

Hitchbot

It all just happened.

He was stalking down the sidewalk with a thunderstorm in his head. He saw the Hitchbot sitting there. He went to town on it. That was it.

It was the middle of the night, and he assumed no one could see him.

The thing was sitting on the bench at a bus stop near the roundabout at Oakland and Pleasant River. He'd walked three miles by then. He was on his way home from the job he'd just lost at the Red Robin in the Ten Willows strip mall.

"That'll do," was the last thing the manager, Rhonda, had said to him. It was strangely archaic and infuriatingly formal. Something final and medieval about it.

And so he was jobless. Again.

His PO would no doubt give him more shit about this. More tragic disappointment in his eyes, like the smarmy bastard expected better and could hardly believe he was being let down. Like a saddened little brother – the guy was at least five years younger than him. Bullshit.

Natasha would not appreciate this. He'd get quite the earful when he got home. She'd hung up on him when he'd called her, asking for an early ride back.

"What do you mean they're letting you go?" she'd said, too calmly, when he gave her the news.

"I mean I'm off the clock, and I need a ride," he said. "Please, babe, my head's hurting again. I need to come home and sleep this off. I'll start looking for something else in the morning."

No response. He looked at the phone. Back to the home screen. Not even an exit beep.

He put the phone back in his pocket and felt sick and angry. Cars rushed by, a lovely evening in suburbia. Families in minivans and

retired couples in sedans, whooshing along in their air-conditioned pleasantries.

He'd been a dishwasher for about two weeks. He couldn't even hang on to a shitty job like that.

He was a failure. A recovering drug addict. This much he knew.

He tried calling Tony, then Earl, then Jovee, then Antonio. None of them were able to come get him for one reason or another. Jovee and Antonio didn't even answer. He even tried Chad, his PO, who said, "I would, man, but I'm up north this weekend. Have you tried Jovee yet?"

He didn't have any money for a cab, or an Uber. He had nothing. His first and only paycheck would be coming later that week.

Chad wasn't a bad guy. Natasha wasn't a bad woman. Rhonde wasn't a bad woman.

He was. He was the bad guy.

He sat on the curb near the front door. People going into the restaurant were afraid of him. He could feel their suspicious looks at his back. He hated the looks, but he didn't hate them. He didn't blame them. He wished he could be like them.

The sun was almost set, and the sky was clear and lavender. It was getting colder. Without thinking, he got up and took off on foot.

He walked and walked, heading home along the road, under the streetlights. He passed gas stations and supermarkets and restaurants, all lit up with happy people inside, living their lives and enjoying their places in the world.

By the time he got close to New Hudson it was nearly midnight, and the streets were empty and lonely. Cars with blinding headlights drove past, not seeing him. Their headlights made his headache worse. It throbbed at his temples. He thought about throwing himself in front of them, but couldn't make himself do it. What would that do to the person behind the wheel? How would they feel?

He walked and walked, one foot in front of the other.

When he first saw the Hitchbot he thought it was a random trash can someone had set upside down on the bench at the bus stop.

As he got closer he saw it was indeed an upside down trash can or a bucket of some kind. It had been turned into a little child-size robot toy thing.

It had what looked like a clear mixing bowl – also turned upside down – for a head. Under the bowl was an electronic display with a red smiley face on it. Its arms were foam noodle pool floaties with yellow gloves attached to the ends. Its legs were also foam pool noodles, with a child's yellow rain boots attached. It sat strapped into a little black car seat.

He stared at it, sitting there on the bench.

'Hitchbot' was written across its chest. A white piece of tape with "San Francisco or Bust" was stuck on its helmet, just below its pixelated red smile.

He pulled out his six year old iPhone and Googled 'Hitchbot.'

He noticed its left arm was stuck out, the fat rubber thumb cocked, all awkward like a scarecrow's. Like it was hitchhiking.

Articles popped up on Google. He read. It was an Internet stunt. This thing was hitchhiking across the country. This thing made of kid's clothes and pool toys.

Some asshole who probably made more money in a day than he had ever made in his life had put this thing together and told the Internet. People had noticed it. They had noticed this rich hipster cunt's hip little idea. People paid attention to this thing. People cared about it. This piece of plastic and foam.

