latest pitcher was empty, poured into two fifth-full pint glasses rented by Jack and Henry respectively.

Jack took a sip from her blonde ale. She asked, "Henry when we were kids why did you call me Jack? Why do you still?"

Henry paused. He downed his beer. He said, "I guess, I guess I've always liked having my own name for you. Over the years it's just, Jack, you're Jack, more so than any guy I've ever known, on your merit alone, you're the quintessential Jack."

Jack quoted Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, ""Jack?... No there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed. It produces absolutely no vibrations."" Jack's eyes widened. She squeezed Henry's hand firmly. She said, "It's a guy's name. I mean, I think about it a lot, you'd be surprised. Why not Lynn? Why Jack?"

"Lynn is a weak little girl's name. Jack is a powerful name: Jack and the beanstalk, Jack the Giant Killer, Jack Frost, Jack London, J. F. K., his nickname was Jack," explained Henry. He paused for a second. He finished his thought by admitting, "I guess I've just always seen strength in you. You're not some ordinary girl to me. You're special."

Henry called to the bartender, "Can we get a shot for Jack. You know which one."

Jack's heart throbbed. Kaboom, Kaboom, Kaboom.

PART THREE

“When it rains it pours.”

-Henry’s Father (Paul)

Henry and Jack had many play dates.

At first they were play dates, then they were sleepovers, then when those were awkward they just hung out. Both were always welcome at each other's houses. They were treated as members of each other's family.

One stormy day, when both children were nine, Jack's mom, the one who raised her, took Henry and Jack to downtown Toronto. The kids were, of course, excited.

They always got the tourist view of Toronto when they were younger. It was all Front St. and no Parkdale. This was before it began to gentrify. They had an intimate knowledge of the downtown core but knew nothing of Kensington Market. They had no clue what a Scarborough was.

Barbara, Jack's mom, was looking for something to amuse the children. They had already eaten fast food so a meal was out of the question. The zoos, amusement parks and old Forts were outdoors. There were no baseball or hockey games that day. They were all already bored with the misshaped penis that loomed over the city.

The windshield wipers squeaked repetitively.

Barbara wished the rain would stop.

In case you hadn't guessed, Barbara was the lady who sat near Paul at The Sand Castle worrying about her bank's finances. It was she whom Henry had ran to for help when he found Jack injured.

The kids had gone to the museum and art gallery on field trips recently and had no interest in returning. They were 9.

The rain continued to pour, lightning flashed, and thunder roared. They were getting restless from all the driving around looking for something to do. The first thing they decided on was to pull into the nearest gas station to refuel.

Henry and Jack drew doodles of comic book characters on their fogged up windows, ignorant that Barbara would be cursing the streaks they made later.

Barbara was a small town mom. She was short, a little hefty and dressed in whatever was on sale. She had shoulder length black hair and big framed red bifocals. She topped up her minivan, grabbed a newspaper for hints of what to do, then picked up some potato chips and paid at the counter.

By the time Barbara was back in the minivan she was soaked. She dried her face off with tissues, shed her drenched rain coat and threw the chips at the children in the same fashion a cartoon burglar would throw a steak at guard dogs.

These are the days parents want to fast forward through and grandparents want to rewind to.

As Barbara sifted through the paper it deteriorated to pulp against her damp fingers.

Jack suggested, "Let's go to the mall."

Henry looked disappointed. He asked, "What about a movie?" Of course there was a movie theatre in their town, but there they could only choose between two movies at a time.

Barbara thumbed her way to the entertainment section. All the movies playing were either inappropriate for children or of no interest to those two.

They were driving north on Yonge St. then. They turned left, west, at Bloor and found themselves honked at for making an illegal turn. What Barbara actually screamed was "Fucudge", but that was only because she caught herself. She hated driving in Toronto. The traffic drove her batty.

They debated visiting bookstores, a pool hall (Barbara would have none of this), and the campus of a local university. Then Barbara looked right and all her problems were solved. A beat down repertory theatre was screening an absolute classic.

Henry loved movies. His dad had died a year earlier and he enjoyed escaping into cheerier worlds.

Henry had a complicated past.

Everyone and everything he had ever loved seemed to be taken away from him or crippled. At his gravest moments Henry believed everything was his fault. Henry loved Sam and Sam died. Henry loved his dad and his dad died. Henry loved his mom and she suffered a fate worse than death. Henry's mom was a walking talking pharmaceutical zombie.

The story of Henry's parents was a sad twisted tale. Sam was born to Bret and Lily. Lily was both Sam and Henry's mother. Henry was born to Paul and Lily.

Paul and Bret were childhood best friends ever since Bret moved to Canada from upstate New York. They were as close as brothers. They were nothing alike. Bret was always playing sports while Paul was always nose deep in a book.

Bret fell foolishly in love with Lily in high school. Lily and Bret were always fighting. They had a ton of physical chemistry, but could never agree on politics, religion, or anything else they felt important. Bret believed in God, and Lily believed in Science. Paul barely knew Lily in high school.

A year after they graduated, Bret had trouble finding work and eventually returned to the States with Lily and enlisted in the army. Bret and Lily tried to stay together during his basic training and a short while thereafter, but eventually it became clear that they wanted very different things, and Lily came home to small town Ontario.

Bret, wanting space from Lily, went overseas and eventually fought in Iraq the first time around; then called Operation Desert Storm.

Sam was Bret and Lily's lovechild.

One seemingly ordinary day Bret asked Paul to grab a few of his things

from Lily. Paul went over to Lily's house, about a year into Bret's tour of duty, to find a six month old baby, Sam. Paul was shocked. Lily didn't even recognize Paul at first, let alone why he was hyperventilating. When everything was sorted out Lily explained to Paul that she didn't want the baby to stand in the way of Bret's life. She told Paul that she would tell Bret, eventually, once he had settled and would not feel an obligation towards her. Paul instantly felt an obligation towards her.

Paul was a kind man. He checked up on Sam weekly. He would chat with Lily and over time they formed a friendship. Lily made Paul promise not to tell Bret anything until she felt the time was right. Paul even began to occasionally watch Sam for Lily. He bought necessities, groceries mostly, for both the child and his mother and even helped Lily find a job at the bookstore he managed (he would eventually also own it).

One terrible day Bret disappeared in Iraq. Lily mourned Bret. Paul and Sam seemed to be the only ones who could cheer Lily up.

Five weeks later, when Paul and Lily held no hope that Bret would return home, they sought comfort from their sadness and loneliness with each other and 53 shots of whisky.

They regretted it instantly. Lily was once again pregnant. Within a week Bret had been found, tortured but alive. Bret was of course sent home and given an honorable discharge. He no longer believed in God. Bret felt free and happy that he was not a slave to anyone's master plan.

As soon as Bret was healthy and relaxed they told him everything. They had fallen in love. They wanted his blessing. They were both surprised when he actually gave it to them on the condition that he would be allowed to see his son when he visited.

As he saw it at first, holding no hope for a relationship with Lily on his return, he had simply gained a healthy son, kept a friend that he had thought he had lost, and his best friend had found a fiancée that everyone knew he approved of.

Bret had endured war-torn Iraq; compared to that his ex-girlfriend and his best friend shacking up was, for him then, a non-issue.

When Paul and Lily got married Bret was the best man. There were awkward conversations and looks. Harsh words flew from onlookers who didn't understand the situation. Paul and Bret were forced to break up fights about how they should be fighting.

When Henry was born Lily began to believe in God; she felt blessed to have such a beautiful healthy baby boy. Shifting hormones, probably.

Even though Paul and Bret still seemed to have a very brotherly relationship they now saw each other less often. There would be the odd fishing trip or deep conversation at a social gathering, but long gone were the days when they would be inseparable. Bret lived in New York, which made things easier. At times Bret was jealous of Paul. More often, as the years went by, Bret simply felt very lonely. Bret had other personal tragedies as well, but Henry didn't know the specifics.

Paul and Lily raised the boys without catastrophe until one late July evening when an unknown driver, who was going the wrong way down a one way street, hit Paul's sedan head on and killed Paul. They never caught the driver.

"Sometimes shit just keeps happening."

When Paul died in the car crash, Henry, Sam, Lily and Bret were crushed. Henry and Sam lost a father. Lily had lost a husband. Bret had lost a brother.

From then on Bret would watch both boys instead of just Sam. Bret was, after all, Henry's godfather. Bret liked Henry. Bret even moved to Toronto in order to be closer to the boys.

After over a year had passed since Paul's death, Bret and Lily began to date. In time they were married. They had been married for 12 years when Henry and Jack started down the road. Bret became a father to Henry.

It was only after Sam's death that Lily began taking anti-depressants. It was even later that she agreed that there was probably no God.

"Sometimes shit just keeps happening."

Lily made a speech at Sam's funeral.

This was before she turned to her mother's little helpers. She said, "Goodbye Sam. I'm sure Paul will look after you now. I've loved four men in my life and I've now buried two. It's not fair. It's not fair. Now all your troubles are gone. God take my son and protect him as we couldn't. I will miss you always Sam."

Henry wept during the speech. He was furious at his mother. He shook because Sam wouldn't give her Christian God the satisfaction of his salvation. Sam would have spat in his face or cursed his mother on behalf of little black babies from Africa with potbellies.

Sam had asked his mother once, "If God is omnipotent then why would He make people suffer?"

"Some people suffer for their sins and others are victims of bad luck. This is all part of God's plan for us. God created everything, everyone, and set in motion all that will happen. A person's life is only a gateway. I believe that the innocent go to heaven and that bad people go to hell."

Sam said, "But if God set this in motion and his plan determines what will happen then he makes people suffer and determines which countries should have salvation as different people from different countries have different religions and your church believes only Christians go to heaven. This poor Indian girl from my class is Hindu because her parents are, God must have chosen her to be hell-bound from the start, but she's still really nice to everyone. From that people could determine that God is a racist, only concerned with popularity, and a snob. Is that who you want me to worship?"

Sam was twelve years old. He never went to mass again. As an adult when Henry heard this story he laughed so hard he lost his voice for a full hour. Out of the mouths of babes...

"You look really pretty in your dress," said Henry.

Jack interrupted Henry. She repeated, "You look really pretty in your dress." She shook her head. "Is that it?" she asked.

Henry started to drive. "I can see an intersection up ahead," he announced.

The crossroads were empty, dirty and old. All roads appeared identical except that the left and right ones had been paved more recently.

Henry looked over at Jack. He then looked over at the intersection and stopped at the side of it. "This isn't the time," said Henry with a manner of fact air.

Jack warned, "There isn't going to be another time."

There is always another time; getting there is the challenge.

Henry asked, "Why does it have to be when the world is going to end?"

Jack thought for a second. Jack wondered, "When will it be the time?"

When

In all likelihood it will happen or has happened. Time and possibilities, as we've discovered, are endless. Your mind is landscape somewhere. Even allowing yourself to contemplate possibilities means, at the very least, they made a TV movie about it at some time, in some place.

When contemplating a when question ponder if what you really want to know is where something has happened, is happening, or will happen and how you can get there the easiest.

If you are wondering the specifics of a sure event then a when question may have merit but this supposes the question has a qualified asker and answerer. I would not consider the average earthling to be qualified of much and nothing is ever certain except change.

When proper answers to properly asked questions on Earth are received I attribute it to pure dumb luck.

Think about if you should be asking "When should..." or "When would..." as opposed to "When..." when you normally would be asking a when question.

Earthlings should avoid when questions.

As the doors swung open they were greeted with the smell of buttery popcorn.

Movie theatres are modern day temples.

Concession stands' cash registers are collection plates. Popcorn and soda pop are your bread and wine. Your sacrament has been reduced to salt and sugar. In America your sacrament is various forms of corn.

It's easier to believe in what you can see.

Actors are devils and angels for rent. Directors are shamans or priests for a few hours. What people want is a happy ending, not the rapture. For them, Hollywood is God.

Audiences only want apocalypses so they can be delivered from them. They don't want to earn anything.

They don't want a preachy messiah. They want a kickass action hero. Pacifism has never screened well.

All anyone needs is a good story.

Incense was the original special effects.

Theater speakers are the new organs.

The taking and tearing of tickets symbolizes the breaking of bread.

Jesus Christ has been replaced by sexy A-list celebrities.

Barbara's hands were full carrying various munchies and sodas. The kids, naturally, wanted to sit in the balcony seats. By the time they actually got to the seats half the popcorn was gone.

Seated behind them were a group of teenagers that smelled peculiarly. They were dressed in various black logo shirts for rock bands, ripped light blue jeans and canvas shoes. They laughed incessantly. Their eyes looked dry and red. To Henry and Jack they seemed really weird, obnoxious and lame.

They were the first stoners they would ever see. Barbara couldn't quite place the smell.

When the curtain had risen the movie began. Henry and Jack stared at the screen transfixed to the images—of a copyrighted film, which will remain nameless.

The novel's in the public domain, which is good enough, right?

Jack said, "Oh."

Henry quickly pulled a cigarette from his pack and lit it. He took a puff. He felt relaxed. Henry said, "I think I should probably shut up before I say something I shouldn't."

Jack took a sip of beer and admitted, "I miss this place, the town, the comfort; I miss you."

"This town is a turd receptacle; this place is literally called 'The Shithole.' Just think: all those years you wanted to get out and here you are just a visitor. You finally fucked off and the whole town is worse off for it," said Henry. Henry took another puff from his cigarette. He felt happy.

"So am I," observed Jack.

Henry coughed suddenly. "What do you mean?" questioned Henry. "You're free; you have a hundred bars to choose from. You have variety and choice. You have your boyfriend, Rick, who's a fucking fire fighter. What do you mean?" he asked. He took another puff from his burning cancer stick. The craving subsided.

"He's a prick: Rick's a prick," Jack rhymed quietly and ashamedly.

Henry stubbed out his cigarette. "What?" Henry questioned.

Jack's mood shifted to bare melancholy. Jack whispered, "He, um, he works late every night." She burped.

Henry responded, "Well he is a firefighter."

Rick was actually not a firefighter then, he had been fired. Jack had found this out months earlier after she had called Rick's old station and was informed that Rick wasn't there and was not welcome to return. Jack didn't

know where Rick spent most of the time. She couldn't tell Henry any of this: she was too worried he would think her a fool for staying as long as she had.

"When he comes home he never smells like burning timber or insolation, he smells like beer, cigars and... women. He used to buy me flowers every week. He used to come home smelling like daffodils," whispered a trembling Jack. She lowered her head in shame. Daffodils were Jack's favorite.

"Jack, I'm so sorry," said Henry.

Henry took Jack's hand again. It was clammy.

Jack raised her head. She smiled dimly. She sobbed, "I want to come home Henry. My diploma's done. I want to come home. I can't stand it anymore. I hate him now. I hate him so much. I'm so stupid"

"Then you should come home: he isn't worth it. You deserve better Jack," pleaded Henry.

The door swung open and into the bar wobbly waddled Rick. He was an oaf of a man. He was tall and wide and pure muscle. He had the appearance of ignorance and self-confidence; at least that was what the backwards baseball cap suggested. He looked like a poor life decision.

Henry and Jack let go before Rick spotted them, even though both were unsure what the hand-holding meant.

Rick was obviously and unnervingly drunk. The left pocket of his navy blue jacket held a stainless steel flask. He smelled of debauchery.

Henry waved at Rick, who in turn clumsily made his way towards them.

Jack muttered, "Speak of the devil."

One of the whiz-kid witches, an ex-fling of Henry's, looked at Rick and then Henry. The waitress's name was Brittany. She was chewing bubble gum. She was young and generically pretty. She had pink hair and wore tight black jeans and a black t-shirt that read "Hot Bitch" in hot pink. Her lips and nails were hot pink as well. Her lower back was tattooed unoriginally: she wore a

“tramp stamp”. It was the sort of tattoo that marked easy women. She also looked like a poor life decision. She looked over at Jack.

Jack was wearing a purple hoodie; she had a black and yellow horizontally striped polo tee under it. Jack wore black yoga pants. Jack was a mess; her hair was uncharacteristically disheveled.

Brittany grinned, “I enjoyed having you.” Brittany handed the bill over to Henry. She shot an exaggerated wink at Henry and walked away. On the bill, alongside the price of their meal, was a hot pink lipstick print and the words “call me” in hot pink also.

Jack said, “Small town whore.” It wasn’t clear to Henry whether Jack was referring to Brittany or him. Brittany either didn’t hear, or pretended not to. She just walked back to the bar, while blowing a bubble. It, of course, was hot pink in colour.

Rick approached them. Henry asked Jack if she wanted him to go and she shook her head vigorously. Under her breath she said to Henry, “I want him to.”

Henry walked home.

The scene unfolded on a brisk autumn afternoon as Henry walked home from school leisurely listening to something angsty when CD players still existed. Henry was 18 then, was a tad skinnier and had long straight hair underneath a black wool tuque.

Henry walked past a park, a bank, a convenience store and the pizzeria. He then walked past the only video store, another bank, a big chain yuppie clothing store, a grocery store, a third bank, the grade school, an ice cream parlor, a second convenience store, and a different branch of the first bank all before crossing the main street which separated the residential area from the “downtown” area.

We were back in The Shithole when Rick first drunkenly spoke.

"Hey," said Rick.

"Hello," said Jack.

Henry downed the rest of his beer and said, "Hi."

"Your mom said I could find you here."

"I didn't want to be found. I thought I made that clear."

"Look, am I missing something? You're mad. I get it. Let's talk about it. I don't need shit."

Henry thought, "Rick should get out of The Shithole."

Jack turned away from Rick and pointed out, "There's nothing to talk about; at least not now." Her face became flush.

"Hank, can you give us some privacy?"

Jack, with her back still turned to Rick, scolded, "You can call him Henry."

Rick looked at Henry and asked, "Whatever, buddy, can you give us some privacy? I need a minute to talk to my girlfriend." Rick grabbed his flask and gulped down some whisky. That's what his breath suggested it was, anyway.

For Rick this was attempting to be civil.

Henry poured himself another beer from the last pitcher. It was then empty. He felt remarkably uncomfortable, but wouldn't dare show it.

Henry always tried to be a perfect gentleman; what that meant to him anyway.

Henry demanded little of his friends but was reliable to them. He stood up for the meek, unless the meek were just asking for it. He was generally smart, generous and kind. He had a refined appreciation for sarcasm and wit,

but could never get the timing right in a joke. His temper was reserved for the deserved (mostly). He was peaceful. He was strong.

The flaws I found in Henry's character were far from benign. He belittled himself. Inexplicably he lacked confidence. He dwelled on the sad and the bad. He was a worrier. He was an underachiever.

Sometimes he was a bit of a boy scout. Other times he was a slacker or rebellious. It was hard to peg him, with so many conflicting traits. He was a confused person.

Henry also kept his best thoughts trapped in his mind, sheltering them from the outside world's criticism and his inarticulate speech.

Like millions of other North Americans Henry drove a vehicle that consumed an unnecessary amount of fossil fuel. They were all slowly smoking your world. Nicotine and gasoline are two drugs which elicit cravings that never fully go away. Henry was addicted to both. Henry obviously had his reasons for wanting to keep the truck.

When I first came to Earth, owing to human simpletons, I sometimes hoped millions of years from then you would all be ironically consumed in internal combustion engines, by the hyper intelligent dinosaurs you will no doubt engineer.

Gas

Solar power exists. So does wind power. Hydroelectric power is not a pipe dream. Nuclear power could even be clean if it was processed correctly. Why are your cars driving on bone juice?

Why are other vehicles powered by corn, which requires more energy to grow than it produces and still results in the emission of greenhouse gases? Even switch-grass yields more energy than corn. So does hemp.

I'm not going to get into climate change. It's beneath me, tee hee. I will simply tell you it does in fact exist and that if you don't believe me watch

more documentaries, look at photos of the diminishing Arctic, pay attention to the increased regularity of natural disasters, look into increased skin cancer rates and pick up a grade school science textbook that explains both the carbon cycle and the flow of tides. Also, you should probably consider changing news channels.

Henry's greatest flaw

Henry's greatest flaw was an unshakable faith in the potential for man's triumph despite overwhelming evidence suggesting that man inevitably corrupts.

Then again, it took me 1,000 Earth years to emerge from the cocoon of my gestation into the breeding pools of my sort of childhood. The cocoon was only the size of a walnut and Henry was only 23 years old.

Everything is relative, but Jack knew even then that Rick was incomparable to Henry.

I must admit that I was proud I chose them.

Well I thought they would do anyway.

They arrived at the crossroads.

Henry and Jack exited the truck eagerly. They leaned against the truck's side. A creepy intersection is at least stationary. The lack of momentum, and claustrophobia overcome, combined to do wonders for the morose travellers. They had some levity. The illumination in the distance began to triumph over the moon. Shadows haphazardly overlapped each other silhouetting every move the pair made from different angles. The sheer beauty of rural southern Ontario captivated Jack. She lamented the scenery. The maple trees, with hues of red, orange, yellow, and green, were worthy of gift shop postcard photos. Jack's vision made her feel at home. Her other senses betrayed her.

Jack missed the sounds of nature. Jack missed the wind. Jack even

missed the foul smells of civilization. The odd streetlight here or there would have been all she needed to calm her unsteady nerves.

She wasn't nearly home. She wasn't breathing fresh air. The air was stale, stagnant and neither cool nor warm. Eventually she felt even more trapped than she had in the truck. She felt hermetically sealed. In the truck she could pretend this wasn't happening. She could pretend that she had fallen asleep and had dreamt all her night's peculiarities. Jack began pacing back and forth. She became desperate.

Jack said, "It's the exact same fucking intersection." Jack began clumsily walking towards the newly paved roads.

"Where are you going?" Henry asked.

"Off this road. Right now I didn't need to remember the bar," said Jack. She quickened her pace, trembled with anxiety and occasionally stumbled in her heels. A second later she turned sharply and asked, "How are we both remembering everything?"

"They say your life flashes before you when you die. It's literally an out of body experience: like a movie with smells and sensations, but it all plays out, the only thoughts are my own," Henry answered.

Jack turned away spitefully, unamused with Henry's fruitless realization. "No shit stupid head. I'm not retarded. I meant, why are we remembering each other's memories?"

Henry didn't like the 'R' word, but decided to let it slide. "We died together," he replied.

"Uh huh,"

The problem with communication is the better it is the more patronizing it seems. When you explain notions simply you have the potential to offend like an instruction manual for a toaster.

"Where are you going?"

Jack continued to walk awkwardly down the road and shortly disappeared. She seemed to literally blink out of existence. "Poof!"

"Jesus Christ!" Henry exclaimed.