It had started in Boston and made it all the way to suburban Detroit. Some YouTube star had picked it up in Philly. The zoomer fuck had taken a selfie with the thing in his backseat, making some goofy face with his thumb cocked back at it. What an absolute faggot.

Meanwhile, he was flesh and blood. Carbon and electricity. And what did he get?

Nothing. Even his own supposed friends wouldn't give him a ride home. He had no money, no way of making money. All because of a 2 year prison stint. Non-violent offense.

Someone had gotten out of their car in Ohio, picked this thing up, drove it here of their own volition, and dropped it off at the bus stop. Before long, someone else would pick it up, and it would continue on its journey, and everyone would smile and think how kind people are and how cute and isn't the world such a nice place?

His own girlfriend wouldn't even give him a ride home after he lost his job. While he was on probation. While he still owed money to the state. While he was trying, fucking TRYING, to go straight. And he couldn't even wash dishes for two weeks. What a fuck-up. His father was right.

How dare this stupid fucking thing sit here under the streetlight and smile at him? This fucking plastic trashcan with its goofy fucking face. This random children's toy receiving more love and acceptance and chances that he ever had.

He raised a foot and kicked it. It fell over on the bench in its car seat. Its arms flopped about bonelessly.

He kicked it again. It fell off the bench and clomped to the sidewalk, rolled a bit.

He saw he'd scuffed the side of its plastic bowl head.

It was still smiling up at him.

He lost control.

He kicked it again and again. He stomped on it.

It broke apart with every blow. Into pieces, into shards.

"Why are you still smiling?" he snarled down at it.

He brought his foot down again and again.

He ripped its foam arms off. Its foam legs.

It never make a sound.

He tore it out of its stupid carseat and flung the carseat into the brush.

His head pounded from within, making him think of a pulsating red orb.

When the storm had passed he stopped and looked at his handiwork, the thing scattered before him. Its red smiley face was gone, black blankness behind the shattered clear plastic bowl.

For some reason, he thought of the Wizard of Oz, right after the Scarecrow was torn apart by the flying monkeys, the Tin Man saying, "Oh, that's you all over, isn't it?"

He breathed heavily, calming down enough to realize he could've waited until someone gave the thing a ride and then perhaps bummed one.

Actually, no. No one would've stopped while he was here anyway. And if they had, they would've just taken the goddamn robot and refused to take him. It was guaranteed. Given some thinly veiled excuse. They would've looked at him like people always did— like they were uneasy, uncomfortable, repulsed.

That was more than likely what would've happened. And it most certainly would've been more than he could handle.

He looked at the real-life Internet meme he'd just wrecked. How many people's fun had he spoiled with his tantrum? Wrong place, wrong time. Story of his life.

Heavy shame draped over him like a warm, wet, unwelcome blanket.

He put his hands in his pockets. Looked around. No one was there, and no cars had come by. God knew why the Hitchbot's last chauffeurs had dropped the thing off way down at the end of the street like this.

They probably thought someone would be less likely to find it and fuck it up.

He looked at the Hitchbot one more time, its arms and legs and broken body, and walked off. He had the sudden sensation he was being watched.

He made it home and slept on the couch, not wanting to risk waking up Natasha.

He awoke in the morning, feeling like he was being shaken. He opened his eyes. It was gray and gloomy, soft white light seeping through the blinds.

His head felt better, the pain dulled down to a single silver thread of discomfort in his temple.

He'd fallen asleep sitting up.

He opened his laptop on the coffee table, checked Google News, like he did every morning.

In the US section he saw something that made him stop and begin to sweat.

"Hitchbot, hitchhiking robot, gets beheaded outside of Detroit" said the third headline.

He clicked on the real-time coverage button and read, his heart pounding.

"Good Job, America, You Killed Hitchbot"

"Hitchhiking Robot Lasts Just Two Weeks In America Because Humans Are..."

"Hitchhiking Can Be Dangerous, Even for Robots"

"Hitchhiking Robot Gets Killed in Detroit, To No One's Surprise"

"Hitchhiking Robot Damaged Beyond Repair in Detroit"

"Hitchbot is Dead Because Detroit"

The bedroom door opened and he started.

Natasha walked out, puffy with sleep.

"I want you out of here," she said, flipping through her own phone and not looking at him. "I'm sorry, but you've got to find somewhere else to live."

"K," he said, distracted.