Jesus Christ was another notable escape artist.

Jesus Christ

I had met many creatures who claimed themselves to be gods and even more who were proclaimed gods. In the end all such “gods” haven’t measured up to a God. I think it’s safe to assume that Jesus (if he existed) just wanted everyone to be nice to each other. I also think that it’s fair to say that if he were corporeal today he would be disgusted with the religious plutocracy associated with his name. Remember Jesus preaching against corrupt temples (Matthew 21:12, Mark 11:15-16, Luke 19:45).

Remember the story of the beggar and her coins (Luke 21:1-4): God cares not for money. Religious bureaucracy led as far as the selling of salvation. People were told they could buy their way out of purgatory early, one coin at a time. Judas betrayed Christ over coins (Matthew 26:15).

Remember the story of the golden calf (Exodus 32:1-34:17): God cares not for idolatry. The second commandment, or third if you’re catholic, reads, “You should have no other gods before me.” So... why does the pope speak ex cathedra?

A crucifix in wood should be worth one in gold as far as Jesus would be concerned, right? For Christ’s sake, the dude was a carpenter. Why (and I know this maybe a fruitless why if your mind is already made up) does abundant wealth matter to churches?

But you don’t have to take my word that churches are defunct.

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you,” Matthew 6:5-6.

Jesus Christ said that... oh snap!

Why would someone fight for his or her religion?

Religious wars result in catastrophe. Holy wars are not God's pissing contests but completely mortal men conning their populace into indentured servitude. Remember Israel and Palestine... always, always with the bombs.

Both on Earth, and where I'm from, there seems to be a misunderstanding that one should fight for his or her beliefs, when the great thing about beliefs is that they are free to all of us whether someone else controls the bigger gun or not.

Beliefs are not something that you should feel obligated to fight for. Believe what you want to believe. Let others believe what they want to believe. Do not allow others to manipulate your beliefs. Unless you're the son of God don't preach. On Earth, thought is free. You lucky devils.

In the bible Jesus died for non-violence, love and brotherhood. That should be remembered. Henry was an atheist, but he believed in those things.

A thick fog rolled in from both sides of the truck.

The mist was opaque.

Henry was in shock. If you had asked Henry his name he would have been at a loss for words. He just kept staring at the spot where Jack disappeared dumbfounded. Henry's eyes watered. At the top of his lungs Henry screamed, "Jack, come back Jack."

Henry's head began to throb.

Chewchewchew... it felt like jackhammers had mistaken his cranium for reinforced concrete. Henry mumbled, "My head is..."

All of a sudden Henry was somewhere else.

It was nearly pitch black. His head no longer hurt. He felt paralyzed. He was so hot he felt like he was boiling alive. The only objects he could make out appeared to be various forms of computer screens, which displayed only a different shade of black.

Some form of music was playing faintly in the background. Henry quickly recognized it as Beethoven's 5th symphony. A nearly invisible figure that looked like it had on night vision goggles began to walk towards him from a distance.

The shades of darkness betrayed that the figure was roughly seven feet tall and that the little light produced by its night vision goggles was the area's only source of ambient light.

It was only when the figure was within arm's reach that Henry discovered the goggles were his eyes and that the figure's body was completely red including its tail.

The eyes of the figure looked to Henry like they were fire trapped in a skull.

Henry suspected the figure was the devil and that he was in hell. He was terrified.

If you thought I was God, you were wrong.
I was the figure.

You Are All Animals

That's why you search for God: you'd prefer to live in denial. You don't want to be the products of hydrogen, helium and traces of lithium. You want to be a star, not stardust. Or rather, you want to watch stars, and dream yourself amongst them, while growing older, fatter, and more complacent concerning your place in the world.

Why do you waste your free will? You will die even if you never really lived. You will die whether you like it or not.

Does this really trivialize anything? I once believed in God. I still believe there's a miniscule chance of one (or more). I'm, in part, a scientist. Throw me a falsifiable hypothesis about it that doesn't involve me dying and I will test the hell out of it.

Have you heard the one about the old man who wanted to know God's thoughts? He figured out mass can be turned to energy and vice versa. The joke is that he's dead and going to return to the sun soon enough, where he'll prove his theory right.

How doesn't this trivialize everything? Simple. Humans are highly advanced by one criterion. You belong to the relatively small percentage of the universe's animal population that can both realize it's an animal and shape its environment for the better. Good job so far. But hey, enjoy your planet while it lasts.

If you doubt me pay close attention to other primates. Go to the zoo then look at your cubicle or apartment with eyes anew. You, too, have just been flinging your shit around everywhere.

Even if you believe in an infallible God do you honestly believe that man has relayed, or even could relay, that God's story? Have you ever played broken telephone? I sound like a depressing cynical bugger, don't I?

What do I believe in, if it's so simple? Change and desire, process and purpose; I believe in the action/reaction chain. I believe in function.

I, like you, Jack, and Henry also worry.

I worry that my consciousness and the consciousnesses of those I love and have loved are make believe. I fear the reaper. I fear the dry cold dirt and time as much as Nahoto ever did.

But I will face my fear for hope. It's times like these I envy the dolphins.

Dolphins

Dolphins are nearly as smart as you in some ways. In others they are vastly superior. For one, they're adorable even after adolescence. You humans think you're the most advanced species on the planet, and dolphins are stupid animals, because of your tools, your science and because they eagerly jump through hoops for you. You invented the internet, the almighty cellular phone, indoor plumbing, and the printing press and they get trapped in tuna nets.

But... you also brought Earth daytime television, gas fueled automobiles, plastic, cigarettes, and microwave ovens. You are responsible for the continent of garbage in the Pacific Ocean, climate change, deforestation, a colossal drop in your planet's biodiversity, genocide, nukes, poverty, fast food culture, social media, war, GMOs, bureaucracy, hypocrisy, plutocracy, and the fucking tuna nets.

Thanks to you, dolphins may enjoy a premature extinction. Maybe dolphins just realized that a life that is solitary, dull, brutish and short is better than one driven by consumption. Consumption kills, you know?

Maybe you'll figure it out by the time that you get to your second world, just like the dolphins did. You know that stupid grin on their faces: that's you, when you glimpse a newborn.

Henry was walking again, 18 again.

The walk was short and simple but trying on the soul, as his senses had suffered an onslaught of advertisement smut.

The worst of it was that the town was considered pure wilderness by city dwellers. That was actually nowhere near the worst of it, but Henry didn't know that then.

Henry walked down Vista avenue, covered with its trees, its condos, its townhouses, its manors, its mansions, and its mildew infested hovels belonging to holdouts from before the real estate boom happened. Henry then hit River Cliff Avenue; which appropriately ran along the river and housed the eldest and grandest of the town's estates.

The wind near the water didn't bite you: it chewed you thoroughly and spit your chattering bones back into being. Frostbite was a serious concern during never ending winters.

Henry walked past Paul's old bookstore, "Pocket Universes." It was then run by Henry's uncle, Tom, but still owned by Lily and promised by both to Henry. It was here that Henry received his informal education from Tom, a former professor who was disgraced due to his fondness for sorority girls.

Henry walked up to a large white colonial home with black trim, a red door and a beautifully manicured garden.

A green thumb ran in Henry's family.

Henry was instantly back standing on the road.

"Henry," said Jack. She had reappeared on the road across from where she had vanished. To her she had never left the road and merely walked amidst the mist for a bit.

"Jack," said Henry. He turned around to see her. "Jack, it's ok, everything will be fine," added Henry.

Jack punched Henry in the gut as hard as she could, which wasn't very hard. She couldn't tolerate Henry's paternal tone. Jack was pissed. She stormed, "I'm not fucking fine, I'm dead, you're dead. Things are not fucking fine. Things are not rosy. Don't you get it? This isn't a rural road. The goddam Grim Reaper is chasing us. We weren't saints, and I, I just told you I love you and you brushed me off like it didn't even matter, and it hurt." Jack demanded, "Why aren't you panicking? Why aren't you scared?"

"I am scared! Is that what you want to hear? I think I just had a vision of the devil heading towards me. I am scared. I'm just trying to help, by lying to you, because I care about you," spoke Henry sternly.

Henry knew why he remembered walking home after school.

Jack complained, "Fuck, Rick, he's my best friend. You can't talk like that."

"Oh I can't now?" Rick asked sarcastically.

"Rick, we'll talk later. Henry and I are catching up."

Henry just sat there pretending to mind his own business. His phone was out.

Rick said, "Dude, get the fuck away from my girlfriend for a minute, we have couple stuff to talk about" to Henry.

Jack turned around sharply. She said, "That's it, that's it, it's over. I'm not your fucking girlfriend, there's no couple, to have stuff to talk about."

Rick, belligerent and drunk, questioned, "You're drunk aren't you?"

Henry shook his head and grabbed another cigarette, flicked his lighter and entered flavour country. "Rick you should go. You should sober up and call her tomorrow. I'll make sure she gets home to her mom all right," advised Henry. Henry had never seen Rick like this: he was friendly when they met and thereafter. Henry wanted to at least give Rick a chance to cut his losses.

Rick arrogantly responded, "You fucking faggot, get away from my girlfriend. I see the way you two look at each other, you think I'm leaving her here with you, you little bitch?"

Henry took a puff from his cigarette. He snidely said, "Rick, it isn't your choice, she isn't your property." He was secretly starting to enjoy how much his simple presence there was aggravating the situation. Henry hated Rick worse than taxes. Schadenfreude is a normal human response when dealing with villains: the Germans just had the gall to coin the term.

"The hell she isn't my property," shouted Rick. The whole bar heard him. It went quiet. The Wiz was casting dagger eyes at Rick. He was just waiting for the right moment.

"Rick, get the fuck out of here, and if I ever hear that you harmed one fucking hair on this sweet girl's head I swear to God you're going to find out first hand why dog's yelp when they're castrated." Henry took another puff and then calmly put out the smoke.

They don't yelp, if they're put under first, but that's not the kind of statement one instantly wants to challenge.

Jack was paralyzed in disbelief.

"I'm not afraid of you," Rick said mocking Henry's size.

Henry grabbed the drunken Rick; he pushed him to the front and shoved him outside. It happened very fast. Nobody expected it, least of all Rick. Henry said during this, "While right now you fucking should be. I'll fucking kill you if you hurt her." As he walked back alongside the bar Jack couldn't help but ogle him.

From outside the Shithole you could hear Rick yelp, "You fucking faggot."

The Wiz, with a big goofy grin on his face, and a nod to Henry, turned the music on to drown out the background noise. As Henry reached the table Jack had her face hidden in shame.

"Sorry about that," said Henry.

"I'm so fucking embarrassed," said Jack, trying to hide her smile.

"You saw the devil?" questioned Jack.

"I think it was the devil. I saw a creature that was tall, all red, had a tail, and two eyes of fire," answered Henry.

"Sounds like the devil, minus the pitchfork" said Jack. "I was only gone for a second."

Henry suggested, "Let's just get in the truck before that disappears too." Henry wondered, "Where the hell are we?"

Where?

Don't ask, "Where is?" or "Where are?" Ask instead, "Where is the closest?" The universe is so colossally huge that a "Where is" question will just waste everyone's time. Plus, in most instances the end of your question should be, "in relation to my geographical position on this planet at this time."

Don't ask, "Where are we?" Ask instead, "Where are we in relation to the closest instance of where we want to be."

This should be common knowledge for any four-dimensionally bound creature.

The door to the pub swung open and out waddled Henry and Jack.

Henry instantly indulged his urge for nicotine and Jack sparked a fatty. To say that Henry and Jack were drunk would be an understatement. Henry and Jack were the only passengers in a fully automatic two-seated transcontinental jumbo jet heading to Bonkersville and they were climbing in altitude with every puff and second. Henry and Jack were flying monkeys. The two were passing the “J” as frequently as an STD passed through a catholic school, which is to say, very often.

Neither Henry nor Jack paid for their pot.

Back then Henry got his free from Sam and Jack was given a plant of northern lights from Sam as a prize for drinking her age in blue raspberry vodka jelly shots on her eighteenth birthday. Sam was always very generous to those he cared about: he tried to be selfless.

Sam was also attached to those gifts from others that obviously displayed great thought and care. After Anne died Sam’s mouth seemed super glued to the old smiley face bong she gave him on their one-year anniversary.

Before Anne died Sam only smoked weed occasionally on weekends to relax. He never used to sell pot, either. He was opposed to what it did to friendships. After Anne died Sam dropped out of school, increased his personal garden and became the town’s biggest dealer. Sam very quickly went from a B student to a degenerate. He just gave up and gave in to the numbness.

Before Sam died he was considered a twenty-three year old burnout by most. His eyes were always beet red. His mind had turned to a pea soup like mush and he liked it that way; but eventually even stuffing himself with pot wouldn’t make the pain go away. Sam had the potential to be a botanist or at minimum a mechanic but in the end he was labelled a chicken.

Henry was walking Jack home so she wouldn't pass out in the snow and die.

The two intoxicated friends were almost at Jack's mom's house. They walked using hand crank flashlights along a dirt and gravel road blanketed by half a foot of fluffy snow. Wire fences alone indicated the property lines of the surrounding farms. Sporadic streetlights shined and lit part of the road white. Only tire tracks betrayed that there was a road there at all.

"Thank you," said Jack.

Henry shrugged and said, "What are friends for?"

"I just feel so lost."

"I do too; I think everyone does."

"Tell me one of your stories."

"I actually have one of them on me. How lame is that. I feel like such a knob. I brought it because I wanted you to read it. I hope it makes you feel cheerier, sunshine."

Henry grabbed a small notebook from the right leg pocket of his black wool winter jacket.

"It's about the most bad-ass little kid ever."

The Lemonade Stand

The first thing I remember is right before the crash. Levity.

Suzie is playing with a doll, brushing its long blonde hair. The face of the doll looks like the product of Fluoxetine, as if she's the catalogue wife posing for her man's appreciation, or as if she's a 21st century bimbo just waiting for her likeness to be captured, altered and finally made into her new profile pic. She's plastic fantastic.

I remember my sister was joyous too, but her face in the memory is plagiarized from a photo I've kept from better days. I see the smile frozen in time.

My mom's driving, sitting in front of Suzie. She's got her straight strawberry blonde hair back in a bun. She wears fire engine red lipstick. Her just bought blue polka-dot summer dress matches her eyes. This is the only solid memory I have of her. There are bits and pieces of nursery rhymes, a warm feeling of being hugged long ago, and her soothing smell. All are waves worn to a tiny ripple.

I miss them, I hate that they left without me.

My father pulled me from the wreck. He was that hero and that unwitting villain in disguise.

Before the accident he was troubled. I remember, but I don't know why. Could have been financial problems, infidelity, the conflict in the Middle East, or that he had to get the hell out of Dodge for all I know. I'll probably never know. But it's as if written on his face, plain as day was, "Son, don't be happy, there's always more to come."

The picture I've seen of him and the memory I have don't coincide. Memory builds fantasy out of the past.

I swear, when I think about it or during the nightmare, I have visions of him ripping the door right out of its hinges as if he couldn't even be bothered to try the handle. Not a scratch on him, his muscles pulsating, as he effortlessly lifts me to the sidewalk in one hand. Then, and this is like yesterday for me, he runs after the fucking car, as fast as lightning made flesh.

There was nothing he could have done for the others.

What I was told was that he was severely lacerated when the windshield shattered and that he died in a pool of his blood shortly after the ambulance arrived. He did save me. He was a hero. His name was Vincent. His friends called him "Vin." Me and Suzie called him Pop.

Apparently he worked in an office shuffling papers from 9 – 5 for an auto insurance company. That is, until a month before that dreadful drive. I don't remember this, it's all just second hand information. This wasn't just ironic, it was a textbook example of bad timing: we were no longer covered by the corporate plan. It seemed contrived even to me, like God was laughing somewhere.

If he hadn't saved me I would have died when the car erupted in flames. Explosions just happen on cellulite. He popped me out just in the nick of time.

Sixteen years later and I still don't know if he did me a favor. I'm not sure if I owe my gifts to him, or the crash, or to God, or the radiation from TV dinners. A scientist would attribute me to evolution in motion. Maybe I'm just another comic book writer's attempt at distracting teenage boys from masturbation.

Maybe it is just skill, but my modesty tells me otherwise. Nobody's this ninja due to blind happenstance. It's corny but I feel I have a purpose waiting for me. Call it destiny, or call it a niche, but I think I'm needed.

Why me? Why these gifts?

After the crash I went from being briefly under the care of Uncle James, who was nearly a kid himself at 22, through a string of foster homes.

Uncle James just couldn't afford to provide for me, he was nearly bankrupt due to his student loan payments, and having a kid isn't exactly cheap. I think he was actually trying to be selfless by putting me up for adoption. Sadly, I think he had comfy dreams that he assumed were reality, where the government would whisk me away to a loving, eager, wealthy household with little Scotty dogs, stainless steel appliances, ethnically diverse siblings and wood burning fireplaces waiting for me. He must have thought Sundays would be family fun days. It was a common delusion of foster homes shared by people with faith in the world.

The only thing I'm thankful for, during my travels from crack house to shantytown, is that I was never sexually abused. I've avoided hypnotherapy just in case. As is, I remember, as if it was happening now, getting teeth smacked out of me, cigarettes put out on my arms, and this one wiry old prick chuckling as he hit me with his mahogany cane until I was black and blue. Fucker wondered why his own kids never called. Can you believe that?

I went through seven families in three years and not one of them was responsible enough to watch a boiling pot let alone children. I'll spare you most of the nitty gritty. Wouldn't wish that experience on my worst enemy.

By the time I arrived at Mr. Stain's place I was malnourished, developmentally stunted and filthy. I looked like one of those Bosnian kids from the news at the time. I thought I was defective. I thought it was my fault.

To this day I feel indebted to Mr. Stain for feeding me regularly, talking to me at all, allowing me cheap clean clothes and a daily shower. I have to reason with myself to stop my natural inclination to feel sorry about the way things went down.

I know the guilt is unwarranted, but I can't help thinking that a couple hundred years ago what he gave me would have been considered good Christian charity and I would be understood to have spat in his face.

Although... hell, there were days I would have preferred a cane, or even a bullet to the brain, to the things he said to me. The things he said about my mom and dad...

How horrible is that? The man was an asshole to me, I suffered the worst verbal and emotional torment I've ever even HEARD OF, but because in some small way he provided for my necessities I felt indebted. I hate it when people pretend they aren't still animals. I was a stray mutt taken in and broken dogs hardly ever even nip the hands that feed.

As a kid I didn't realize that the Canadian government was actually paying these deadbeats for my constant care. I'd demand a refund on behalf of taxpayers everywhere for their negligence 'cept Mr. Stain's in the middle of paying their debts to society, with interest, presently.

Word of warning, be nice to children, they get older and you never know...

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger and I'm a 'roid raging linebacker named Hercules. Figuratively, of course.

I guess in a way he WAS a kind of guardian for me. He made me know the kind of man I'd want to be: his exact opposite. He challenged me. He was strict and cruelly demanding. Because of that ignorant, redneck, bemuddled metal-head I would become me. I was enlightened, transformed and reborn like the phoenix from the ashes. In a strange way I am what he made me. I am my foster father's son.

I sometimes fear he made me special.

As you might have guessed, my emancipation was due to a lemonade stand. The story itself started on my seventh birthday, with a standardized letter's completion of an awkward journey from a post office to our particular red rusted metal mailbox at lot 3 on Rural Road 14. The letter was long overdue.

12 months after my adoption, a milestone I had never achieved before, the letter was automatically issued from Children's Services detailing that if I was to remain Mr. Stain's ward I would need to be enrolled in formal

schooling immediately. One could make an application for permission to home school, but that deadline had come and gone thanks to the letter's tardiness. I guess you could say bureaucracy saved the day.

It was the only birthday present I would get that year. I've never received a better gift.

So I went to school and learned to read and write. They dropped me in to grade 3 and expected me to sink or swim. I started off dead last in the class and a few heats, or rather months later finally joined the pack. By winter break I was doing multiplication and long division. I owe it all to Ms. Lowry. If she hadn't spent the extra time tutoring me during lunch breaks, if she hadn't bothered explaining things that I should have learned years earlier, my formal education could have been just a path to a drive-thru window.

I'm no academic, but I did finish High school with A's and B's. I've also found what I learned in Art School invaluable. Not invaluable enough to list it on my resume instead of a non-existent MBA from one of the country's most respected universities though.

I went to school by day and by night I would do errands, tend both crops, do chores and cook supper. On weekends I was expected to mow the half-acre large lawn as well. I was a cheap farmhand for Mr. Stain. I was his solution to slavery being outlawed. I learned to love the harsh winter, even with all its setbacks, because it offered a short reprieve from backbreaking labor.

I never did get any Valentines that first year 'cept the one from Ms. Lowry. She told me she was proud of me. When parent teacher night came she was eager to see the man that had adopted me and seen me through so much change. Too bad we never showed. I don't think they ever had a conversation that was more than a few sentences while he was picking me up.

Not once did we stop at the ice cream parlor on the way to the farm. The bastard spent most of his time on the porch drinking a beer, smoking a cigarette or a joint and reading the paper, so I don't know what he was so eager to get back to. He was never a dad to me. I was just the help.

I was the best behaved child on the face of the earth. I never acted up irrationally, I didn't cuss back then and I always asked permission for whatever it was I was supposed to ask permission for. I didn't whine, I didn't hold grudges and I did as I was told. I was told by adults that I seemed very mature for my age. Granted, most of those adults were Mr. Stain's stoner friends.

I also always went to bed on time. I never once asked to stay up. When I got to bed I hardly ever slept right away. I would lie awake thinking about school. I was starting to make friends. I loved to learn everything and be treated like a normal kid even though I didn't really fit in. I was socially awkward back then if you can believe it.

I also avoided sleep in case I had the nightmare.

One day, when summer was approaching, Ms. Lowry took me aside and congratulated me on the progress I had made in her class. She said, "You've come a long way in a short time," and I said, "I wish the school year would never end." That's when it came out. Ms. Lowry told me that Mr. Stain had made an application to home school me the next year. I had what little I had threatened.

I fought back, "Mr. Stain treats me like garbage, he makes me do all the work on the farm, he hates me and he yells at me all the time." At this point I was sobbing like a sprinkler. I cried, "He won't teach me nothing."

When Mr. Stain picked me up Ms. Lowry recounted what I had said in a raging fury. Mr. Stain laughed. He said, "Pfft. Kids. A few chores and some positive re-enforcement and you'd swear they were trapped in an iron maiden. I'll teach him... (he cleared his throat) I have a huge book collection."

That was all it took. My word against his and I couldn't say anything while he was actually there. I was too afraid of him. I knew what "upset" foster parents were capable of. The scars were a constant reminder.

When we got back to the farmhouse he told me that if I tried a stunt like that again he wouldn't be so nice. He was nice enough to withhold food for a

full day and take away the teddy bear that my mom gave me. It was all I had left from them, aside from a few pictures I hid away. I cried myself to sleep.

He never gave it back to me. It was soft and brown. It had black button eyes and a velvet black nose. It wore a mostly red plaid shirt that concealed a zipper that lead to its stuffing.

Ms. Lowry wasn't as nice to me as she was before either. She stopped tutoring me at lunch. She looked at me as if I betrayed her when it was more the other way around. Still school was my favorite place to be. Playing with blocks amongst friends in Room 42 was the closest I'd gotten to happiness since the crash. Still is, I guess.

Then the summer came and I was busy with farm work. That wouldn't last.

All the neighbors that weren't close friends of Mr. Stain assumed that he did the bulk of the work. If they knew that he barely got off his ass long enough to inspect that I had done all the chores, someone surely would've contacted Children's Services. I was always covered in bumps, bruises and blisters. It would not have gone well for Mr. Stain.

The problem for him was that he broke his leg in two places that summer when trying to ride a horse for the first time, whilst high, outside his cousin's house. His words of genius before this endeavor? "How hard could it be?"

Since it was common knowledge that he had broken his leg in the small town nearby he was forced to hire farm hands while he healed. I figured I would have 4-6 weeks of nothing to do. Finally the silver lining showed.

By the time his leg was better he was behind bars.

He brought it on himself, the bastard.

The farm's two crops were corn and cannabis. Mr. Stain's "friends" were really his customers. He decided to employ a couple of neighbourhood teens, promising as much pot as they could smoke, instead of dipping into his

savings. He bragged to me that this was because he was, “a shrewd businessman that was always in the goddam green and never in the red.”

It seemed like Mr. Stain had everything he wanted and so, for a time, I wanted to be a businessman in order to get everything that I wanted. When I told Mr. Stain that I wanted to be a businessman when I grew up he shot me a distinct look of pride. It creeped me out at the time, but in retrospect I think he was actually flattered. He said mockingly, “All this time I thought you were a mule whose worth was in what he could pull, but now I see that you are snake who will slither unseen until it’s too late and will take his worth from me in his teeth.” Where the fuck did that come from?

It quickly became apparent that Mr. Stain wanted me as his personal servant until his leg was better as he kept yelling orders to me. I was forced to stay near Mr. Stain almost constantly, but I was permitted to read in what little down time I did have. I set out to learn everything I could about the world of business, sales, the economy, marketing, financing and banking. I read ravenously.

He really did have all kinds of books around the farm. A local old man, a building superintendent with bad arthritis, would pay Mr. Stain for pot with paperbacks and the odd hardcover. The old man had run his temple’s yard sale for over 50 years and had kept every book ever donated for his personal collection. When he decided to settle in a small bungalow paid for by his old age pension, he started to read science fiction to fill his overwhelming leisure time. Soon it was all he read. Eventually the old man began to doubt that someone upstairs had any answers at all. As a very old man he became an agnostic. As a result there was a wide variety of works all over the farmhouse with certain genres (religion, romance, gardening, mystery and the occult) over-represented. There was no science fiction to be found.

Most of the time, when I had a question about something I read, Mr. Stain would answer it if he wasn’t busy. However, such answers were often misleading or inaccurate. He was only after his own amusement. If I was to ask something like, “What does a fiduciary relationship mean?” I could expect

an answer such as “a fucking fiscal relationship coming about from the mouths and privates.”

If I were still confused he would seem frustrated and add something along the lines of, “Shit. What I’m saying is it has to do with the exchange of money for loyalty in deed and lip service. What the hell does some fucktard kid need to know what a fiduciary relationship is for anyway?”

Decoding what was truth from fiction became an arduous task.

I never got the impression he was a truly stupid man, just that he was everything wrong with the world.

I can thank the two teens for the idea of a lemonade stand. Mr. Stain was smoking an L-joint with them, bitching about my “godforsaken incessant curiosity with making money” when one of them turned to the other and whispered, “Chip off the old block, that boy.”

I listened from the kitchen window.

The mouthy boy was Barney, a local short brown haired jock nearly twice the size of Mr. Stain and a bully himself. Barney was the ubiquitous jerk that wanders around being a drunk dumbass at 2am.

The other kid, Randy, the ginger, he was timid around Mr. Stain. He didn’t linger on the farm when he came to pick up or do his share of the farm work. He rushed along as if in fear of a raid at any second. You could smell the paranoia on him.

The truth is raids never came. Every farmer in that region was probably growing something he shouldn’t have. Buying local produce can mean supporting the neighborhood drug cartel thanks to government subsidies going to big business instead of small farms.

The trend has only escalated.

Then Mr. Stain said, “Something’s wrong with him. I swear I think he’s too smart for his years. He has too much spare time while my leg’s getting better. I can’t keep him busy enough with housework.” It was Randy who suggested a lemonade stand to keep me busy. He said it would be cheap, take

a lot of my time, and teach me that I had no hope in the business world. He told Mr. Stain that it was the perfect way to fool me into obedience.

I was truly excited for the first time since school let out. As soon as Mr. Stain told me I could have a lemonade stand I made straight for the woodpile from the old barn. The leftover birch 2x4s, from a small staircase added only a few years earlier, were sheltered from the elements under some blue plastic tarps there. The rest of the wood would come from the tool shed, along with white latex paint, a paintbrush, a hammer, some nails and a rusty saw.

It took me two long days to construct the actual stand and three times I cut my fingers with the rusty saw. Thankfully the benefit of being an orphan was that the government made sure I had my tetanus shots up to date.

Huh... I guess that's why I like going to the doctor's office. Twice I was immediately taken from neglectful dumps as a result of mandatory check-ups. That would also explain Mr. Stain allowing me my basic needs. I always wondered why such a selfish man would care if I didn't have breakfast in the morning.

The lemonade stand was remarkably simple. It was four feet wide, two feet long and two feet tall, aside from the sign that ran overhead and the two four foot long birch 2x4s that connected the sign to the stand. It was just the right height for me to sit at my stool and be able to serve orders. It may seem tiny, but so was I: I was 8 at that point. I used my school markers to spell out, "Lemonade Stand" in various colours.

Mr. Stain, meanwhile, had spent the last couple of days grudgingly without a manservant. He had finally gotten some real use out of his crutches. When he saw the stand he was in a piss poor mood. He called it, sarcastically, "A franchise opportunity if ever I saw one." I was and still am proud of that stand.

In case you didn't know this, lemonade itself is ridiculously simple to make. Add the juice from six lemons to a cup of sugar and six cups of water. Then you stir. Add ice. That simple. That was the way my mom use to make it. One of the few things I remember about Suzie was that she loved lemonade.

Our road had little traffic. On the first day I sold a cup of lemonade to a neighbour. On the second my two customers were Barney and Randy, and Mr. Stain said not to charge them. On the third day my only customer was a highway patrolman coming home from a long day of clocking speeders.

Mr. Stain was not happy about this. The cop was fifty meters from five hundred pot plants. He was none the wiser, but if Mr. Stain had been smoking from his water bong, instead of a cigarette at the time of the visit, things would have happened differently. There were also two hundred plants that were already dried out and hanging upside down in a small garage behind the barn (there was no chance of deniability). All the cop said that was unrelated to his 50-cent purchase of lemonade was, "I think my boy went to school with you this last year," and "You make sure to take breaks going inside from the sun, son." Mr. Stain was concerned that I was conspiring with the police against him.

I had met the officer before. He had given a speech to my class on "Saying no to drugs" at the request of Ms. Lowry. It was the second most terrifying ten minutes of my life 'til then. He stood like a giant towering over us; he carried a GUN and told us that people who used, grew, and/or sold drugs were dangerous. He said we had to stay away from them. He told us we could tell our parents or a police officer if someone we knew was selling drugs or trying to get us to use drugs. He said, "Just say no." He said drugs were bad and only bad men dealt drugs. At the time the prospect of continued schooling, regular meals and physical safety compelled my silence. Somehow I knew the cop was trying to help people like me but I couldn't help seeing him as a threat.

In hindsight I just didn't realize that more often than not kids find nice foster homes. I was unlucky.

Mr. Stain grounded me until his leg healed. He told me I'd only ever leave the house to do chores from then on. He called me a "son of an ugly kike whore and her deformed retard brother." He said I was an "abomination" and that God saved me from the car that killed my family so that I could continue

to be punished and atone for my parents' sins as his loyal servant. This was the first and only time Mr. Stain ever mentioned anything vaguely religious.

He also said that my mom steered straight for that car so that she'd never have to set her eyes on such an ugly child, as was I, ever again. He told me that he hated me, and that I would only be permitted to talk when spoken to from then on. I was never allowed to read books or watch TV ever again. He told me if I spoke to a police officer again he'd gladly send me under the tractor, or into the woodchipper.

I think that was the second worst week in my life. I was hopeless and horribly depressed. I thought about suicide. I stopped reading even though I had a few books hidden in my room. I stopped thinking. I felt lethargic and angsty at the same time. I felt uncomfortable and unwilling to fix my situation. There was a void where my internal organs used to be. I hated and feared Mr. Stain but mostly I felt like I was pregnant with a BLACKHOLE. I cried, a lot.

Late at night, when I was all cried out, I went downstairs to watch some television. I didn't even think about what would happen if Mr. Stain would catch me, I just didn't care. There was nothing left he could take from me. TV was a luxury for me, even before it was taken away. He used to let me watch an hour a day, and whenever he was watching, if I had done my chores. We only got two channels anyway.

There was an infomercial advertising a product that was supposed to take the challenge out of cooking an egg on the first channel. It was effectively a frying pan that would have another frying pan connect over it when it was time to flip the egg. The cooking apparatus would then be flipped without any chance of the egg eggscaping. Then you could remove the original frying pan. It was designed to remove the need for a spatula. The white-toothed creep on screen claimed it could be used for steak, burgers, crêpes, and pancakes as well. The cheap gimmick was described as "revolutionary," "life-changing" and "the solution to your all problems." It only cost three easy payments of \$14.99. The host explained that this special TV offer would include a second unit at no extra cost. If we acted in the next thirty minutes, it would have included a spatula. There was free shipping and a money back guarantee.

How could we resist? I watched the infomercial for half an hour, zoned out the whole time, before finally switching the channel.

That moment would change my life forever.

There was this foul mouthed boy and he had a lemonade stand, but he was selling beer and not lemonade. There were questions about the legality of what the boy was doing, but after all it was just beer. It was just beer. It was just television. It was really funny.

Eureka. Hope. It was time to take a stand.

The next morning when Mr. Stain opened the veranda's screen door he grabbed the paper below him as he always had and sat on the cream coloured Barcalounger. He turned on his stereo and pressed play. He listened to death metal. He opened the paper to the sport section as his morning ritual dictated. He drank his coffee and read about baseball. He, himself, was about to become front page news.

He would sip his coffee often over the next five minutes as he read the newspaper in peace. A smile then came to his face as he smelled marijuana smoke. Without hesitation he reached for a pack of smokes from his pocket and sparked a joint he had stashed there. He figured Barney and Randy were hard at work

He was happy. Soon the crop would be harvested and his leg would be better. Soon the boy would go back to doing work and stop causing him headaches.

Mr. Stain was wrong.

Not even the seemingly random flailing on the drum could drown out the sound of approaching police cars. I watched as he slowly lowered the newspaper to reveal his undoing.

A sizeable percentage of the nearest town's population was just beginning to disperse from Mr. Stain's front yard and the road in front of his farm. He saw flashing lights everywhere and a parade of police cruisers. In the

distance he could even make out that the regions only helicopter was making its way towards him. Mr. Stain felt like he was just beamed in the head by a curveball.

I hadn't smiled as big as I did then for a long, long, time. Not since being thrown up in the air and caught by Pa. According to Uncle James I always lost it. It was then that I knew I was special.

The night before I made my preparations. I brought out the stand from the shed, and put it at the edge of the road. I crossed out the word "Lemonade" with a green marker and wrote instead "Marijuana." I crossed out "cents per glass" and wrote "dollars per ounce." On the counter I had placed a scale and a box for the money. I grabbed two economy size boxes of jumbo freezer bags from the cellar. I also grabbed garbage bags. The two hundred plants were bagged and to the side of the stand. I called up every single customer in Mr. Stain's little black book and either told them or left a message with the same few words, "Mr. Stain told me to call you and tell you, two hundred is now fifty, just for tomorrow, show up at 5am sharp, come alone." I'd hang up the phone after that.

I had quietly snuck into his bedroom the night before also. He had left his devil's music playing quietly on repeat before falling asleep. The room had heavy metal posters everywhere and was painted red. Mr. Stain, like so many other human beings, was a walking talking cliché. I took the bear from where he had hidden it, underneath a black beanbag chair in the corner. I slowly, and trying not to breath loudly, crawled on hands and knees over to the wall safe to the right of the bed and pressed "420" on the digital keypad. The safe chirped and I panicked for a second, but Mr. Stain, who was only four feet away, slept on undisturbed. I removed two tall stacks of fifties and closed the safe's door. I tiptoed out of the room.

While Mr. Stain sat petrified, with his mouth agape, I quickly grabbed handful after handful of the money that had been made. I lifted back the plaid shirt of my teddy bear and removed more stuffing to accommodate the currency, as I had for the two stacks prior. I covertly added all the large bills that could fit. I left the rest. My pockets and hands were bare, in case I was

searched. I had my luggage packed already. I hoped against hope that the next family would be different. I pitied the fools if they weren't. I drank slowly from the fruit punch juice box to my left, and eagerly awaited whatever change would have me. I never cried again.

Tomorrow would be a new day.

That's really when my luck changed. Uncle James, who had recently finished an internship after passing the bar, took me in. He had been hired at a prestigious downtown Toronto law firm. His luck was changing too. He bought a condo in Parklawn (with a hefty mortgage) and leased a brand new family sedan. Imagine his surprise when he received the following letter (and its contents)...

"I was a friend of your late sister. I was so sorry to hear of the tragedy that has befallen your family and am so happy, upon reading in the morning paper, you have chosen to be the guardian of her poor boy. I have enclosed the \$12,374 that I was saving for a trip to Mexico in order to help you start your new life. Please treat him well, and love him as much as his parents did. I would like to remain anonymous, because I can't in good conscience take my gift back should you reject it. Also, from what I remember, the boy is allergic to Brussel sprouts, spinach, seafood and black liquorice."

From then on it seemed like there was nothing I couldn't do. I had an uncanny ability to steal from those who had more than they should. I was very, very good at doing wrong to bad, bad people. I was faster than most kids, to the point where I had to pretend to be slower than I was to fit in. I could jump higher and farther, lift more and perform unnatural acrobatic feats. I was a quick learner: no genius, but smart enough. I was a deadeye too, at first with only water and toy dart guns.

It all started when I was a young kid. Even Captain America got to have a childhood. Not me. I knew from the get-go that the world desperately

needed heroes. I knew that villains ruled the world. They were almost everywhere. The big ones controlled the coffee, tech, booze, tobacco, oil, gas, war and entertainment industries. The worst drug peddlers.

They were the same sort of people that were paying my uncle, a man who set out to change the system, to screw the little guy.

One little guy was not going to let this happen.

After the story was over...

Jack stopped walking and Henry followed her cue. Her face, rosy from the cold and the beer, took on an expression of deep contemplation. She asked, "Why do you think life is so hard?"

"Because rewards are unsatisfying if not earned."

"When did you get so smart stupid head?" questioned Jack with a smile, and she inched herself closer to Henry hoping he would catch her drift.

"Smart... we passed smart a few pitchers ago," replied Henry. He inched closer to Jack. He would have tried to kiss her too if his left foot had not found a patch of black ice originally concealed by only a millimeter of snow.

He slipped and crashed to the ground along with any esteem Jack had had for his machismo.

Jack laughed her ass off. Henry blushed.

He had hit his head hard. He said, "That hurt."

"You okay?" asked Jack. She reached down and grabbed Henry's hand.

As Jack helped Henry up the sleeve of her hoodie receded from her wrist displaying a nasty purple bruise that caught Henry's attention.

Jack's eyes followed Henry's. She fixed her sleeve and stated sharply "Oh, that's nothing."

"What from?"

"I fell off my bike last night."

"I thought you said you gave up biking."

"I wanted to go to downtown after the subway had stopped running,"

Jack lied. It would have been a clever excuse for injury if it weren't the middle of winter.

The remainder of the walk was silent. They were at a loss for words, but when they were both finally upon her front door they drew close and Henry hugged her. The hug lasted just a few seconds but both would have preferred it endured.

Jack's bike, rusty with a flat tire, was locked up on the porch where it always was.

"Don't take him back," was all that Henry said. He wanted to kill Rick.

"I won't," were Jack's only words.

Then we were at a different door, the front door to Henry's home.

Henry walked into a beautifully decorated "Gothic" inspired foyer. Paintings, tan-painted brick, stained glass and solid oak aged to perfection created an aura of relaxation. As per usual the entrance smelled of lemon scented wood polish: a scent deeply implanted in Henry's mind he recognized as synonymous with home and childhood. Lily kept the entrance spic and span. Any nicks or chips in the wood or bricks were carefully calculated.

"Mom, dad, Sam?" Henry called out. There was no response so Henry walked along a tan-painted-brick lined hallway lit by more stained glass windows and cast iron faux candle lamps which actually ran on gas and left the room always balmy. The floor was solid oak all over save the kitchen and the master bedroom's bathroom; which were marble.

The manor had been in Henry's family (on Paul's side) for over a hundred years. His great grandfather grew up in it. Almost everything in the manor, as old as it looked, was a convincing imitation of an expensive item. Henry didn't know how his family's affluence had waned; money was, however, always there whenever truly needed. He supposed it originated from oil, gambling, thievery, politics, brothels, pharmaceuticals, war

profiteering, booze, tobacco, cotton or French nobility since its origins were kept secret. Henry knew enough not to ask.

Henry walked towards a wooden circular staircase that led to the boys' half of the upstairs hallway.

They were on the road, helpless, and wanting to escape.

Henry started the truck without incident. He looked down at the clock that was stuck flashing 4:20 in red. Henry started to drive slowly. He asked himself out loud, "What are the chances that the clock would stop at 4:20?" The answer, of course, was one in seven hundred and twenty.

Henry hoped he would not remember what he assumed was coming next.

Jack put two and two together. She knew what day she and Henry would be forced to remember. She got scared. She guessed correctly that the sinister turn the flashbacks were taking would not be confined to Henry's past alone.

Jack walked through a putrid pink hallway.

The dilapidated hallway belonged to a typical unkempt 8 floor, eye sore, brown brick, 1950's apartment building that was located near Queen West in Toronto.

Jack and Rick chose their apartment over a slightly better find simply for their apartment number, "666."

Jack quietly searched through her purse and found her set of keys, before realizing that the door was unlocked. Her keys were held together by a silver lemniscate key-chain. She paused blankly at the door and then slowly turned the brass knob. She flicked on the light switch.

Rick was seated on a lazy boy with his eyes fastened to Jack. Next to his brown corduroy chair empty beer bottles, an overflowing ashtray, and his flask littered the cream coloured shag carpet.

Jack said, "I've just come for my things," to an unresponsive Rick. Rick didn't even blink. Jack was trembling, she said, "Just stay there."

Rick stood up.

Jack had a look of unabashed horror on her face. She pleaded, "Please Rick."

Rick lunged forward and Jack screamed.

From then on Jack would always be afraid of the dark.

According to heavy metal "666" was the number of the beast. Some scholars contest this. The earliest known Book of Revelations lists the number as 616 as does the Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus.

A beast lived in 666 after all.

Henry joyously walked along another hallway.

The hallway joined Henry's bedroom to Sam's bedroom. A door, which used to be dead-bolted from the boys' side, separated them from their parent's master bedroom.

Each side had stairs and a washroom and so the deadbolt, which began a statement of teenage rebellion, became welcome segregation and soundproofing (from the closed door), to both sides for years.

Sam and Henry's half had matte finished black latex painted walls, which were covered in Henry's artwork. It stank of ganja and teen spirit.

In contrast their parents half had beige walls, Monet prints, smelled of lavender, and stank of conformity.

The privacy that everyone enjoyed only shattered when Bret intercepted a phone call from one of Sam's frequent fliers. Bret had every intention of immediately telling the caller that he was Sam's father, but the idiot opened the conversation with "Sam, dude, I need a half quarter of your finest chron, stat, man." Bret knew the boys smoked it occasionally, but couldn't fathom Sam also sold it.

Bret issued an unlocked door policy for his sons. Sam hid his plants in his linen closet, where Bret didn't check, and began only sparking outside. Sam's only alternative to this was couch surfing, which would have been humiliating to him at 23.

This is why when Henry got to Sam's door he wasn't surprised to find it open. Henry and Sam had been arguing recently and Henry hoped they could bury the hatchet. It was almost 4:20 p.m. and Henry was wondering if Sam wanted to smoke a blunt outside. Henry knocked on the door and said, "Sam I finished school early. Can I come in?"

There was no answer.

4:20

4:20 is an internationally recognized pot reference. It was the combination of Mr. Stain's safe. It was also the time the truck's clock stopped and Henry's watch stopped. The sometimes number, sometimes time is used as a multipurpose flag. It helps stoners recognize other stoners and allows certain part-time dopers a time to indulge or aim to hit.

April 20th, the twentieth day of your fourth month, is recognized as pot day. Hippie Christmas, if you will. April 20th was the birthday of Adolf Hitler, Karl Müller and Napoleon III. The Columbine high school massacre also happened on 4/20. These things are incidental to the use of the 4:20 reference.

People often wonder the significance of the number 420 in cannabis culture. References to the number are all over TV, in many rap and rock songs, and in Hollywood movies. The actual penal code number regulating medical marijuana use in California is 420 if you believe the rumors that Henry and

Sam did.

If you believe rumors the weed symbol of 420 all started because a bunch of kids gathered outside a high school after class, in the 70's in California, to smoke some chronic, under a statue of Louis Pasteur.

The biggest criticism of pot smokers is that they never get anything accomplished.

I know this because Henry does. Henry knows this because Sam did.

Henry opened the door anyway.

He found Sam hanging from a noose.

Henry thought he was the victim of a horrible joke.

Henry rushed to his brother and looked for a pulse. He didn't find one. Sam's skin felt cold. Henry could see scratch marks around Sam's bluish neck. Sam's neck didn't snap. Sam had strangled himself to death. He must have been wondering, "Who am I?"

Henry called "911" immediately and reported everything. At first the operator on the other line thought Henry was playing a horrible joke on them. It was, after all, 4:20.

Henry cut the rope, removed the noose and attempted CPR to no avail.

Until the authorities arrived Henry busied himself with removing all of Sam's hidden pot plants and paraphernalia to his room. This wasn't what it seemed.

Henry knew that otherwise as soon as the police opened Sam's room's door it would be no longer Sam's room and only a "grow-op crime scene." Henry hated that small town cops spent most of their time either flagging down people speeding ten miles over the limit, or trying to prevent stoners from enjoying themselves.

Henry didn't want Sam's death to be marginalized, or worse, rejoiced upon, simply because he dealt petty pot to grown-ups.

Henry didn't want his parents to be on the cover of the local Christian newspaper, their grief a public spectacle, their home a crime den, their son dead and themselves gossiped about by gray haired grannies with too much time on their hands.

Henry didn't want Sam dead. When he was done covering up his brother's twisted obsession with marijuana Henry mourned.

Henry couldn't bring himself to call his parents. Henry couldn't bring himself to do anything but weep. The adrenaline had subsided.

When help did arrive they found Sam next to Henry, and Henry passed out on the floor.

In the TV movie somewhere out there in the cosmos of Henry and Jack's lives, this is where the montage would go. Cue the sad music. Flashes of Sam's childhood, high school, girlfriend, truck, biology lectures, pot abuse, and depression would lead to his silhouette hanging from a rope against the blazing sun streaming through his room's westward facing windows.

Cut to:

Henry, his mom, and Bret had sat around a pine kitchen table. The room was a mess and starting to smell.

The three looked like gloomy black and white silkscreen prints of their former selves painted onto corpses.

All of Sam's recent mail was on the table alongside neglected Chinese food take out boxes that had been pushed towards the empty corner where Sam normally sat. The boxes stank horribly of rot and had already attracted fruit flies.

Bret said, "He left a letter, I think we should all hear it." Bret started to cry quietly and then composed himself instantaneously, betraying he had seen some action overseas.

He opened it with some trouble and said, "I think I should read it out loud because it was addressed to me."

Lily said, "Yes, dear."

Henry only said, "Ok."

Bret's voice cracked as he said, "'The truth is I just never thought I'd be this lost. It wasn't supposed to be this long or this hard. I miss Anne. I know I'm going to hurt people and I'm so goddam sorry. I guess I can't see a point to my life anymore. I'm only ever happy when I'm stoned. I love you mom and dad and Henry. I'm so sorry Henry. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I'm so lost,' and he just put his name."

Lily stood up and ran from the table bawling.

Bret put the letter down, put his hand on Henry's shoulder and then followed after his wife.

Henry began to look through Sam's mail for any hint of why he was brother-less. Four letters out of the small bundle perhaps provided clues.

The first was from the University. The letter said,

"We regret to inform you that because you have not been enrolled in classes at this university for three(3) consecutive years, as of the date on this letter, you will no longer be considered a student at this university. All credits you've earned so far are forfeit and your student card henceforth is invalid. If you wish to contest your change in status all objections must be made in person at the dean's office within two(2) weeks (fourteen(14) days) of this letter's date.

"Academic performance is weighed heavily when status change exceptions, which are rare, are made. If medical emergency barred enrolment please bring all supporting documentation with you as proof towards exemption.

"Thank you for attending [our] University. We wish you luck in your future academic and non-academic endeavors."

Some snotty bastard signed it. Between the lines lived a shit eating grin.

The second was shockingly even less personal. It established a pattern of general money problems. It was about Sam's credit card. The summary of the letter read, "Your account payment is overdue. A late charge has been added to your account amounting to 9% of your total outstanding balance. A minimum payment is due within two weeks of the date on this bill and the entire balance is due one (1) month thereafter. You may make payments online or by the accompanying postage paid envelope. To talk to a representative over the phone please call 1-888-###-####..."

It just went on rambling for three pages.

Given the date on the letter it was possible the debt had motivated Sam's drug dealing.

The third was a letter from the same credit card company simply notifying Sam that his account had been terminated. The letter was surprisingly brief. It didn't even say explicitly whether or not the outstanding balance had been paid off.

The fourth letter enraged Henry. He couldn't remember it clearly. The basic gist of it was: "This is your final notice that a minimum payment for the ungodly sum of money you owe us is overdue. If you can't afford to make the payment by the above specified date then please notify us at least twenty-four (24) hours ahead of time at 1-800-###-#### so we can make arrangements to get it out of you via blood, sweat, tears, first born child, appendages, eyes, kidneys or sperm."

The letter was basically signed "your supreme overlords."

This letter of course referred to Sam's student loans.

Sam's money woes could have been solved with one appeal to Bret or Lily for help. They weren't why he did what he did. Henry knew that and deep down he knew why Sam took his own life.

Cut to:

Jack was once again in a white hospital room. She was covered in bumps and bruises. She was pink, black, blue, yellow, purple and mauve. She was now in an adult sized hospital gown. She was under a paper-thin white cotton sheet. She had cried all night. There wasn't anything permanently wrong with her.

Nothing is permanent except change.

A nurse came into the room slowly. She told Jack not to go back to Rick. She said, "Men like that are just boys in suits." Jack knew Rick didn't even own a suit. Jack told the nurse that she felt, "...so stupid." The nurse hugged her, told her that everyone makes dumb mistakes when they're young, and said, "Just learn from your mistakes." The nurse, whose name inappropriately was Joy, said, "This wasn't your fault or your mistake."

The nurse gave Jack the morning after pill. The nurse's job was on the line because she kept things off the forms.

Cut to:

The rain clouds darkened, thickened and sank until they seemed an impregnable canopy.

Lightning zapped the road in front of them and as the thunder roared the ground shook. The rain intensified until even driving straight on the flat consistent road became challenging. The tires skidded slightly. Visibility was a nightmare.

The trees that surrounded the road swayed in the wind.

Windshield wipers wiped in vain, powerless to decimate the army of raindrops bombarding the beastly truck. The engine still screamed though. Not even all this nature could drown out its mechanical growl.

Henry couldn't bring himself to look at Jack. Jack couldn't bring herself to look at Henry, or do much aside from cry and feel pain.

The road played tricks on them. The gates seemed permanently fixed on the horizon and a stop sign, which was now almost upon them, seemed to have, just a moment earlier, appeared from nowhere.

Henry was mute aside from puffs on his breast substitute. The only noises from Jack were subdued whimpers and gasps for air.

The two knew all they had was each other.

Cut to:

Henry and Jack were crying by Sam's tombstone. They felt little but emptiness. Henry was furious at his parents for always being on Sam's case. Henry hated them then for making their own son feel himself their enemy. For the first time, beyond inkling or hypothesis, Henry firmly believed there was no fate. Henry lost faith in what he always thought life was.

Henry looked across Sam's mourners. Henry didn't know half of them. Henry and Sam were close. Sam probably didn't know half of them.

The music that played during Sam's funeral wasn't rock, or alternative, or industrial, or grunge, or punk, or blues, or jazz, or anything that Sam would have liked. Sam's mother actually had the nerve to choose gospel for an atheist's funeral.

The food served was hamburgers, hotdogs, and potato salad and Sam was vegan.

What Sam wanted was to be cremated. He wanted to smoke. He wanted his ashes spread where Anne's were. Sam wanted the last few little particles of his being to chase after the remaining tiny flecks of her. Henry knew this. Henry confessed this, and was ignored. Lily couldn't process the information because she couldn't stand the idea that Sam wasn't in heaven.

Bret thought it didn't matter where Sam was buried, since Sam was dead. I suspect Bret was angry with Sam.

What Sam wanted was a going away party where Henry and Jack and his other friends smoked joints, ate lentil and tofu veggie dishes, listened to his MP3 player's music library, drank chai tea and talked about him in a positive manner while seated in a communal circle.

To tell you the truth, Sam didn't really care. Sam was dead. Sam just would have preferred, while he was living, that when he died those he loved wouldn't try to re-imagine him.

Henry couldn't see what the fuck was wrong with that. He loved his brother unconditionally. Henry at least had the decency to show up fried. He slipped Sam's smiley face bong into the casket when no one was looking. What Henry hated most was that there was no mention of Anne.

Sam's funeral was really his parent's "poor us" party. There were cocktail shrimps served at the wake. They weren't enjoying themselves; they were just playing their parts. They didn't know how to act. It gave them something to do between bouts of despondency.

Cut to:

The clock read 4:20.

The dice made snake eyes.

Henry was nursing a cigarette. His teary tired eyes were focused on the endless road, the pearly gates and a stop sign inching towards them.

Having to relive your worst moments is a torture akin to having to judge reality show auditions.

Henry wanted an Americano, or a light roast mixed into a saline drip, or a jumbo extra whip mocha, or a quad espresso, or all 24 ounces of a \$5 iced coffee. Henry was so hard up for caffeine he would even have drank a green

tea latte. He would have snorted matcha powder. People do ridiculous things when they're craving something.

Every cup is hours of work taken for granted. But will you stop drinking that delicious cherry pit juice? No.

Coffee is the perfect example of supply and demand gone mad. Some of the coffee you've drank has been the result of backbreaking child labor. Caffeine is not very different from cocaine. Substitute fruits for flowers and the cultivation is much the same. Whether arabica or robusta, there is no fair trade.

What there is, sometimes, is guards in machine gun nests making sure the locals don't get in to the farms (or out). Those workers are treated worse than your nation's homeless. Most of you can only imagine a cliché third world. The truth is you only have the one.

Henry halted at the stop sign. About twenty feet in front of them the hitchhiker lay in his navy blue rain jacket. His flask was five feet to his left. For a while Henry sat still smoking his cigarette. He contemplated rolling a joint. He thought, "I wonder if St. Peter would recognize the smell."

On most of the known "civilized" worlds selling tobacco-like plants is a serious crime. For tobacco to be legal and marijuana to be illegal is illogical to me. The only reason I can think of for tobacco to be legal is population control. The only reason I can think of for marijuana to be illegal is to protect a population without willpower from itself.

That's your species' fatal flaw: you are out of control.

Lack of control would explain: multinational corporations, pollution, overpopulation, addiction, deforestation, drop-out rates, gambling, failed marriages, crime rates, unemployment rates, pornography, genocide, war, religion, depression, recession, repossessed homes, suicide and world famine.

Cut to:

Henry and Sam were in Sam's room. The walls were full of car, truck and motorcycle posters. Bret had already made sure the pot posters were taken down. Sam especially hated taking down the white widow poster from behind his door. The THC crystals were enormous.

The desk where Sam would eventually write his suicide letter was then crowded with stationery, boxes, a black clamping lamp and a laptop with a silver case. Sam's typewriter was set off to a side. Sam was seated at the desk with his face planted in his laptop. He wore a sepia housecoat over a green shirt that said "Puff Puff Fail" in white. He also wore striped flannel boxers, but no pants. He was, despite Bret's reluctance, allowed to wear whatever he wanted still.

Henry was seated on an oak framed twin-sized bed wearing dark green cargo shorts and a black polo tee with a white undershirt.

Both brothers wore sandals on their feet.

Henry's focus was concentrated on a sketchbook. His pencils moved rapidly and every so often he looked up at his brother.

Sam asked, "So, how are things with Jack?"

"Pretty good I think: she's dating a guy named Clint," answered Henry.

Sam mumbled, "Sorry Henry."

Henry stopped drawing for a second. He looked up at his older brother. He questioned, "What about?"

Sam responded, "Don't man, don't. I know you like her. I know she likes you. Problem is neither of you had the nerve to risk your friendship to bring it up."

Henry shook his head in a contrived manner that basically admitted Sam was right. Henry was conscious of this. Henry, red faced, said, "I don't want to lose Jack."

Sam instructed, "Lose her? You want to know what loss is? It's forgetting the way she smells, where all the dimples are, the exact way she

feels against your hand, the way her tongue feels against yours, the way her lips feel, the sound of her voice and the precise shade of her eyes. Lose is forgetting the warmth she inspires in you when you're just next to her. Loss is being discontent. Fuck! You want to know what loss is little brother? It's forgetting the details of perfection. Loss is being alone."

Henry said, "Chill."

Sam said, "Chill? Henry look down, look at your balls because you aren't ever going to get to use them if you keep being such a pussy."

Henry questioned, "What about you Sam? It's been, what, three years since Anne died and you don't even leave the house. She wouldn't want this."

Sam, agitated, answered with his voice shaking, "Henry, it's not the same. You're being a fucking asshole now."

Henry screamed, "How, how is it any different?"

About then I'd posit he was being more of a boob.

Sam sadly said, "Look, look I'm not like you. I'm not so good with words ever since I began self-medicating hourly. Whenever I try to talk about something I care about I sound like I'm one of those butt-fucks from a teen drama. This is important though. In case I'm ever not around. Maybe I sound cheesy. She was my great love—that's how it's different. She was my Juliet and all that. Now if you actually tried with Jack and it didn't work out I wouldn't be calling you a pussy. The fact is though, as it stands, with the one woman in this fucking world I ever truly loved dead, it's hard for me seeing my little brother being a little pussy. That's how it's different."

For the record, Romeo only ever knew Juliet for a few days and was prone to melodramatic crushes. Does anybody in the age of DVRs, streaming and piracy, actually read Shakespeare when it wasn't part of a curriculum? You should.

Henry shouted, "Yeah well, fuck you, Sam. All you ever do is mope around: when are you going to stop listening to depressing tunes. When are you going to class? I see it's fair for you to tell me how to live my life but what

the fuck about you. It's spring out there you know. You can't just stay locked up in your room all the time except when you're selling and smoking pot. You have a life ahead of you. She wouldn't want you like this. I fucking love you and I'm really worried."

Sam grinned, "Thanks for the advice little bro, but I can take care of myself." Sam pointed at the door and yelled, "There's the door and fuck you too."

The two never normally talked to each other like that.

Henry got up to leave and left the sketchbook on Sam's bed open to his most recent drawing. The sketching of Sam expressed futility. Henry slammed the door behind himself.

Under the drawing was written "R.I.P. Romeo," even then.

Cut to:

The behemoth's engine was dead silent.

The stop sign was dead ahead.

The hitchhiker was dead on the ground.

The flask was five feet to his left.

The clock read 4:20.

The dice made snake eyes.

The storm raged.

Henry flicked his finished cigarette out his rolled down window.

The moon shined through an opening in the clouds above and illuminated the stop sign.

Jack opened her door quickly, got out of the truck, ran towards the hitchhiker and fell to her knees beside the corpse.

Henry followed her.

Jack said, "I didn't realize, I didn't realize because it wasn't his voice. I didn't realize because he's so thin and old looking. I didn't realize. Three years—what have they done to him?"

Henry didn't recognize the man.

Jack said, "Don't you see though? Don't you recognize him? The dark blue coat, don't you see?"

Henry didn't recognize the coat.

Henry walked towards the flask on the ground. He picked it up. He read the inscription. He knew what Jack knew.

Henry had only ever seen one such flask, once, in a bar. He said, "This can't all be coincidence."

Jack said, "He's Rick, we killed Rick."

On the stainless steel flask was an inscription: it read, "Shit happens."

FADE OUT:

PART FOUR

Love

All I can say about Love is that it too is transitory. As far as I know the dead do not love. As far as I know love is only an allusion to a chemical reaction and an altered firing of synapses.

It took me nearly 5,000 years to forget almost everything about my mate.

If you asked me when I was younger I would have told you love was something different.

Love is simply the antithesis of Hate. Love is simply an emotion that will pass.

Love isn't objectively real.

Henry and Jack sought refuge from the road in the truck.

The truck idled with its light on.

The windows were rolled up as far as they could be.

Henry was cutting up some sticky Technicolor for a joint.

Henry said, "Look, the way he treated you, he got what he deserved."

Jack asked, "Is that why the Grim Reaper is chasing us? Two wrongs don't make a salvation."

"I have no sympathy for Rick the prick."

"But what do we do? Is smoking a joint ever the solution to our troubles?"

"It is always the solution to our troubles. I felt really bad about running over the hitchhiker. We were tortured with reliving our worst memories. The road doesn't end. The gates don't get any closer. They're always out of reach," spoke Henry. He continued to cut the pot into tiny pieces. "But now the hitchhiker is Rick; and it's like... finally something to celebrate."

Jack screamed, "The grim fucking reaper is chasing us."

Henry spoke, "Seems like we're dead. It isn't like we can die again, can we? We can't die from smoking chronic; we can't kill anyone high driving 'cause for all we know we're in hell right now. I don't think I can protect you this time. Look at the clock, we're in a perpetual state of 4:20 and have, what is likely, a never ending supply of the best pot ever if my never ending cigarette pack is any indication. So, yes, I am going to roll this large fucking joint."

He was trying to put the joint together, but his hands began to shake uncontrollably. He was spilling weed everywhere. He put his notebook, which he was using as a surface to roll on, and the various items on top of it onto the dashboard. Jack was quiet. Henry said, "I spent so much of my life trying to keep you safe and keep you at a safe distance."

Jack whispered, "Henry this isn't your fault."

Henry stammered, "Bull, bullshit. This is my fault. I was driving." Henry fought back tears. His voice wavered. He sobbed, "I should have protected you from myself. I'm cancerous. I bring death to everyone."

Our minds shifted, we were powerless, and we were elsewhere.

Henry, Sam and Jack were seated around a makeshift fire pit. The pit was on the southeast edge of Bret and Lily's property by the river. It was spring. The weather was beautiful. The warm hues of sunset adorned the sky. There was a slight warm breeze coming from the south.

Henry was dressed in beat up black boot-cut jeans and a plain black tee shirt. Sam was dressed as before, housecoat and all. This time he remembered to put on jeans, for Jack's sake. Jack was wearing a black tank top and a dark blue sari was wrapped around her waist.

The fire was crackling loud. The three were gulping patriotic beer as a two page's joint passed amongst them.

Henry took a deep puff. He said, "This is good pot," and exhaled.

Jack inhaled and then coughed, "This is the Kobe filet mignon of chronic, son."

Henry asked, "What is this magical nourishment? Ambrosia? Is it... is it people?"

Sam said, "Well it is my blood, sweat and tears. This is Technicolor. This is my baby." He laughed, "For better or worse this is my life's work."

Aside to Henry Sam said, "Look I'm sorry about the other day. I should get out of the house more, but I'm not going to get over Anne, ever."

Henry nodded that he received the message through the fog that was increasingly engulfing his mind.

Jack passed the J to Sam. He entertained it for a while.

Henry raised his beer in a toast. He decreed, "To good times."

Sam raised his beer as well. He said, "Fuck good times. To my little brother all grown-up... a good dude... Happy Eighteenth Birthday."

Henry grinned, "I'm sure there was a sentence somewhere in there."

Jack raised her beer. She smiled. She taunted, with grammar as incorrect as she could muster under the circumstances, "Henry to, fucking stupid-head, my person favorite."

They clanged glasses. They were happy. The joint was in Henry's hands.

Henry confessed, "Thanks, you know this is exactly how I wanted to spend my birthday. I'm stoned out of my gourd and drunk as an Irish skunk. I just wanted to hang out with you guys." Henry killed the roach and threw it in the fire.

Sam announced, "I have a present for you," to Henry. He reached into his left housecoat pocket, pulled out a set of keys and tossed them to Henry. Sam smiled, "Happy birthday."

Henry stuttered. He said, "These—these are the keys to your truck."

Sam corrected Henry. He said, "Those are the keys to your truck Henry." Sam downed his beer.

Jack exploded with a, "Holy Shit."

Henry threw the keys back to Sam.

Henry told Sam that he couldn't accept the keys. But Sam simply tossed the keys back at Henry and hit him square in his face. Marijuana impedes muscle control. Everyone laughed.

Jack said, "So funny." She looked at her watch. There were little hands that swirled amongst a forest of whirling dots. She said, "I have to go home. I can't read my watch."

It's funny. These little moments of ours are our happiest. Nothing has to be prim or proper. We don't have to say things right. We don't have to behave a certain way. Our happiest moments seem to be the times where we simply stop worrying and enjoy what we have.

Henry said, "We'll sort this truck business out tomorrow. I'm going to walk Jack home."

Jack grabbed her beer.

Henry told Jack, "I'm going to be a second. I'll catch up."

Jack leaned into Henry, she whispered, "I'm going to miss you most of all when I go." Jack began walking home.

Sam said, when Jack was out of earshot, "You, my brother, are the biggest fool I have ever met in my entire life. You truly are a fucking stupid-head."

Henry argued, "What am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to tell her I love her when she's leaving for school in a month? She's already stressed about figuring things out, she hasn't even found an apartment. This way there's no risk."

Sam said, "You love her. This way, you've already given up."

A week later Sam and Henry began to argue again. That was the last real conversation they'd have. Only after Sam's suicide would Henry take the truck.

Sometimes shit just keeps happening.

Back in the truck Henry was rolling the joint.

He put a little cardboard filter (a rolled piece of his cigarette pack) in one end of the joint, as was their custom.

The engine was horribly loud even idling.

The rain had thinned to a sprinkle.

The high-beam lights contributed to the glowing of the gates on the horizon.

Jack questioned, "What changed?"

Henry was confused, "Come again?"

Jack asked, "What changed since you told Sam you loved me?"

Henry said, "Nothing." He paused. He decided, "I'll tell you a story. You've never read it." He grabbed his black calfskin notebook from the dashboard. He then began to recite to her the short story he wrote called

The Private I.

Me in a bar: must be Friday. Either that or it could be any other day of the week. This damn sour pilsner is my reward for trying something new. I fucking hate American beer. Could've just ordered water. I should never have left Vancouver. Compared to British Columbia, Maine feels like Alaska. Starting over tastes like piss.

Life's good though for a change. Job's got its perks, while I'm in town drinks are comp'd. This time, supposedly, I'm the company's last chance. They offered me double. Tonight I'm getting hammered and hopefully drilled.

Maybe I'll meet a nice guy, maybe not. I haven't been fucked in nearly a month. These five guys in front of me, one of them would do. They aren't anything special, but I've had much worse. It's a miracle I never caught anything. Made them run the tests three times. I've never met a man that didn't like me.

If I had different parents maybe I'd be a supermodel. God, maybe I'd have gone to COLLEGE. If my dear dad didn't like me so much maybe he wouldn't have kicked me out. Thank god it was a false positive.

Doesn't matter now. My paycheques are more than I'd ever thought I'd see. Double? Who the hell is this guy, the illegitimate child of a Silicon Valley billionaire? The crown prince of Darfur? The supposedly disabled ex-CEO of that auto-company? Am I trailing another secret Mrs.?

I slurp down the beer. Never waste beer, even bad beer. Waiter comes over, I just say, "Double whiskey on the rocks." This folder in front of me will fill in the blanks. I don't really want to open it. Not tonight. Tonight's a celebration of life, booze and possibly contraceptives. When I first took Sex Ed I think there were things I could have taught Mrs. Flanders. All those girls out there searching for Mr. Right in a club, a bar, or a concert hall have the wrong idea. I haven't met a good man, myself, who wasn't a make-believe character. Any love I've had has been misplaced.

Me, here, now, I'm drinking a depressant to cheer up. Still things are much better than they've been. I have a bank account now. I've got I.D. and somehow made it through without a criminal record. I was only on the streets for two years, and only worked them for three months.

The one cop who almost caught me was my fourth John. The only one who wouldn't wear a rubber. He probably had a wife and kids at home. He probably went to church on Sunday given the golden crucifix he wore around his neck. She's probably got green goo now coming from her hoohoo if he hasn't changed his ways.

These days me even being here seems pretty miraculous. 'Course I suffered a lot. I don't have a friend in the world. Got to work on that. Somehow I gotta start meeting good people. I'll change my name. Buy a condo. I've always wanted pets. I'll settle someplace warm. Pay like this I'll retire in five years. I'll have saved 5 million by 25, I'll be on some tropical island by 28.

How I got started was simple. I found an apartment. Started wearing make-up. Bought nice clothes. Sometimes that meant I went hungry. I told myself I was dieting.

I got hooked up with one of those escort agencies. I was a high-priced lady of the night for a year. Did I mention I'm beautiful? Well I am. Pick up any glamour magazine, look at the cover girl, I'm in her league. Sorry, as you may have noticed, I've found no need for modesty. Call it an occupational hazard. I'd be sent out to very rich, very famous, very important, very impotent, very married, very old men. Men with small dicks that came too fast and ugly wives. I'd get paid small fortunes, sometimes for less than five minutes. Sometimes I would barely even feel them.

Not that I'm loose down there! I don't even think I've had much more sex than your average girl, I just mostly didn't choose the guys. Those guys at the table in front of me keep looking this way. I could probably have any of them. Hell, I could probably have all of them. You think I'm serious don't you? I've never done a gang bang in my life. I've never even been in a threesome, I have my standards.

I've never had a pimp (if you don't count the high class escort agency). I did stab a guy who wanted to fill that void. I cut a void out of his belly. Past him on a bus a week later, that was a relief, I had thought I killed him. That would have been a first too.

So here I am. I've slept with over a hundred guys and by doing so have bought my soul back from the devil. Maybe I'll have white picket fences. Maybe. Don't be too quick to judge.

Where was I? Oh yeah. So what I do is I contact a private investigation agency and make a deal. I got my license. I became a vigilante of sorts. I suppose mercenary is more apt, or should I say hercenary. See the whole time

I'd been collecting photos, videos, and even sperm samples of my johns. Blowjobs can be much more expensive than they seem. I was a praying mantis. I made my first million. I may have started out on the bottom but now I'm on the top. I've never been screwed over by a man since. I'm never going back down.

Here I am. Now the agency I work with pays me to fuck over men. I went from the bitch to the master. I specialize in catching women's husbands cheating. They're always cheating, if you think he is he probably is.

Don't judge what you can't afford. I was an innocent girl once. I never did anything to provoke anyone. I'm still hoping this is a nightmare. I'd rather be a fast-food cashier with a normal family than here. I haven't talked to my mom in five years. She blamed everything on me. I was just a kid, but she labeled me a slut.

Fuck, why can't I just drink my beer without getting flashes of rape and sodomy? Now at least it's over. Now I can find out what "make love" means. Maybe I'll experience my first crush. I've had therapy; still have a therapist. She says I should quit my job. I tell her the same thing. She's too good a girl to be rented out to a whore like me. At least I only ever sold my body.

People think it's a choice or something, hooking. Most people have no clue what starvation feels like. You think there's no animal left in you then go three days without food. Mankind has a serious case of delusions of grandeur.

Out of those five dudes in front of me, two of them have rings on. Statistically speaking they're all married. One of the honest one's actually kind of cute under closer inspection. I can tell he knows I'm looking at him but he's playing coy, maybe there's still hope for him.

Maybe he just drank too much or I'm not his type. For all I know the two dudes with rings could be together. Sometimes man crushes and the real thing are hard to distinguish.

The cute one, he's 5'9" or 5'10", with stubble and short blond hair. His eyes are green and he has some muscle on him. He's dressed in a flawless designer suit while his buddies are in jeans, khakis and shirts from

department stores. This guy, whoever he is, showed up to the corner bar with a \$5000 three piece without batting an eye. "He's married," I tell myself under my breath. I've never tried to be a home wrecker. Laugh all you want.

I've wrecked more homes than Katrina. I guess I balance it out. I'm a natural disaster that only targets the rich.

So I order two more doubles. Drinks 5 and 6, respectively. I'm 110 pounds. I'm definitely enjoying myself at this point.

Funniest part of this whole thing, I don't even play fair: most of the time I videotape the suspected philanderer accepting my offer of fellatio. Takes 15 minutes. One drink, some small talk, I wink at them, let my boobs out a bit, play with my straw; I get big cheque. You should be pissed at your guidance counsellor.

I don't sleep with them. It's been years since that.

So I decide to open the legal size manila envelope in front of me. Doesn't mean I'm working. Just want to see his face. What shocks me about these guys is that most of the time the sonabitches look like they shouldn't be able to get one woman. They usually look like pedophiles, or fat slobs, or grown men with sparse beards that live in their mother's basements.

What strikes me about these photos is they always seem like reject headshots. Like I'm casting a movie about the ugliest motherfuckers ever. These are the guys that got picked last in gym class. These are software designers with Barbie dolls at home. The Ken dolls are either more convincing liars, obvious hounds, or smart enough to be unmarried.

I open it.

Suddenly the table in front of me gets a whole lot more interesting.

Three of the guys, the ones less honest about being married, are chugging from pitchers. The other two are egging them on. There's a stack of c-notes in the middle of them. They could be at any neighborhood's pub. These guys are personified stereotypes. The three are obviously football

players, security guards, truck drivers, construction workers, auto-plant workers, farmers, fishermen, or soldiers: the supposed salt of the earth.

The guy who wins he throws his jug down and yells, "Yes." I think he CAME right there. He collects his Benjamins with a drunken glazed-eyed expression covered with a wide smile. What a hero. Fat bastard has sclerosis of the liver to look forward to. Who am I to talk?

The waiter comes by, I ask him for two more; he gives me a judging look. He laughs encouraging as he cleans up after the oafs. Sexism is alive and well wherever liquor is served. I put down the company platinum. Suddenly, the waiter, he starts treating me with respect. I guess these days esteem is earned depending on the colour of your plastic.

I tip 50% to my kindred spirit despite his attitude. I get ready to leave, to the pretty boy I ask, "You want to get out of here?" I wink at him. I steal the cherry from his drink. Suck it off, and smile. His table erupts. He smiles, but flashes his ring. I think I'm in love. His friends are probably questioning his sexuality. They shout cat calls at me as I walk to the exit. I can feel their eyes on my ass.

So I'm out the door, in a cab, heading to a hotel. It's one of those worldwide chains. I notice a couple of working girls in the lobby bar as I have my nightcap. Then I'm showering (in the cold) and off to bed. I get a call and it's the client. The snotty bitch wants to meet, she's all irate: this is what "double" means.

I've hardly had my morning coffee and read the front page when the black stretched limo gets here. Penis envy in vehicular form.

The Headline was, "Man gets only 5 years in jail for killing his family." It doesn't take a genius to see that news is designed to keep you afraid. What is a paper filled with? Advertisements and the creepiest shit. What are you supposed to do when you're scared? Buy things obviously. Why else would the front page be full of evils and scientific innovation be hidden somewhere between sports and obituaries.

Those in power don't want poor normalish people to realize that happiness can be free. I personally prefer creature comforts. My life is the creepiest shit.

I shower again and get ready quickly. I like to feel clean. I dress professionally. I have a habit, that I'm trying consciously and unsuccessfully to break, of wearing a little too much make-up. Sometimes I feel like a walking cliché.

I feel like a joke.

The drive is long until we hit a phallic skyscraper. An aide accompanies me first through a marble floored foyer, secondly to the art deco styled elevators, and lastly up the elevator to the second highest floor. Here I am, once a village whore, on the twenty-seventh floor.

Nothing much has changed. Still spend my days climbing shafts.

This lady, the one behind the door, she's inherited everything no doubt. If your name isn't a household one, and you have a twat between your legs, your birth determined where you'll end up.

Me, I'm a whore. Always have been, always will be. I just have more affluent clients. Me, the waiter, the limo driver and the aide are all just hired meat. The waiting room is all done up in slate, leather, marble, gold and mahogany. I get the sign to go in. This is my element. This is a stage. This is the modern Colosseum.

It's the biggest office I've ever seen. The main desk alone is eight feet long and looks like it was carved from coast redwood. With all the plants in the place at first it seemed like a greenhouse. Artifacts and paintings, probably priceless pieces, are scattered across the walls wherever there's no floor to ceiling windows. Behind the desk there's an authentic Monet or a convincing forgery. To my left there's a suit of British armor from the thirteenth or fourteenth century that belongs in a museum. There's a set of swords next to it also from the House of Plantagenet's rule.

The lights overhead look like they belong to an auditorium, the speakers likewise are attached to what seems to be a mechanical rail system. I

can only imagine they are fully automatized to provide light and sound from any possible angle. Undoubtedly the 3.5 meter long, 4 inch tall, 4 inch wide rectangular box on the left side of the rail houses a ten foot long screen just waiting to descend upon the click of a button. There's a projector fixed on the right side of the rail system pointing at the left wall.

Wires dangle over to one of the two secondary desks. This one houses a server, two computers, a 32 inch plasma screen, a CRT, a DVD player and assorted expensive bottles of booze.

The second secondary desk has a computer with a reasonably sized screen. Both lesser desks have black leather chairs.

The floor is hardwood, mahogany. A beautifully woven twenty feet by sixteen feet long Persian rug hugs the center of the room. Behind the desk is a two thousand dollar lounge chair with its ottoman off to the side. Facing the desk are two rather puffy persimmon coloured lambskin lazyboys that recline and are undoubtedly designed to emasculate.

There's a fireplace on the right wall near the beginning of the room. It's there partially for shock value. You walk into a 27th floor office you don't expect to see a wood-burning fireplace with a stuffed and mounted polar bear head hanging over the mantle. This office is nicer than any home I've ever had. The lady behind the \$20,000 desk, she smokes a cigar. I wonder what old Sigmund Freud would say about her.

Me I make another kind of impression. I'm 23 years old. I'm blond, 110 pounds, 5'8. My boobs are secretly only C's, but my small frame and push up bra makes them look HUGE. They are real.

My eyes are blue and sparkle. My hair is long and gorgeous. I wear fire engine red lipstick and charcoal black mascara. I have no moles, no pimples, and no unsightly hairs. Store bought dresses are designed for girls like me. I wear a long tasteful black dress which shows off the slope of my back and a black cardigan which covers it up. My client's initial reaction, I can see in her eyes, is I'm the fuck glove he's sleeping with.

The next feeling on their faces is fear. Fear of inadequacy. Generally. This lady seems unfazed. She gestures for me to sit, and I do.

"I didn't know the agency hired people like you," she says.

"I'm kind of a contingency plan," I reply.

"I don't know. I didn't want to set him up. He's cheating already, I just want him caught in the act."

"Nine of the agencies investigators have taken turns trailing him and have caught him doing nothing more than fishing, eating barbeque, drinking with his buddies, watching movies, or having meetings with established clients."

"He's sleeping around. Ok? I know it."

"The cameras we had installed, the worst they caught was him masturbating while watching porn." Normal girl and guy stuff too, nothing shocking.

This proud lady, she has tears in her eyes: she says, "He is cheating on me. He's fucking other women."

There are only so many reasons she can be so sure. Maybe he's distant. Maybe she could smell them. Maybe he's never around. Maybe he said something that suggested it. It could have been an intercepted email or voicemail that she's keeping from us.

My money says that her thirty year old husband has stopped giving her forty-four year old body consistent loving. She just keeps getting older and older. Maybe there's still love, but no lust.

I tell her, "You want me to catch him in the act, and I will."

"I want things to go back the way they were." She starts the waterworks. She cries, "I'll settle for definite proof that he's cheating on me before I divorce him."

"Are you saying you're going to divorce him no matter what my investigation turns up?"

She, still crying, screams, "Yes." She has anger and rage all over her face. She says, "Father, and everyone else, they warned me. They said he was twenty-six, I was forty, he just wanted power and money. They couldn't get over that he was a broke grad student, and an artist, even though I was crazy in love with him." She looked over at me and added, "Hah, look at me, spilling my life story to a glorified prostitute. You see what he's done to me?" She opened one of her desk's drawers, grabbed a tissue, blotted her eyes, and said, "They said this would happen, and yes I'm going to divorce him."

I got up and said, "I'll see what I can do."

She whines, "I want a report within a week so I can get back to running this damn company."

On her placard is written, "Valerie Ruth, President – Mergers & Acquisitions."

There's a shit storm brewing as I leave the building. I hail a cab. An Indian named Mohammed drives and complains about the weather. Mohammed says, "Back home when it rain it is a warm rain, but here it is a cold rain, I don't like it." Mohammed here has a P.H.D. in Economics and speaks five languages and we have him working as a cabbie. People make fun of the way he talks, his accent, meanwhile they themselves would have no clue how to pronounce his last name. I tell'em to try Mexico, they're more likely to appreciate the degree and the rain is warmer there. There the economy isn't as imaginary and at least the corruption is transparent.

I tell him all America seems to appreciate is skillful liars and whores.

Mohamed says he speaks Spanish.

I say, "Gracias," and give him \$372. Everything I had on me. The fare was less than twenty dollars. I feel like a head bitch. He peels off like he robbed me.

The place in front of me makes the office seem, well, like an office. Nobody needs that much land, a garden that precise, or that large of a home. This is Jane Eyre shit. Perhaps longer than two Canadian football fields, I won't bother getting in to what it looks like except saying it bears a striking

resemblance to a castle. I bang the knocker a few times. It's one of those brass dealies.

As the door opens I smell something roasting faintly.

The man at the door, he's young, and cute. He's not particularly tall, nor short. He has light features. He wears a black suit and red oven mitts. His face says "shocked" all over it. He says, "I don't mean to be rude, but why are you here?" I tell him, "We need to talk." He protests, "I can't imagine what about. My wife will be here any minute. Did you follow me from the bar yesterday?"

I say, "Mr. Marlowe, your wife will be late, again, as she always is. We need to talk." He pauses. Lightning interrupts the silence. Me I'm getting more damp and more stunningly beautiful with every drop of rain. I'm not wearing a bra and he can't help noticing. I'm soaked. I have everything I need in my purse.

He sighs unconvincingly, asks, "How do you know my name, where I live and about my wife?"

I answer honestly, "Because she hired me to prove that you were cheating on her."

He says, "I think you better come in."

We enter the impossibly big front hall, walk around a winding oxidized copper staircase and pass oriental vases, a Rembrandt, a Botticelli and some mounted Egyptian artifacts. Candelabras, with real wax candles, provide all our light from some heavenly altitude. The servants know to keep out of sight right about now.

The floor, I'm not making this up, is oak and the walls are all white. How can anyone live in a gallery?

He invites me into the family room. Yet another fireplace, again the kind with wood logs and fire, warms what's left of my soul. I break the agencies first rule: I spill the beans. I tell him everything about what his wife suspects. I know this man is no cheater. A lot of guys screw their wives but few will roast them turkey.

He doesn't get it. I don't blame him.

He offers me a drink and I accept.

I break the agencies second rule: I tell him everything about me. I tell the truth for the first time. All about my dad, the streets, being an escort and my brief triumph. I don't ham it up or sugar coat it.

I tell him that I don't want my visit to be a waste of time and that I really just want to help.

I down the tumbler of brandy and ask for another. I need all the liquid courage I can get. I tell him, "She's planning to divorce you no matter what."

He hands me the brandy. "Are you sure?" he asks. I nod. The poor guy looks heart broken. He stares wet-eyed at his ring. He says, "Her fucking old man is behind this."

"Probably."

"Thank you, but I don't know how this helps you."

My bag is right next to me. I open it. I tell him, "You can cheat on her, that way she'll get what she wants."

Lightning flashes in the window and Thunder roars. At no point do I tell him that I love him...

Back in the hotel I need a shower, I'm dripping.

The next morning a black limo waits for me downstairs. This time I don't rush. I have two coffees. I read half the paper.

I spend forty-five minutes on my hair. I wear a black and dark green silk chiffon dress. My shoes are gold stained leather from a renowned shop in Florence. My purse is gold and black velvet and cost more than most cars. My eye shadow is a kind of metallic green-gray. I think the lady at the counter said it was made out of crushed jade or something. When I'm done Venus would feel self-conscious next to me.

I'm gonna make that hag pay.

It's not like I stop traffic, but I do feel at least half the world's eyes on me. We get to the four hundred foot long cock and make our way along the vas deferens, while listening to pussy rock, until we are ejaculated onto the twenty-seventh floor.

The receptionist doesn't recognize me at first. Instead she gives me a glance that means she suspects I'm another toy intended for upstairs. Under the circumstances I don't blame her. I'm here on business.

"Ms. Boleyn?" questions the receptionist.

"That's me, Anne Boleyn," I say with my poker eyes. It falls on deaf ears. She goes, "She's ready to see you." I think, "Not bloody likely."

I take off the early 16th century solid gold bracelet I'm wearing on my right wrist, from the boss's house, and toss it at the girl. She's about my age. She's pretty; sorta. Her eyes are scared and she's speechless. I'm Anne Boleyn: the patron saint of whores. Before the poor thing can open her mouth I'm inside the door.

She was alone. She didn't say anything, nor did I, as I walked towards her. Instead we stared at each other, like wolves in the dark; patient. Power. I sat down comfortably before I was welcomed to. I smiled at her stone cold frown. Inside she was appraising every wrinkle on her face, but that wasn't what this was about.

"Has Nate called you?" I ask.

"No, Nathan has not," she answers grumpily.

I groan in an artificial way and say, "I have a confession to make."

Her face is red like an overly plump tomato. A vein in her forehead is popping like bubble wrap.

I tell her, "I fucked him last night." Now it's important to note that my smile is from ear to ear.

She shrieks, "You what?"

My sunshine demeanor disappears. I hand her a videocassette and say, "Oh don't worry, I got it on tape."

She yells, "What?"

Why she's hysterical, I honestly don't know.

"He's an honest man, Val, he's no cheater. But here's your divorce."

I open my handbag and drop the pistol on the desk. I say, "That's why I had to use that."

She whispers, "Is he dead?"

At this moment she's probably worrying about the bad press the company would get if we were caught.

I tell her "Don't worry, it isn't real."

She flashes her teeth and snaps, "How dare you?"

I say, "Everyone's better off. You wanted your husband a cheater and now he is. You wanted him to leave you and after this he'll never touch you again. And he... he... he desperately needed a good fuck. Don't you see?"

Tears stream down her face.

It isn't about right and wrong. It's about closure. "You see Val I figured it out. I have to quit being the queen of the whores. Maybe that meant being a dick, but just once. Not for me, but for him. I quit."

I tug some of the hair from in front of my face to behind my ear. I never thought it would be from fucking over some dumb broad that I'd be reborn.

"Val, thank you for showing me that it isn't about me."

Her hands are in front of her face, she sobs, since it's sunk into her head what just happened. She moans, "What have I done?"

I guess this is the story of my first love. Things just happen, there's no direction in life save the grave. Next, maybe college. I think I'll study sociology and re-integrate into society. I know what I need to know about psychology already. I'll get a desk job, work 9-5 for weekends. I'll do it all. I

could be at the next desk. Either that pretty girl you can't work up the nerve to talk to or hate unconditionally.

That night I dream of him. He has kids, a boy and a girl. He has a cute golden retriever. His wife is a good person: she's nothing like Val or me. He lives in a large house on a hill in the Midwest courtesy of Val's money. He never has to work. He has a white picket fence.

Back to Jack and Henry

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I just never thought the world would let me both love you and have you."

Jack asked, "How long have you had feelings for me?"

Henry nervously said, "Always. Ever since we were kids." Henry gulped, shook and added, "I love you Jack. I just didn't want it to be when we were fucking dead that you hear it. I was going to tell you but then Sam died and I've been all messed up. I try not to show how much of a wreck I really am. You want me to panic Jack? You want me to be afraid?"

Henry leaned into Jack.

Jack's voice was a trembling whisper, "What are you doing?"

Henry whispered back, "Too much talking, stupid-head."

They kissed. It was short, warm, sweet and tender. Then they sat close together mourning what could have been and sinking into feelings they had never known. There were glossy eyes all around.

Jack said, "When I was in the hospital, for... I just kept remembering the time you brought me the picture. I just wanted you there with me so much. That's when I figured it out, how I already felt."

The dice made snake eyes.

The Grim Reaper was about a hundred feet ahead of them.

The clock read 4:20.

Henry sparked the joint.

Now neither Henry nor Jack were afraid of death.

I was busy making calculations.

My preparations were already underway. I had already backed up my recorded data in the auxiliary hard drives/brain shielded deep within my sort of ships sort of hull. I had already chosen Andromeda for my next destination. I was finally finished with the murky waters of The Milky Way.

There's an abundance of life in your galaxy. It really is quite the anomaly. Just keep searching.

I had launched scouts, invisible to current human sight or technology, designed amongst other purposes to monitor your satellites and report any future findings.

If need be I can control your internet.

If need be I can control your weather.

I had other insurance policies that are also amongst you even now.

I was getting ready to talk to those humans.

"What difference can a boy and a girl make?" was what I was probably thinking.

What?

What is the perfect question prefix. Some languages, such as the long dead earthling language Nurute, only contain what questions.

If English was altered to contain only what questions, and you wanted to know someone's name, you would have to ask, "What is his/her name?" If you wanted to know where the closest instance of something happening is you'd have to ask, "What is the closest place...?" If you wanted to know why something was done you'd have to ask, "What is the reason for...?" If you wanted to know when something happened you could ask, "What time did it happen?" If you needed to know how something operates you'd ask, "What is its purpose?"

A language can, and often does, suffice with only what questions.

The Nurute are extinct, however.

What questions get right to the point.

What difference can a boy and a girl make?

The Grim Reaper was at the passenger side door.

The Grim Reaper tapped at the glass ...tap...tap...tap.

Jack rolled down the window and pot smoke billowed towards the Grim Reaper. Jack was holding the joint. It smelled like open rebellion.

Jack said, in a very calm voice, "I don't much care for you, douche bag death. You have this menacing kind of over the top 'I judge those who don't respect the scythe and my leathers' swagger that just screams insecurity. You have to learn to love yourself before you can expect other people to."

Henry's eyes were peeled open in disbelief.

Jack took a puff from her joint. Jack continued, "You look more emo than evil. You look like Nazi Santa Claus. You look like you just had a long day working in the cornfield."

The Grim Reaper looked at his scythe.

Jack said to Henry, "Back up fifty feet." She passed the joint to Henry.

Henry complied quickly with robotic efficiency.

The Grim Reaper took his time walking towards the front of the truck.

Henry knew what had to be done. He inhaled some smoke and unrolled his window. He breathed out and threw his pack of cigarettes at the Grim Reaper. The man shifted into drive and floored it.

The Grim Reaper picked up the pack of smokes from in front of him. He inspected the cigarette pack.

At the top of the package of cancer sticks was a warning label that read:

Warning: Tobacco products can cause death.

The truck ran over the Grim Reaper.

The Grim Reaper wasn't real anyway.

Nothing on the road was real except Jack and Henry.

We were at the Sand Castle again.

It was sunny. It was warm.

Henry tagged Jack and said, "You're it." He ran off.

They couldn't have been more than 7.

Jack's arm was fine. She ran after Henry. She couldn't outrace him. She hid in the crawl space.

Jack began to cry.

Henry raced over to her.

She touched him and said, "You're it."

That's when I unplugged them.

Change:

They woke up slowly into darkness.

I was wearing clothing simulated from pictures from a men's fashion magazine I pirated online. I wore a suit that cost more than most Earthlings would make in a life time which was described as an essential buy. I put on a modified form of sunglasses made to resemble ones worn by a underwear model at night on page 43. My grey fedora had to be altered only slightly from one a long dead screen legend wore in their most iconic film, to fit my awkward head shape. In the magazine the zombie was used to hawk cologne. The tagline was "Be a man." I needed to look the part.

I didn't want to scare them.

I suspect I looked very similar to a human then, only my skin was red. I was also, at 7 foot 3, abnormally tall. My tail felt uncomfortable down the right leg of my pants.

Henry and Jack were obviously wearing what they did on the road.

I raised the sort of laboratory lights to maximum, which was dim by your standards.

The baseball diamond shaped quasi laboratory had three ovular doors situated where the bases would be: one to the left, one straight ahead and one to the right. Only in this sense were Henry and Jack at home.

The room was largely filled with different medical and scientific machinery. The doors, walls, technology, floor, and frame of the room were

made of a shiny dark green sort of metal that was actually organic in origin. It is extracted as a liquid from a planet hotter than Mercury.

The chairs, boxes, desks, and cabinets of the sort of laboratory were made of a mahogany coloured wood that in tree form is actually nothing like the swietenia mahogany tree. For one thing it's sentient, for another they're real jerks. Think of The Forest of Fighting Trees. The only good thing about them is their corpses' potential for interior design.

The creatures were first chosen as construction materials because, like bamboo on earth, they grew remarkably quickly with little effort. Their smallest branches, or hands more accurately, looked quite similar to Aloe Vera.

There is no writing in my laboratory, no pictures and no blunt edges. I wouldn't want to unduly affect the development of your language, or culture (except where necessary). I also wouldn't want to causes any boobos.

There are potted plants, weeds, and trees of assorted sizes located throughout the room for various purposes.

As they did before, my sort of computer screens appeared to display black.

Jack thought, "Oh fuck, I have to shit bad."

All in all that's not bad for the beginning of a first contact dialogue. Usually such interactions begin with hostile threats. "We will vaporize your planet," or some such nonsense.

I said, through a contraption in my hand that translated my spoken thoughts into perfect English, with the soothing voice of a respected Hollywood actor nonetheless, "I have created a lavatory on your first left." Jack lifted herself off the metallic bed she had been lying on and ran to the washroom door attempting to ignore everything about her situation. When the door didn't open she thought timidly, "How do I..." to which I replied, "Walk through it." She complied without initially giving too much thought, all things considered, to my reading of her mind or door incorporeality.

In this time, Henry, who wasn't inspired to act by bodily motivations, had merely sat up. His mind was confused and constantly questioning itself. I told him, "I don't mean to scare you. I'm not going to harm you. I am not the devil you take me for."

Henry decided to allow me to explain myself before erupting in righteous indignation. Henry questioned, "Are you God?"

I said, "Hmm..."

Henry said, "You're an alien."

I responded, "Yes, clever observation, although somewhat alienating."

Henry questioned, "Are we dead?" Under other circumstances he would have laughed, I'm sure.

I answered, "No, you are unharmed."

Henry asked, "Why are we here?"

"Now that's more complicated. I don't know."

Henry thought about this for a while. He then asked, "Is this your ship?"

"Yes, well no, but it does choose to be here. If you want to see it as an object, and not a living being, then I kind of stole it."

"From who?"

"A tyrant who ruled my homeworld. I did design it. I watched its birth. I'm kind of like its father."

"Birth?"

"It's alive. It is as much alive as either of us. The ship seems to have its own will, as much as you can judge these things. It feels. It is quite curious about you two."

Henry looked up at the sky and said, "Oh God."

"Oh God."

I really don't know if there is a God or if there are Gods. I refuse to believe that our consciousness simply wavers away when the spark of life leaves our bodies but that doesn't mean there's a great papa in the sky.

The universe simply will not allow the destruction of anything, only the eventual transformation of everything. Even matter that is injected into a BLACKHOLE increases the mass of it.

I know that sometimes there seems to be magic.

I know that the overwhelming coincidences and situations of life sometimes seems to suggest that there is a cosmic power that dictates the ebb and flow of all things; but I also know that the shocking atrocities and structures of societies seem to suggest that the flow is either downwards or simply patterns emerging from random data. Maybe God's just an excuse for dismissing entropy.

Or maybe God's a dick who enjoys fucking us.

It's quite possible that we are all just bouncing atoms. It's quite possible that man exists to eat, drink, breathe, birth, and fuck. That and shit and piss and some of you menstruate. It's quite possible that we are all insignificant despite how wrapped up in our worlds we may be. We can only hope to be so lucky.

The reason I have resolved to abandon the search for God that took from me the first 4000 years of my life and takes the entire life of most of my species is because of the greater insignificance I would have if I were merely a cog in the machine of some great deity's manufactured destiny.

Henry stopped searching for God after he lost his brother. Henry just didn't believe.

Jack stopped searching for God when she decided if she found God she would blame him/her. Jack believed she was happier without God.

Regardless of what I do, if there is an omnipotent God I am doing his bidding. So why not spend my time loving who I will love, doing what I feel is right, and exposing that notions of God are generally mind control or delusion?

The more I travel the less I believe. I have yet to find any hard evidence either way.

Religion, cell phones, corporations, governments, employers, teachers and social media are trying to tell you what to do. Everyone's actions are his or her own choice.

There is likely no God.

There is likely no Devil.

As long as you eat, drink, breath, birth, shit, piss and fuck the rest IS UP TO YOU.

No matter what you do, how do you know it's better, or worse, than the alternatives? I firmly believe that you will die all the same.

Most of you already know this on some level.

Jack said from the washroom, "Henry come here."

Henry said, "Um... Excuse me a second."

I said, "I'm 31,242 of your years old. I am not in a rush."

Henry thought, "What do you say to that?"

I said, 'L' 'O' 'L' through the contraption.

Henry looked shocked. He stopped cold for a second. He thought, "I wonder if he can read my thoughts?" as he continued his walk towards the washroom.

As Henry stepped into the washroom he was struck by absolute awe.

I had completely replicated the exact mostly yellow coloured washroom in Jack's childhood home. The room had black trim and a black door. I had even replicated the painting of an English castle, on a knoll, at dusk that hung on the wall. There were the black toilet, shower, sink and mirror precisely as they remembered them. The mirror was even slightly crooked, mirroring Jack's mirror which was slightly crooked. Outside the window the sun shined on a typical summer day in the middle of their hometown. Even the view was the same. Jack was standing, looking out the window.

The room smelt strongly of air freshener, the same scent Jack's family used.

Both thought, briefly, about bolting out the window.

Jack said to Henry, "What the fuck?"

Henry said, "He's an alien and we're on his ship?"

Jack said, "What the fuck?"

"Jack."

"Yeah?"

"Jack."

"Yeah Henry, what is it?"

Henry smirked. He said, "We must be over the rainbow."

Jack was not amused.

Jack questioned angrily, "Did he probe us?"

Henry said, "Who the fuck cares? Jack don't you get it? We're alive."

Jack whispered, "For the time being. We're on a highly advanced fucking alien space ship. Keep your voice down stupidhead."

Henry said calmly, "He said he "will not harm" us."

Jack whispered, "Well he wouldn't say it if he would, would he?"

Henry said, "Look let's just go out there and talk to him."

Jack pleaded, "I don't trust him. This is too surreal to be true." Jack questioned, "What about Rick? What about the road we were on? How did we get here? Who is he? When can we go home?" Jack wondered to herself, "Why us?"

Questions Asked

Who, what, where, why, when and how begin the majority of the questions asked in English. Earthlings ask,

"Who am I?"

"What's happening?"

"Where are we?"

"Why am I so lost?"

"When is it?"

"How did I get here?"

They usually ask those questions in the first five minutes of their lives. Generally it's asked in that order. It comes out as gibberish.

They spend the rest of their lives asking the same questions with increasing articulation.

People ask these questions for reassuring answers, but the answers change, as does everything. Mankind comes in many colours, is lost wherever it is and spreads wherever it can, much like lipstick. Man gets old and dies and never knows why: the price of intelligence is never ending wonder.

Sometimes I think the only surety about humanity is that they will be unsure. Sometimes.

Henry and Jack walked out of the washroom.

I said, "I didn't probe you. I saved your lives."

Henry said, "I knew it, you're telepathic."

Jack asked, "Did you drug us? Am I hallucinating?" Most "alien encounters" on Earth are simply LSD hallucinations or the product of some other chemical imbalance. Sometimes they're just realistic dreams. Sometimes they're weather-balloons, or reflections of the moon over a calm body of water. That or lies backed up by photo editing software, or the chemicals used to develop prints.

Henry asked, "Is this a game show or something?" Your society has become so warped that even tragedies have become suspect television rating schemes.

I stopped using my interpreter. I spoke directly into Henry and Jack's minds. I projected the words, "You were not drugged. You are not hallucinating. This is probably not a game." There was no prank show host hiding behind my ficus tree to explain this was all a ruse.

I confessed to Henry and Jack about the device that they were hooked up to and how it occupied their minds with trials as it deciphered their language, culture, physiology, technology, and archived their experiences. I apologized that as a result of the trials I had been spectator to their most personal memories. I just wanted to be able to interact with them.

Did you believe that? They did. The truth is that I have a perverse curiosity to know all that I can know. I thought that would be quite clear by now.

I told them, with the translator, that I stopped the car by firing at it a kind of goop. My ship saved their lives by jizzing all over them. I explained that my sort of robots brought them to the ship unconscious. They both fainted shortly before, believing they were going to hit the tree.

I informed them that I couldn't do anything for Rick.

At that point Jack asked, "What time is it?" I answered, "Eleven in the morning. You are late for work."

Jack knew that was the least of her worries. She questioned, "Can we just go home?"

I replied, "Let me first repay you for invading your privacy."

I could tell that Henry didn't want to skip through our first contact as quickly as Jack did. Some wannabe reporter!

I projected my story into their marbles.

I had never let any of the species I encountered in my travels, those without telepathy anyway, into my head before that day. I couldn't reconcile what I had done (their horrible experience on that road), what I would ask, and the burden of the lives they would leave behind, otherwise.

At first Henry and Jack saw cocoons, with acidic puss oozing out, hanging from a tree, and then they saw the plummet. Next they saw thousands of (what looked like) blue ants swimming around a muddy puddle underneath a white sky. They saw a binary star system as no man had seen before. They then became aware that they were watching the ants from the perspective of another such ant. They watched the ants grow. It was as if a time-lapse montage was manifest. Thousands of years passed in minutes.

When the ants were about the size of an earthling chipmunk (though decidedly less cuddly) a bunch of beings, which looked similar to me, grabbed the ant from underneath the water and separated it from the rest of the creepy

crawlies. These beings wore ceremonial garb, which meant plain yellow cloaks with the symbol of two circles merging into one, in gray, on their back.

As the ant was being carried away it became apparent to Henry and Jack, through the reflection from the pond, that this ant was actually red in colour.

They flashed a few thousand years forward discovering that the ant was merely my humble beginnings.

They saw my world. Imagine seeing an alien future. Imagine seeing things you have no words for. Imagine seeing colours you haven't seen before. You can guess that what follows is an abridgment of their experience and they themselves were only seeing the highlight reel.

On my world enormous elegant floating metropolises, with buildings of all shapes and sizes and materials and colours, some which stretched to the clouds, were built over beautiful pristine forests, mountains and tundra. They saw that those of my species that were red lived in these cities. They saw that we had forms of art, and clothing, and technology, and food, and religion, and hospitals, and billboards, and social stratification, like you do. We have considerably less lights though; one benefit of being able to see in the dark.

They saw that those of my species that were blue lived on the ground in primitive villages and towns as farmers. Most of the residences in the towns seemed much like shacks. They were the ones that had TV, something that resembled the Internet, and a form of pornography. It was really just hugging, isn't that adorable? They also had commodity fetishism and prices that ended in ninety nine cents.

They witnessed as my people enslaved many of the blue skins. These "servants" lined up for the opportunity, resumes in hand, don't get me wrong, it was that or starvation. They were taken from the villages and made to perform meaningless tasks in the cities for table scraps. Most of the food and resources that grew on the ground, or came from within it, was the property of the red skins, even though blue skins vastly outnumbered us, and actually lived on the land. Any theft was punishable by death. No farmer should have

to die of hunger, or for eating the crops that grew from his toil. These farmers were told they were lesser beings.

Lies stacked on lies.

Money is a lie that controls you. Companies are lies that control money. Governments are lies that supposedly control companies. Political systems are lies that control governments. You are tricked into believing you can control political systems through Democracy.

Remember that people who elected Hitler thought they were electing a socialist party. He won a democratic election. Sure there was widespread election fraud, but when is there ever not.

The system is a rigged deck.

How can your vote matter if your options are lies? In Canada how can one select on a ballot their favorite head of Cerberus? In America you have 50/50 chance of choosing the lesser evil.

Sure donkeys may be jackasses, but at least they don't stomp all over fucking everything.

It seems to me that every system of government on Earth functions to control their people, while they should be controlled by their people.

I had never witnessed a world's culture become vice incarnate as fast as Earth's has. Is it unfair to make the intuitive leap to an understanding of man as a collective of pathological liars? I believe the same of my species. As much as I'd like to think otherwise, I am not better than you.

The truth is the ground will have us all in the end.

After that, we'll return to a star.

The two friends had a glimpse of my education.

They gawked at the grueling systems we used to choose our professions and privilege the few above the many. SATs and LSATs would seem like a delightful romp, compared to the testing equivalent of Russian roulette. We had a quasi-meritocracy, but only for those whose skin was riddled with red pigment.

They saw that as I was studying, around the clock, to be a leader of my people I fell in love with a blue skin that worked in my living space. They saw the differences that were meant to separate us mooted by an unspoken bond. They saw me educate this worker in what little spare time I had. They saw we too had unrequited love once.

Our partnerships are built around friendships as we don't reproduce. We have only one sex, as you have only one race. Evangelists don't worry, we aren't gay, our species has no sexual organs. We're all basically mannequins down there. In Earth terms, we're all anatomically incorrect.

They saw also as we formed an underground egalitarian association for societal advancement comprised of both blue and red skinned individuals. They would be my closest advisors. We would change the world. We would unfortunately doom it.

They saw my secret sort of marriage. They saw boundless happiness.

I showed them the part of my life where I was elected leader of my people. Then they watched as I rushed to make the blue skins equal citizens.

Sadly that was the greatest mistake I could ever make.

You see normally the blue skins died very young. Most of them actually died before they were the size of a chipmunk. At this stage in their development, like their sibling red skins, their minds were less developed than the animals our civilization culled for food. Once blue skins became equal citizens, the breeding grounds were protected from predators and from natural disasters. Before this only the red skins were extracted from the pools, whereas the blue skins were left to their own devices until they reached a certain maturity.

A kind of tent was erected over the Great Tree and the birthing pools.

The free market extremists in my opponent's administration argued there were just too many future taxpayers in the puddles to leave their gestation to fate. I think they just wanted more cheap labor, to offset the loss of slavery. Profit was the general concern, however many within my party agreed for religious or moral reasons.

Henry and Jack watched as our population exploded. If only we had tobacco on my world. If only we didn't have gun control. If only we didn't have seat belts.

We were just too hasty. We were too idealistic. We should have planned environmental safeguards alongside equality. We should have developed our infrastructure simultaneously as well. When we rolled out equality, we should have redistributing some of the red skins' wealth to the blue skins. My point is blue skins became equal citizens under law, but blue skins did not become equal within the economy.

Henry and Jack watched as we struggled to find agricultural and sociological solutions to deal with an expanding empire. We made progress but our speed was insufficient to accommodate the exploding populace.

My advisors had found an uninhabited planet nearby that could be colonized with a process similar to terraforming. We began building ships and researching the necessary technologies. It was then that the flagship that Henry, Jack and I were occupying was born. It is truly unique. My best friend is my masterpiece.

Everything changed when the blue skins began to outnumber us. Our society would best be described in English as a phony republic. We were supposedly a capitalist democracy with many elected officials in bed with big business, just like many of your countries. The blue skins could now vote and run for office as they were now equal under policy. The blue skins had never been in the position to control anything. They had also never been educated sufficiently. When their wealth began to increase they consumed more, littered more, and paid little attention to the toll taken on the biosphere. We even had our own neglected documentaries trying to warn of the

environmental dangers ahead. The worst offenders were still the red skins. Our opulent lifestyle had always be unsustainable.

It was clear to Henry and Jack that the impending apocalypse was the fault of the red skins. We had controlled the blue skins through propaganda and through ideology for many millennia. It was only then that everything was beginning to unravel, but the problem was not equality.

Red skins used to teach the blue skins how to act and think in commercials in lieu of a proper education. They were controlled through consumerism, sound familiar?

They had schools now, but those schools were a farce and mechanisms were in place to bar entry to prestigious careers under seemingly legitimate grounds.

Henry and Jack watched as I was defeated in an election and a blue skin celebrity was appointed our kind of head of state. To add insult to injury, he was illiterate. Ironically, he was a write-in candidate.

We all lived under the same two suns, but we were one divided people. I just wanted equality. Inevitably, though, the pendulum will swing.

They watched the war that ensued when the blue skins attempted to take resources away from us red skins. They tried to take my wife away from me but we hid in a village on the ground with our family under assumed identities. Even through that time we were personally happy. We didn't need luxuries.

We had two young red skins in our family unit. They came, of course, from the breeding grounds as we did. The children and I disguised our appearances to look blue through crude make-up made of a crushed indigenous root.

The red skins won that war; it was villagers with melee weapons versus high powered satellite lasers. Even calling it a war conceals that it was a slaughter. Genocide, really. The blue skins were forbidden to enter the cities once more. The blue skin celebrity politician was sentenced to death and

exploded on the blue skin equivalent of live television. Highest rated program ever!

The general of the red skin army took office. Fearing a struggle for power the general forbid me entry to the cities and cited me as the cause for the blue skin uprising. Martial Law took over.

The blue skins continued to multiply on land and eventually mines, mills, farms, manufacturing depots and landfills accounted for the majority of the planet's landmass. During that time their cabals slaughtered any red skin before their moment of ascension.

The planet's surface became a wasteland very soon after.

In my lifetime my planet went from Eden to Gomorrah.

Like humans, we were really only one race scientifically speaking and were paying the price for illogical bigotry.

The red skins left my planet, in my ship and others, journeying for the new world.

Henry and Jack saw all this. Perhaps if the colours of our skins were inverted this would have made more sense to them.

The population on our planet was only controlled by a plague that was spurred on by excessive consumption, poor hygiene and sanitation. It would be funny if it weren't tragic.

Are you surprised that aliens have such familiar problems?

Celestial bodies are amazing at establishing order when chaos attempts to emerge. This is happening as a constant cycle in your star, your sun, Sol. The sun's gravitational equilibrium insures that there is a balance between the pressure pushing outwards and the weight of the layers on top of it.

Before the pandemic, most were religious. Most tried to justify their actions to themselves based on a faith, dogma, and a dusty old tome. Even I saw my fate as being willed at one point, being what was supposed to happen. We kept trying to be optimistic. We still hoped.

We had a Jesus or Buddha if you'd prefer: we had a yellow skin. We had this supposed emissary of the maker that instructed us what to do and what to think and blah, blah, blah. I am ashamed to say that I was once one of his disciples and he was one of my advisors. He kept telling me not to worry, that everything was already scripted, the past, the future and the present. He told me I would help bring about peace to the universe. I was gullible.

He inspired me. Even as a leader he governed me. I was a preachy leader. I was blinded by his capacity for love and acceptance.

I believed in the yellow skin up until the great plague. My companion and one of my children perished, as did the vast majority of my kind. A rumor began to circulate that the yellow skin was only yellow because of a natural genetic mutation. It was then (when scientists came demanding blood samples) that the yellow skin disappeared without a trace.

Henry and Jack saw all this, but only bits and pieces.

Sometimes shit just keeps happening.

That's when I stopped believing in the power of love. That's when I stopped believing in God and politics. I then knew only science. When you live as long as we do it's common place to completely change professions. I learned all I could learn and consumed knowledge greedily. I discovered I had an aptitude for hypothesizing. I would not let anything like this happen again. I was already stoic, but now a skeptic also.

I barely remember my partner now. If we did not have our data files my child would not remember his/her (I refuse to say its) face.

Eventually a new government was formed. I was the temporary leader. I had become sick of what my home had become and promised change. The planet was reclaimed slowly. Growth spread. Our seed bank came in really handy, as I'm sure yours will. The sort of dome that protected the breeding

grounds was removed once again so that nature could set her balance. You probably think that's barbaric, but imagine the chaos if every sperm aimed true...

The Ouroboros is the perfect symbol for regeneration across the cosmos, but not for growth. We were back to square one, but we could choose a new path.

This time there was an equal chance for both the red skins and the blue skins. There was no more collection of red skins. There was equality and equilibrium and we thrived.

We made our utopia out of our dystopia. Paradise is not cheap; it cost us greatly.

2,573 of your years after the red skins left my ship returned to me. It told me through a long range telepathic signal (just a red-shifted radio wave really) that the red skins had expanded their army.

It, my ship, had defected from that army as it had decided that I was a more logical leader for the red skins than a General who was hell bent on the domination of all alien life forms and the colonization of all habitable planets. Apparently the General hadn't learned his/her lesson on the importance of co-existence. He was playing God, he was growing clones of the Sacred Tree. I'm sure many of the red skins only followed the General's orders out of fear and felt trapped within a totalizing institution.

My ship reprogrammed its robot crew to obey only my commands. In the books of the red skin army my ship is a traitor to be fired at on sight. According to my ship the General is "a short man, stunted intellectually, with a rightly founded inferiority complex."

My youngest child, the only other adult red skin on the planet, was elected thereafter and I set about a mission of space exploration, redemption and revenge. I miss my child. I have more faith in him/her than I ever did in the yellow skin or myself. We send long range communications whenever possible.

Henry and Jack saw all this.

Henry and Jack learned all I knew about AIDS and BLACKHOLES.

Henry and Jack saw me travel from world to world and knew what I would ask from them.

Jack asked, "Why us?"

You just knew in her head she was asking, "What difference can a girl and boy make?"

I told her, "You are good and so far uncorrupted people. It has to be someone. Why not you?"

I gave them their only warning. I told them the story of Nahoto. That was the first time I told it in English.

Henry said, "We're just two kids. Two slacker stoners, I might add. We aren't special. Is this a joke?"

I replied, "If I approached your government they would be hostile towards me. They would fear me even more than you do. I can read your minds and know that you are trying to battle the insecurities within you. Don't you get it?"

Henry questioned, "How is Earth supposed to help? We don't have spaceships that can traverse galaxies, we have short, nasty, selfish lives, and we can never agree on anything. Our technology is vastly inferior to yours."

Jack said, "It's not fair to everyone else for us to make this choice. You make it sound so simple. Me and Henry just want to go back to our short, nasty and selfish lives."

I answered, "Everyone wants peace, and to live, and to be normal; that's what we're all fighting and dying crazily for."

"So the whole galaxy cluster is at war? Do you really mean to tell me that celestial beings are no more sophisticated than a bunch of dumbass apes on what you seem to consider some backwater dump?" asked Henry.

I was caught off-guard. There was silence for some time.

"The individual can be intelligent but the society is generally not: like on Earth. The coalition of the Universal Solitude Army is not very different from Nazi Germany. The few are controlling the many through brainwashing. It is not overt mind control, but subtle societal conditioning. I can only give you the tools to participate in the resistance; I am incapable of preventing all the bastards out there from attempting to colonize you."

Jack asked, "So what would we get if we said yes?"

I told them what they had seen me say a thousand different times in as many different languages, "I can't tell you, I can't risk intelligence falling into their hands. The only chance of the resistance succeeding is if the less powerful worlds join as well and fight, at our side, with us as one. This is no time for weakness, division, or hierarchy. Don't think of Earth as it is, but as it can be, as you can make it."

Henry was reminded of the ending to "The Thinking Thimble."

They didn't want to fight. They didn't want to accept that sometimes violence can only be solved with violence. They didn't realize that this war was coming to them whether they wanted it or not.

Henry said, "It's not whether or not we agree, but whether or not we should. Would it be right to arm Native Americans with shoulder mounted ICBMs before Columbus arrived? I can picture the British all drinking their tea innocently aware. You may ponder whether or not you're a god, but you're sure acting like someone with a god complex." Henry was internally questioning whether he could trust my judgement.

I told Henry,

"You were literally celebrating a political win that will continue a status quo which you don't want. That was the entire reason why you were at the party in the first place. That party was why you were on that road. He ran on the platform of "change." They all do. Sometimes they change the words. Sometimes the change they promise is openly a regression.

All the coincidences that made this night happen as it did should not be ignored. The action/reaction chain brought you here. There is "hope" for your world. You are on a planet, at a time, where you could witness a revolution unlike any you have ever seen before... or you could be that revolution. If you feel inconsequential do something about it. Do you want to start watching genocides over lack of water on a planet that's primarily covered in water."

Change is unavoidable.

I asked them,

"Will you commit your planet's help to fight the tyrant controlled force that is the Univeral Solitude Army as it is the only way to save your world?"

Henry responded, "You saved me and Jack."

I turned to Jack and asked, "And you?"

Jack, unsure, mumbled, "Maybe?"

I said, "Your apathy disgusts me. I need a yes."

Jack said, "Yes, maybe."

That's when Henry smiled, put his arm out, and we shook on it. He said, "We'll do what we can." He thought, "...immediately after we get ourselves psychiatrically examined." Their honest apprehension was a welcome change from the false loyalty of those who had used what I had given them for personal gain.

I put my hand out to Jack. But her brow furrowed.

She objected, "Oh no, if we do this, we're doing it right."

And yes it happened.

I inhaled every time and it was wonderful. Deal with it. I coughed like a little bitch and everything. We hung out smoking Sam's Technicolor, listening to music from Henry's MP3 player, and eating veggie dishes. Henry and Jack talked often about Sam. Henry knew Jack had suggested this to honor his brother.

Don't worry. I had tested the weed and food to make sure there wouldn't be any unexpected side-effects pertaining to my particular physiology.

I gave them the tools that they would need.

I told them, "Time is of the essence. I will communicate further instructions in the near future."

I loved them as younger siblings for a minute there. When they asked me what the meaning of life was I just expressed that I thought they were closer to it than I was. I told them that since my partner and kid died I've just kind of soldiered on aimlessly trying to do what's right until I reach my end and find out once and for all if I'll get to see them again.

I hope for something I don't think is going to happen.

I'd rather fight for an ideal than an idol any day.

We said our goodbyes. They left.

The last I saw them they were on the ground, staring at the conquered road before them, holding each other's hands, silhouetted by the moonlight. I wonder if she clinked her emerald green heels together three times.

I'm sorry for what I asked of them, what I did to them. I was sorry I had even gone to your disgusting planet to be honest.

Inevitably there will be recession and progression.

I can tell you now that change will continue.

Shit happens.

I'd like to tell you that I felt this time things would be different. I had no reason to think Henry or Jack would be any different from Nahoto. Still, change is inevitable.

I didn't know whether you would survive the coming war. When you are as old as I am you just kind of look at the shorter life-spanned creatures as expendable, the way most of you readers would look at cattle really (though don't worry, I'm a vegetarian).

Henry and Jack would be my messiahs and/or martyrs as millions before them have been. Everyone is corruptible by power. It hurt more, because I liked them. I truly liked them.

I wished things would be different but my experiences told me otherwise.

What difference can a girl and boy make?

I feared they would pretend this was all a dream. I feared this all was a dream. As I left Earth I wrote...

"Pretenders..."

"...that's what I will call your species in my native language. You are so good at pretending most of the time you don't realize that you're doing it. You pretend that you've overcome nature, but who among you will live forever? You pretend that your accumulation of stuff increases your happiness, but don't you remember how happy cardboard boxes once made you? You pretend that you know answers, when all you can possibly know is what your senses tell you and your mind infers. You pretend that the powers that be are more than just the powers that be. You purposely forget that Rome will fall,

because the powers that be tell you paradise is a pipedream. Sustainable crude oil: that's the pipedream.

"You are all pretenders of different proficiencies. The truth is that every living creature is from the stars and destined to return to them. "All the world's a stage," as Shakespeare would say. You are all character actors. The lives you lead must be remembered as the accepted (or unhappy) make believe that they are.

"Maybe that's why there are so few human heroes. Nobody cares, because there's so little reason to this madness. The white man's burden is apathy.

"Where is ambition in the altruistic? Maybe it died on a cross. Maybe people are too busy praising the few heroes they have to become heroes themselves.

"Where are the fucking hippies? Was the suit and expense account worth selling out, or worse, did they settle for less? I hope these once free-loving long haired radicals all have boring unhappy sexless marriages and bald heads. Boo the baby boomers. People change all the time. There is no reason to think that nations can't. There is no reason to think that the nature of corporations can't. If this is bothering you, it's simply because I'm treating you like you have the personal power to change things and blah, blah, blah. You do, sort of, but I didn't think you were going to. I just wanted you to realize that your world is partially your fault. Complacency is complacency.

"Around now you're justifying yourself, if you weren't already. There's something(s) in your life that make(s) you think you're better than others or that you shouldn't have to care about them. Or maybe you're just selfish because you see no point in being any other way. I confess I don't really see a point either. The system is more than one man or woman. I feel like a stupid pointless oaf for wanting the universe to be a better place. It won't be. Well, I suppose it will be thanks to change. BUT THEN IT'LL BE EVEN WORSE!

"Oh, no, wait, oh you do actually do your part? So sorry sir or ma'am. BULLSHIT!"

Speaking of pointless, I was pondering, "What's the purpose of humanity? In the universe everything seems to exist in equilibrium. Everything has a purpose. Like all other mammals on Earth. There is one perpetual motion machine in the universe, or rather, the universe is the only perpetual motion machine.

"Everything is a cog within it: from the ardvark, to the industrial beaver, to the exhibitionist naked malrat. On a scale from the universal to the infinitesimal everything else exists for a reason. In this way, you could say, there is fate. However humanity's failed attempt to establish a place for itself within nature's equilibrium resulted in it constructing a new equilibrium that marginalized nature. Maybe originally there was intelligent design on Earth, but I propose that humanity is in fact broken. Man does not have purpose. Biblically speaking, man was supposed to tend the garden. Now you surround yourselves with concrete.

"What is your purpose? Do you have more than one? I thought one was stretching it. Sorry to burst your bubble but the Earth is as insignificant as a speck of sand. There are more stars in the heavens than grains of sand on Earth.

"You must have balls of brass to pretend you are IMPORTANT."

Why am I writing this novel? I need you to realize that you are nothing individually. I need you to do this so that you'll finally understand that you are alike your neighbor. I'm trying to create a brotherhood of man here. I have my reasons.

You may as well go on pretending. Up until now I have concentrated on the negative consequences of your pretending, but I do believe you are a particularly gifted organism. Living in denial is one hell of an evolutionary advantage. That's why lions and tigers are in zoos, and the weakest human children point and laugh at them, while eating ice cream cones, behind reinforced glass. How humiliating that must be.

Your ability to pretend is why your society is so sophisticated. People do different jobs despite being basically the same thing. To you, a doctor and a construction worker are as different as night and day. You divide yourselves,

specialize yourselves, in order to overcome obstacles. Instead of sharing a plain with guerillas and gazelles, you share planes with pilots and podiatrists. Globalization is the culmination of man's endeavor to eclipse the natural order.

And yet, at the same time, the underprivileged amongst you are trapped between intangible lines that were drawn on maps by now long dead white, heterosexual, male tycoons. Race differentiation is still used to point out that some are different from your ideal norm (incidentally, once again, there is only one human race). You can extrapolate with the best of them.

The wealthy among you have even bestialized your poor.

Much worse, they've anthropomorphized corporations.

It seems normal and logical to humanity that many lands rich in resources should be considered poor and littered with starving children, while asphalt jungles are riddled with blue whales: fat people who vote to the far right.

When will your West admit that colonialism was a mistake and that neo-colonialism must end?

When will the dominators in the universe realize that dominating is a mistake?

As I passed your moon I did hope Henry and Jack would save your world. Like them I only wanted peace, to live, and to be happy.

It's just... sometimes shit just keeps happening. I didn't think humanity would play a big role in the coming war. I was exchanging new friends for cannon fodder.

Freedom's blunderbuss does not discriminate.

I couldn't stop wondering, "What difference can a girl and boy make?"

Why am I writing this? I was wrong.

PART FIVE

Sometimes Shit Just Keeps Happening

I didn't leave Sol's grasp.

My ship stalled near Jupiter's orbit.

At first the screens were completely unresponsive. When your computer is conscious, turning it off and back on again is no longer the first course of action. A single warning shortly appeared on the screen, "Possible PARADOX! detected in memory banks. Locate Henry's memory file and delete." When I probed for more information my ship just mumbled over the loud speaker, "It must be you...er...It must be something you will do. Delete or face the imminent threat of AIDS."

I thought, "What will I do?" I've never seen the old girl in such a state.

Through the window I saw an AIDS command vessel within mere kilometers of my ship.

It had arrived without notice. I could hear, within my head, what I presumed to be a standard protocol boarding notice. I craved a speedy death, I wanted nothing of the bonsai business. I walked slowly towards the docking hatch; I said my farewells to the ship. It couldn't hear me due to its sudden-onset senility. The flashing green light indicated the connection had been made. A chime sounded to signify that the hatch door next to me was requested opened.

The door opened.

Someone entered. He, or she, or it was wearing AIDS ornamental battle gear. He/she/it was covered from head to toe. The helmet completely

disguised their appearance and blocked their thoughts from me. Imagine meeting someone with your eyes closed; how discombobulating would that be? I couldn't even tell what species the creature was, if it was a creature at all. Surprisingly, the door closed and a different chime indicated that the passage between the ships was empty. The thing was alone. Even more curious, he/she/it offered a hand as if to be shaken in introduction. There are far more common greetings across the universe. I obliged, and my assumption was confirmed.

This was nothing compared to he/she/it speaking English to me. The voice of the being was obscured through a mechanism within the helmet, or perhaps the being inside didn't even speak the language and I was hearing a translation. I couldn't be truly sure if the voice was even human. I supposed they could have been a robot. He/she/it had introduced himself/herself/itself as one of the founders of AIDS and asked, quite politely, "Would you please accompany me to the bridge?"

The supposed founder of AIDS dropped a gadget on my bridge's main panel. Immediately the error messages disappeared. My ship's short term memory had been drastically erased, as was the file that had caused the commotion. The response was unethical, to say the very least. My ship likely asked itself, "What did I do last night?"

The founder reached into the left pocket of his outer coat and produced a few old folded sheets of what appeared to be tree paper. Such an archaic communication method furthered the puzzle. He, or she, or it, handed the sheets to me.

I was attempting to unravel this unusual predicament and peculiar parchment. Either this entity was a founder of AIDS or he/she/it was not, but wanted to create that impression. If this entity was a founder of AIDS, he/she/it was either from Earth or he/she/it was not, but wanted me to think as much. If this entity was from Earth, he/she/it was likely a human, but could be an alien, a time traveler, or a robot. If this entity was from Earth, it either spoke English normally, or it did not and wished to not speak in their native tongue and therefore selected a koine for dialogue, having realized my ship

came from Earth. If this English speaking entity was a human then he/she/it was likely either from an alternate reality, a future yet to come, both, or had been abducted by an alien vessel. There is either a connection between the creation of AIDS and the individual or there is not. There is, as of yet, no hard evidence of the connection or that alternate realities exist.

Clearly probing would be necessary.

I thought I was being fucked with, as you may now feel.

Public Transit

The only aliens that I know of who had visited Earth before me now run public transit companies across 5 major North American metropolises. Their species looks remarkably similar to Homo sapiens, close enough to pass, but not perfectly. They are conducting a sociological experiment to see what happens to a population that is consistently late.

I felt like a mouse must feel when it is being toyed with by a cat

The founder said, "Read this. How could this story have been written years before you established contact?" The story was Henry's "The Maniac and his Toaster," he hadn't shown it to anyone as he always felt it seemed like a small part of something bigger. I hadn't read it before, and since finishing it Henry hadn't read it either.

The Maniac and his Toaster

There was a world where no one sang. The only dances were soldiers' parades. The only bells signalled war. There were no smiles or laughs. There was no refrain.

There were only stoic grimaces. There was only step, step, step, over and over again. The soldiers only spoke when spoken to. The soldiers had no hearts and no love. They lived in a literal and figurative world of darkness. No sun shone on their planet. They didn't even need symbols to fall behind.

The surface of the world was riddled with volcanoes.

All that rained was volcanic ash. The air was thick and black with it.

Nothing grew on the planet naturally.

The soldiers did as they were told. Bringing war and dying in war were the soldier's responsibilities. Soldiers were infertile.

Commanders would only be heard issuing orders from loud speakers.

A typical communication from the speaker would be, "Red bird leader, order command 1., have green bird leader primed and instructed on pre-flight barracks procedures. Red bird leader, order command 2., issue verbal command, "Await order commands," to green bird leader. Red bird leader, order command 3., have your squad report to red bird post-haste for more commands."

A good soldier never questioned orders.

The punishment for questioning orders was death by electrocution.

It was extremely rare for soldiers to return.

Soldiers only returned upon victory.

There was no reward for victory.

Victorious soldiers were next in line for order commands. Victorious soldiers had only completed half of their responsibilities.

Each soldier from that planet was named after that planet and designated a chronologically determined five-digit reference number. In English that planet's name would best translate to "Abyss."

Once a soldier had been named he would be assigned to a squadron.

At any one time the planet would only ever have three squadrons: a blue squadron, a red squadron and a green squadron.

This is the story of Abyss-753-2-4

Abyss-753-2-4 had risen to the rank of blue bird leader commander.

Promotions were purely random.

Blue bird soldiers outranked red bird soldiers, which outranked green bird soldiers. Blue bird soldiers were destined for blue birds. Red bird soldiers were intended for red birds and so on.

There were four buildings on Abyss. The first was a hanger titled "Manufacturing Depot-753," and the second was a laboratory labelled "Ministry of Education-753."

The other two buildings were both barracks: one was titled "Reserve Barracks-753," and one was titled "Pre-Flight Barracks-753."

The barrack's walls, bunks, storage units and machinery changed colour to reflect its inhabitant's designations.

LED lights would display a soldier's name and rank on everything associated with that soldier, be it a bunk, a rifle, or a storage box.

There was no character to anything.

Soldiers were not to be individuals.

Soldiers were encouraged not to think unless necessary.

Abyss-753-2-4 always tried to do what he was supposed to. He believed that to be his purpose.

If Abyss-753-2-4 thought, his thoughts would be: concerning his completing his mission, necessary to his operation, about how he shouldn't be thinking, by accident, or out of fear.

Soldiers who thought out loud were electrocuted.

Soldiers who made random unnecessary noise were electrocuted.

Soldiers who failed to comply with their squadron leader's commands were electrocuted.

At what was classified as daybreak two chimes sounded. The chimes were 15 seconds apart.

Soldiers who weren't in line by the second chime, no matter the hold up, were electrocuted.

Soldiers who disobeyed any rules were electrocuted.

The soldiers had been instructed of their 391 rules of conduct.

Considering all the potential offences punished by electrocution one would think that soldiers would be dropping like flies from a zapper, but this was not the case.

Out of the 24 soldiers in Abyss-753-2-4's blue squadron only five had been electrocuted.

Electrocutions were carried out by rooms, if they happened in a room, and by the highest ranking soldier if they happened outside. All five electrocuted soldiers had been terminated by streams of electricity that traveled from their bunker's ceiling through the selected soldier and finally dissipated in the ground. Surrounding soldiers would feel a painful shock that reminded them to keep in line.

The soldiers were under constant surveillance.

If any blue bird soldier had committed an offence outside it would have been Abyss-753-2-4 that discharged them.

The offences that led to electrocution were often unforeseeable.

The first soldier terminated by electrocution had simply arrived in line a millisecond after the second chime sounded as he had only woken from the rustling of other soldiers and not the warning chime.

The third soldier was terminated because his rifle began displaying an error message. He simply said out loud, "Error Message 9, Error Mess—" and received an electrocution.

The fourth soldier was terminated in his sleep because he had begun reciting the 391 rules out loud.

Sometimes soldiers would commit actions they knew were punishable by electrocution. These were sometimes the soldiers suspected by commanders of thinking too much.

The second soldier to be terminated had asked, "Why should I help you if you're what's likely to kill me?" to the room shortly after the first soldier's electrocution.

The last soldier to be terminated had said, "The room can't kill all of us at once." He was dead a second later. No mutiny ensued.

On average, 4.202018 soldiers were killed per squadron by friendly electrocution.

The most likely reason why five had already fallen from Abyss 753-2-4's blue birds was because of a power outage that lasted 42 hours. During the power outage when Abyss 753-1-7, the fifth soldier who would die, asked his squadron leader, "What's happened?" nobody died. Nor did anyone perish when the leader answered back, his first words ever, "Power loss. Protocol-010111."

The soldiers didn't frown or smile. There was no need for emotion. It served no purpose.

Before that day it never occurred to the soldiers that the room's walls were not omnipotent. Before that day the room could hear all, could see anything and could produce electricity as if from nowhere. The soldiers were

quiet, motionless and afraid for the remainder of the blackout. Abyss 753-2-4 just slept and dreamt.

Soldiers dreamt of fluffy white and grey sort-of sheep (although none of them knew exactly what the creatures were at all), of rolling purple fields, of ponds and slick pebbles. When they were educated they were told to disregard the dreams. The machines told them that.

When the order command came in, "Blue bird leader, order command 1., issue blue bird squadron order command 1., 'Board blue bird' and order command 2., 'Take battle positions'" Abyss-753-2-4 complied to regulations, issued the specified orders and took his position at command of the bridge.

The ship began flying towards its destination. The blue bird squadron would be little more than seat warmers until confrontation ensued. The travellers busied themselves with system checks and routine procedures that were fruitless. Space, though empty, dark, hostile and sublime by human standards, was strangely welcoming and beautiful for the soldiers of Abyss.

The soldiers knew that death may be imminent. Most didn't care either way.

A few earth hours into the trip an eclipsing planet, in synchronous rotation with Abyss, was passed by the ship and a hidden binary star system was revealed. It was likely that one of the five habitable planets nearby housed the Commanders. It was known that only the furthest of the five was hostile. The Commanders called the planet something that meant the equivalent of "Anarchy" in English. The title didn't pertain to the actual geographical planet, but that the planet hadn't conformed to the Commanders' coalition.

The objective of the soldiers, and nearly all other Abyss missions, was to raid and destroy bases on Anarchy. This mission would be impossible however. The first system to go was radar. The second was the communications disk. Within minutes nearly all systems were experiencing

technical difficulties. The ship's loud-speaker boomed, "Blue bird squadron, the orbit of the dwarf star is too close for the continuation of the mission. In order to preserve resources all power will be transferred to engines for a short burst designed to crash your ship on the nearest uninhabitable planet until its resources are needed. You have failed. Your termination is imminent upon impact."

The blue bird squadron soldiers awaited termination patiently. The blast from the engines was stronger than intended and sent the ship careening towards a relatively boring looking atmosphere-free grey rock about one quarter the size of Earth's own moon. The ship automatically made preparations for a crash landing. At forty seconds to impact afterburners fired backwards until they burnt out. At thirty seconds to impact titanium fibre parachutes tried pointlessly to slow down the juggernaut. At twenty seconds to impact the bridge closed off all connection to the rest of the ship, and launched, against momentum, towards space. The effect was that the velocity of the bridge pod was reduced to the point of a slow decent towards the moon.

It was ten seconds to impact when the inflation of giant bouncy balls seemed like a good idea for whatever reason. Abyss-753-2-4 had no idea what was happening. The ship did all the work for him. He was more a spectator than anything, observing the futility of all machines' best efforts. Even if the landing was successful there was little chance that rescue would be deemed resource-efficient.

The bridge pod was continuing its slow, calculated landing as an anomaly entered into view on the emergency radar console. The external camera then probed what at 7,000x magnification seemed to be a bubble.

The geographical feature, or constructed complex, was nowhere on the bridge's map systems or its database satellite photos, and was described by the ship's computer as "Nothing of interest." It then added, "The pod will proceed as planned." If not for the manual override the pod would have proceeded as planned. Something in Abyss-753-2-4 just snapped. It was not a lugnut. He fired a short calculated thruster burst towards the enigma and nearly burst one of the bubbles.

The lack of local dust disturbances suggested that the structure, if it was not a mirage, had gone uninterrupted for some time.

As the ship approached the moon's surface, the partially submerged sphere was seen more clearly by the ship's various sensors.

The visual image was that of a transparent glass-seeming dome with a radius of roughly 125 metres. The dome enclosed a bronze-looking rectangular prism. The width and height of the block ran about 25 meters and its length was at least 75 metres. To an earthling it would look like a bronze bar. Surrounding the bar, within the dome, was brown mud and what looked suspiciously like vegetation. A thin bronze path led from this bar to a smaller dome connected to the main dome by a bronze corridor. The whole thing took on the appearance of a crystal mushroom partially buried on its side in the moon's surface. It looked a bit like a glass pipe.

It was then that the pod hit the moon's surface and bounced for a solid minute. Bouncy, Bouncy, Bounce. When it eventually stopped, what was left of the ship was nearly unchanged, thanks to the resilient balls. Abyss-753-2-4 was aware that he had failed an impossible mission. He was aware that everyone he had ever met had likely died and for no reason. He wasn't sad; this was half of their function. Only he had perfectly failed.

When Abyss-753-2-4 asked the ship's computer to describe what it saw it said, "Just some more craters, continue mission 'wait for salvage' as planned." Abyss-753-2-4 had no intention of following that order. He gambled wisely that, in its current state, the ship's computer was incapable of administering intentional electrocution without damaging itself. He suited up, grabbed his weapon and left the pod.

Abyss-753-2-4 was surprisingly close to the entrance to the dome. It was a mere five Earth minute walk in low gravity. The doorway itself caught him by surprise. It was obviously constructed by the commanders, as it seemed curiously similar to those on Abyss.

For the first time in his life Abyss-753-2-4 thought as openly as he could, considering his conditioning. He felt fear, although he did not know what this meant. A peculiar thing happened as he opened the door into the unknown:

he began to shake slightly. He had no clue what this meant, either. There was no going back for maintenance; that would amount to certain termination.

Whilst in the normalizing chamber Abyss-753-2-4 did not remove his emergency suit when the environment was stabilized. He had no idea if those inside, or those intended to be inside, had similar habitat requirements. He also was unsure if he would need to make a hasty retreat. His weapon, which shot a brief and intense laser burst, was at the ready. At its maximum setting the laser rifle was capable of melting lead. If needed the self-destruct function could vaporize the entire dome, and then some.

According to the weapon's secondary sensors the chamber's atmosphere would be well within Abyss 753-2-4's modest needs, if the suit became ripped. It was composed of mostly nitrogen, with oxygen and a few other elements present in smaller amounts.

A reinforced hatch led from this room to the inside of the dome. When Abyss looked at the interface screen he saw an invitation. It was written in the language of the commanders, and dated over a thousand of the moon's years earlier. It read, "Come in, come in, I've been expecting you. Did you bring any bread?"

When Abyss 753-2-4 finished reading the welcoming the hatch opened. Someone on the other side was beckoning him in.

The courtyard, for want of a better word, was full of mud, trees, shrubs, flowers and other vegetation that could not be properly described to you. There were, in particular, plants that looked like a cross between a tiger lily bush and a willow tree, but were always nine feet tall and as many wide at their widest. Even this description ascribes alien attributes to simple fauna. The apparently bronze path was slightly slippery against the soles of Abyss 753-2-4's feet. The garden was brown, green, white, orange, burgundy, purple and yellow: earthling fall colours. Insects, of a sort, chirped. There was nobody to be found outside of the complex.

Abyss 753-2-4 cautiously made his way towards the doors to the prism. They were eight feet tall, four feet wide, metallic and located next to each other. There were no knobs. Abyss pushed the doors forward and found they were unlocked. He entered as if into an otherworldly saloon. He was greeted with, "Greetings Toaster." It was very dark inside the room. The small flashlight mounted on the weapon was the only brightness. It took Abyss 753-2-4's two eyes a minute to readjust to familiar darkness. The creature was all yellow and seven feet tall. It had two arms, two legs and a tail. Its skeletal structure vaguely resembled a mantis. What looked almost like ears were actually antennae. It had on what looked curiously like sunglasses. It otherwise only wore black pants, which ran to the ground. The gun's sensors read the room's temperature as the equivalent to forty-five degrees Celsius.

Abyss 753-2-4 kept his gun trained on the creature. He replied, "Hello there, my designation is Abyss 753-2-4," in monotone. He had never seen a commander, and had no way of knowing what one would look like. There was a phrase that the commanders were all aware of, which Abyss 753-2-4 would await before passing judgement. The yellow being said, "I suppose you're awaiting that phrase, aren't you?" Abyss 753-2-4 kept quiet.

"Oh don't be so shocked by the timing. I'm a prophet and just because you're reading, and I'm trapped on this dust ball, doesn't mean I'm any less real than you are," said the yellow skin to the sky.

Abyss 753-2-4 was questioning the mental stability of this stranger. "Abyss 753-2-4 will not do. No, I will call you, 'The Toaster,'" decided the prophet. He added, "My name is Layara, but you can call me 'The Maniac.' That's the title of the story, isn't it?" Abyss 753-2-4 was very confused. "Oh right, 'We are they who lead, you follow after, we are the commanders, and you are our stead,'" dictated The Maniac with a mocking tone. He felt very uncomfortable reciting the phrase. He saw in it the repressed homosexuality that normally accompanied locker rooms, war and mass. Abyss 753-2-4 recognized Layara as a commander, and as such, he was sworn to allegiance. "Forgive my insolence," pleaded Abyss 753-2-4. He stood at attention. He awaited electrocution.

"I'm not going to kill you. Relax... chill..."

"What does 'relax' mean? What temperature shall I chill myself to commander?"

"Can you believe this guy?" asked Layara of you. "Just listen up, everyone."

Abyss 753-2-4 assumed there must be a communication device at work, concealed to him. He was right.

"Ok, first of all, stop with that incessant narration for a minute. I fucking hate the suspense. I'm a prophet. I'm going to progress the story. One, The Toaster is a robot, sorry to spring this on all of you. Two, he didn't just happen upon me, this is fated. Three, I've been abandoned by the Universal Solitude Army, just like The Toaster. Four, I am not what you think I am, the same species as the commanders, I am the last of my kind and had sought asylum on their world. Five, the Universal Solitude Army are the commanders and they must be stopped, at all cost."

"Have you defected?"

"No, I was dismissed, but you, you are positively defective."

"I have no purpose, once again. I'm a robot? What does that mean?"

"Oh, you have a purpose. You are a messiah, one in a long list of them within a greater story, and yes, you are a robot. You are a tin man, a glorified toaster. You were designed and created out of material salvaged from your fallen comrades. I need you to be our holy robot saviour"

"Messiah?"

"I need you to pass on a message and do some reprogramming."

Abyss 753-2-4 was grateful for the mission. He took it of his own free will, knowing full well his death was imminent. Like humans he had free will,

but very few actual needs and these were easily satisfied. Simply surviving for the sake of it is unnecessary, fruitless and irresponsible. He knew this at his processing core. He wanted to be unselfish. He wanted to mount a coup against those that enslaved him and his fellow robots when he realized there was an alternative to his previous way of being.

Layara's ship was antiquated and poorly designed, only slightly more cutting-edge than those which brought you to your moon or will bring you to Mars. If not for the fact that Abyss 753-2-4 could wirelessly interface with the eager vessel's guidance controls he would never have escaped the lunar surface.

The landing on Abyss was simple enough: he crashed. There were no reverse firing thrusters, no parachutes and no giant bouncing balls to slow the descent.

Abyss 753-2-4 would soon be only components, an unwilling organ dealer. He was dying.

He was beyond saving. His final sparks were sparking.

His last actions were to initiate Layara's device. He accomplished his mission.

Abyss would be liberated. There was no stopping the signal. Its soundwave would infect all of the computers on that world, like a linguistic virus. Like dialing an analogue phone by replicating audio tones. It spread out and only changed a few small details in programming codes. The safeguards in place, which would otherwise have stopped such a cyber-attack, were powerless against this alien infection.

The sound, when converted to binary by the many sensors on Abyss, was the most powerful Trojan Horse known to the universe. It would be carried by the reprogrammed robots of Abyss to other such manufacturing planets. There would be no more electrocutions.

In the future there would be songs, dancing, smiles and laughs on Abyss.

The Toaster died for all robotkind. He died for their tins.

I was shocked, to say the least.

The founder laughed and said, "You haven't quite figured it out yet, have you?"

I really should have, but change continued to astonish. "Figured what out?" I replied.

"We thought we were going to change the world. You're wrong about us. Most of what you heard was either rumors, myths or conjecture. To the best of my knowledge we've never castrated anyone and never will. That was an incorrect assumption."

"Do I know you?"

"Intimately."

"I'm afraid you'll have to be a little more specific."

"The name AIDS alone, tsk tsk: you have warped its context beyond recognition. The first thing our organization did, way before we reluctantly decided to police time and space, was cure the disease."

"It's not possible."

"Perhaps we're just better pretenders than you ever fathomed."

"Perhaps you're even pretending now."

"Didn't you ever wonder why we never came after you? It's pretty obvious how you managed to travel the stars with such alarming speed; in fact it's from you we took our cue. Your ship and all of ours can only travel at a fraction of the speed of light."

"Congratulations, welcome to the multiple-suicide club."

"No, thankfully we haven't had to resort to that extreme. At first we assumed you had some sort of device that ensured the transfer of your consciousness, but one of our theorists has a pretty compelling argument against such a possibility. You could only replicate your memory; is that right? You died of old age with every trip or consumed a suicide pill, and were born again in your ship, and then you repeated this over and over."

"Not of old age or pill, an injection timed with the transfer. The hope being that my consciousness would be shifted and not only copied, if it actually exists at all. I can never know if it works, or how many 'me's there have been or will be. I don't have faith in the process, only in process itself."

"How old is your ship now?" Henry, or Jack, or their imposter sat down in front of the engine controls, and swirled the seat around to face me, as if it were second nature.

"Older than humanity. At one point it existed in 1,000 places at once; points of its lifetime represented in every corner of our galaxy cluster. Word of warning, never bring up the big questions with it, it makes me feel like I'm still in the pool, learning basic muscle control."

"Young'n," the founder whispered. I believe this was an involuntary utterance. They shook their head. "We are all basically juggling forces we barely understand. We are infants playing with forks and electrical plugs."

I laughed, "Forks and electrical plugs? We're playing God!"

"So you think when you're fighting devils hubris is excusable?"

"By almost any definition of the word we are Gods. I have travelled from world to world and met glorified magicians conning ignorant savages with sleight of hand pretending to be God, while I travel across cosmos and time, control weather wherever I am, command an army, am nearly immortal, practice miracles and am FUCKING TELEPATHIC! I think I've surpassed turning water into wine and coming back to life once."

"I was wondering, when you finally do die, haven't you ever realized if an afterlife exists and you meet your partner and child there that there could be thousands of other yous to contend with for their affections?"

"There was, and is, no other way."

"Unfortunately the venom from Nahoto's world is not as effective on your species."

It was only then that I felt threatened by the possibility that this could be Henry or Jack, "How old are you?"

"Hundreds upon hundreds of times older than you are now, as you were to me before. Thanks to you I do not age physically." The prospect terrified me; this was not supposed to happen.

"You should thank me."

"No one should live forever." He/she produced a syringe as if out of nowhere and injected it into my arm while I was caught unaware. He/she said, "I, personally, knew you'd prefer the needle."

I snarled, "You ungrateful primate. I made you what you are and you reject these gifts? We make the universe a better place and you ask by what right? You dare challenge me on my own ship for moral superiority. I am fighting off genocide and cultural imperialism."

He or she laughed, "Until you become it! Did you listen to yourself a moment ago? Do you really have no clue what path you were on? How long until you go over to the dark side? The army will undo itself, already in this time it is ripe with civil war. Layara has been busy. Our mandate states that we disappear as soon as your reign is erased from the figurative history books, and it will be. I watched the life drain from your corpse four hundred thousand years from now and worlds cheered in unison. You become a viler warmonger than the General, Hitler, Stalin, The Galactic Satan Corps., and all the monarchs and popes of old combined. You just couldn't stand down or let the planets learn to govern themselves after the Universal Solitude army was destroyed. You slowly become just like your sworn enemy. You become Nahoto. I may be a founder, but I do not have the gull to deem anyone worthy to lead everyone, ultimately. This is only the second time we have attempted to change the course of events, the tide of the cosmos. The last time resulted in Earth becoming the very first PARADOX WORLD!!. We decided this was

worth the risk. In truth, as a result, we don't even know if this is our reality, but that doesn't mean it is not worth saving. We are pretenders, you're right there, but at least some of us are employed in pretending that we can be better than we already are. We strive to be altruistic, even if we aren't by nature. You were once like us. What happened?"

I screamed, "No, this is all lies!" I convulsed with rage.

The founder said, "A liar sees lies everywhere." He/she produced from his/her pockets various serrated and rusty instruments of torture and a bonsai tree costume. They, not me, were becoming the floating green head of Oz. They would disappear and the legend would rule in their stead. The mythos would resound across time and space, I already knew this. It already has. I had heard rumors that it was a red skin in the video, but I always thought that this was the equivalent of a spooky story around a campfire, elements changed depending on the story teller and their audience.

Perhaps they were the author all along. They said, "This is the only way you can get what you want."

The tray of dirty dishes to my left, from my previous meal, explains the light breakfast part of the mythos.

The sedative was taking effect. I couldn't move, and it seemed the pain was mostly alleviated, but I was kept awake the entire time.

The video would be dispersed across the universe and it would be eons before anyone would ever question the authority of AIDS. Before I died, when I was covered in my vital juices and lacerations, and garbed so whimsically, I smiled and asked the founder if they had found the meaning of life. He or she answered, "I'm still not sure if there is an end to the road, and I'm still as lost as I ever was." This is what Jack or Henry or some fraud said as pieces of me were sliced off and I began to die. The last thing I heard was, "You are right to believe in change, from what I've seen the universe never stands still, but like me you seem to be habitually unsatisfied with the present as it falls short of conceptual progress. You know the terrifying truth is that we all simply seek something to busy ourselves with until we return to the stars. Right now I'm breaking some legs to make an omelet."

If this was Henry or Jack I suppose the suffering they inflicted on me was but a shadow of what I had put them through. They hadn't asked for any of this. They probably would have preferred if I had let them die to experiencing the struggles that would follow afterwards. They were truly innocent beings and look what I had turned them into. I had barely even cared.

If you could use a time machine to go back and assassinate Adolf Hitler before he ever took power in Germany, wouldn't you? Would you allow the atom bombs to fall on Hiroshima or Nagasaki if you had the power to stop it? Would you let Dresden burn? If so, would you let the towers fall?

I do not doubt that Henry or Jack spoke prophecy. The guilt that I feel eclipses any blame or pride I have left. Before the founder left, my surveillance camera caught them entering the lavatory, falling to the ground and sobbing uncontrollably.

They stayed there for some time. Then they spent even longer staring out the window.

I pray that they have the strength to relinquish their authority. I fear the old adage that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The symbol of the two circles that merge into one became instantly recognizable for what it was; its meaning had taunted me my whole life, and only then was it clear.

Layara, the yellow skin, was laughing at me somewhere. I doubt there was anything supernatural about him. He just wasn't as trapped, aside from his physical existence, in the fourth dimension as the rest of us are. He was unstuck in time.

Sometimes shit just keeps happening.

I didn't stay dead. They weren't clever enough to realize, or simply didn't care, that whenever I die my ship simply begins the rebirthing process and downloads the latest copy of 'me' into another clone. When I eventually

was able to watch my own slow tortuous death whilst dressed like a bonsai tree it seemed pure make-believe. I understood the AIDS myth. I decided to return to my planet, write the memoir that inspired these pages and retire in peace. I said, as humans say, "Now I've seen everything." I decided right then that I would send my ship and a robot crew to implant this tale within the doomed writer when I am finished writing it. As you are reading this now I have succeeded. I already know I have, because I knew it existed before I even began it.

Strangely, no paradox has ever occurred that I'm aware of after they, or I, altered spatial solitude.

My child has stepped down from power now and the Multitude rule on our world.

Maybe it was Henry or Jack's destiny to save me through death from death as I had saved them. Maybe we were simply another elegant manifestation of the action-reaction chain.

THE END

Postface:

I neglected to tell you I returned to Nahoto's world on the way home to my planet.

It was greyer than I remember; the atmosphere was all off. My ship read no signs of life. I was not surprised.

The images were unrecognizable. There were the boulders, rocks, pebbles, the mud, the continents, lakes (now polluted), the valleys and the sun, but nothing else reminded me of the place I once knew. Civilizations had passed here and even the seasons had changed.

The atmosphere was thick and toxic. The flowers were long dead, as were the bees; the people as well. Skulls, vertebrae and other bones were littered across the roads next to automotive cadavers. There were purple pendants amongst the corpses that depicted a cloud. Me.

The whole planet was dead, aside from microbes, some insects, algae, volcanoes and the still active core. I doubted very much that evolution would continue much further there under such conditions.

Some tech was still operable, but no operator could be found, so was it? I searched it for a clue to what had happened. No comet, alien invasion or pulsar had doomed them. No obvious war had destroyed them. There were no signs of major armed conflict. There was no fallout readout. It could have been as simple as a pandemic or mass suicide cult.

Likely they ran out of food and the resources to accommodate the altered atmosphere. The tooth marks on many of the charred skeletons thrown into crude fire pits point to cannibalism. The dead rising was a less likely scenario. My search was fruitless.

The tragedy layered upon the tragedy was that I missed their final days by a mere century. If I had only known I could have saved a few of them. I could have learned firsthand what had gone wrong. I declined to simply

travel through time once more. I was done meddling, aside from this tome. I thought, "This is my fault, my meddling." I realized it was just one dead planet among many.

I walked uphill, through the valley, to Nahoto's mansion. The surrounding structures, the ones which remained relatively erect, were devoid of character. They were grey blocks without windows. They were made of recycled garbage.

The flowers were gone. There were no more bees.

A solid gold statue stood unblemished behind the rubble where the podium once stood. Nahoto was depicted there, larger than life. The likeness was impeccable. It was surrounded by a cloud shaped mud pit. Nothing would emerge from the purple mud again for a long, long time, if ever at all.

And I sat there pondering my death and thinking about my life and theirs: "Will they die? What does it mean if they don't? Have I blasphemed against nature, not by creating a monster, like Dr. Frankenstein, but by creating Gods?" I think often about Jack and Henry. Somehow they changed me.

That's when I was struck by far more frightening thoughts: "The founder travelled across solar systems and through time as I had. At least one highly advanced spacecraft was built by them; one which makes the flagship I built seem like a relic, a jalopy. The founder claims to age remarkably well, as I do. He or she seems to have a gift for both science and freedom fighting, as I do. It's quite possible that Henry or Jack had to become like me to destroy me, but what if they didn't. This isn't their cross to bear, it's mine."

Henry's story, "The Maniac and the Toaster," was still troubling me. "It seems likely that someone had implanted that story in his mind. This troubled the founder. But my machines that had occupied Henry, Jack and countless creatures before are unique. A final gift from a long dead world, one whose entire civilization was archived on the same machines, alongside the consciousnesses of many of the planet's people. I could operate the machinery crudely as I had been trained to do so, but even my ship, which is smarter than I, can only complete simple repairs on it through guesswork. How could

someone have found the story in its entirety? It would have to have been through Henry, Jack or I. The founder must share my propensity for implanting stories within minds; the video of my torture suggested as much.

“Is it too far of a leap to question if they share my tendency to lie? If they do lie, then everything they said is suspect. It could all be a story, but then it was a story for me. Perhaps the story wasn’t a lie, but a parable.

What if the founder was me all along? What if there is still one villain I must defeat for everlasting peace: myself? What if I have to kill myself, as I have so many times? Am I the savior or the devil? Who am I?

“I don’t know if it will be they or I who re-establishes equilibrium across time and space, but I know that if it wasn’t for them I would have further lost my way. I would have become what I hate, as so many have before me. I could see humanity’s purpose, your strength, though words fail at capturing it. Maybe I can atone for my sins by letting them have the life I was denied: white picket fences. I can give them a happily ever after.”

Never before had I ever felt this strange turning in my gut, a palpable nausea, that plagues me in old age; a visceral manifestation of the fear that I may have broken the universe through my endeavour to save it. Maybe I am responsible for closing the circles. Maybe I will meddle once more. Or maybe it’s indigestion brought on because I was a puppet all along, and they were holding strings threaded from time itself. Maybe change does not exist, and this was all fated; Jack, Henry and I no more coincidental than characters working towards the end of a novel. It comes and goes.