He kept scrolling through his phone. It didn't look like anyone had seen him. There were no videos.

Everyone in the comments was reviling him, calling him a loser and a lowlife and everything else. He didn't blame them. He wished he hadn't lost his temper. He'd been upset and stressed out and tired and sad and angry. He was always sad and angry.

Apparently the Hitchbot had sent out a message when it had gone offline. Probably at the moment he'd stomped on the thing's plastic mixing bowl helmet.

"Oh dear, my body was damaged, but I live on back home and with all my friends," the message read. "I guess sometimes bad things happen to good robots! My trip must come to an end for now, but my love for humans will never fade. Thank you to all my friends."

He shut his phone off and watched Natasha as she made coffee. She had work that morning.

"I need you out, like, today," she said, still not looking at him.

"K," he said.

He sat there on the couch and tried to think of who he could crash with.

In a way, this was a new beginning.

Drag

I was driving north in Ypsilanti around the projects near the old hospital— this big block of shitty apartments with a shitty parking lot. It was sunrise, and the end of November was creeping up on us. Frost was on the ground and the air was numbing and the puddles were all brown ice.

I was taking a shortcut-- the circular outer drive that goes around the projects-- to get from Huron Drive to Golfside. In doing so I'd avoid the extra-long light at the main intersection.

I was in a hurry but not speeding and I don't remember where I was going.

The guy — I didn't know he was a guy at the time — was crouched in the center of the lane about halfway around the scythe-shaped road. Like I said, I wasn't even going that fast, only about twenty or so. No more than thirty for sure.

Initially I thought he was a bag of garbage that could easily be straddled with my wheels, but then he turned and sat up at the last second. It was too late, and I was on him. I don't know why he didn't hear me coming. I don't know why he didn't move.

He was white — Caucasian, that is — which was somewhat odd for a homeless person in the area. He had red hair, an angular face — looked kind of like Prince Harry, actually. Prince Harry without the muscles or the ultra-privileged upbringing.

He was wearing a black jacket and wrapped in what might have been a black sleeping bag or some kind of utility blanket. He'd been sleeping right in the middle of the road. Maybe it was warmer there somehow, or maybe he was kind of half hoping some poor sap like myself would come along and put him out of his misery.

I plowed right into him before I could hit the brakes. He went under my front end. I drive a mid-size sedan and I could feel him getting dragged under the car for what felt like several minutes. It was the worst sound I've ever heard. He didn't scream. Or if he did I couldn't hear him.

You don't realize how heavy a car is until you need to stop it instantly.

It happened so fast. Dumb, cliché words. But it did. One second, I was about to go over a stray trash bag, the next I was about to hit a guy, the next he was under me, and the next I was over him and he'd slid out from under me, the car bouncing over him. He felt like a speed bump.

I was horrified — beyond horrified — in fact. My insides had this feeling like I'd been injected with mercury or some other cold liquid metal. Some poison glassy liquid.

My hands trembling, I cranked the wheel and turned around as soon as possible, and now to my despair I saw there were people from the housing projects beginning to appear and gather around the crumpled black hump in the road.

I don't know where the people had been a moment before — the parking lot is big and they couldn't have just walked across it without me seeing them. The torn-up lot was completely empty and the asphalt was grey with snow and ice.

I was in too much shock to do much of anything but gape as I drove by the lifeless mess I'd turned this guy into. I saw his face first — it was still intact, and his eyes were open, staring up into the blue morning sky. Of course he wasn't moving. I'd slammed right into him hard enough to crack my bumper and then dragged him along icy pavement full of potholes and cracks and fissures. He was fucked up, if he was going to live at all.

I parked nearby, pulling neatly into a spot with faded lines.

I called 911, not believing anything. The world seemed strangely turned up, everything too loud and too bright.

The operator came on and I couldn't remember the name of the road I was on. I couldn't remember the name of this sickle-shaped shortcut or the name of the project building. The project building had been a hospital once. That was decades ago. Now it was a hastily-assigned tower for the destitute. There were a ton of destitute people nowadays. Even people who worked were destitute.

There were people gathered all around him now, and most of them were black. It was good thing the guy was white otherwise they'd of probably ripped me from the car and kicked the shit out of me, or worse. They all mumbled grimly to each other.

I got off the phone with the operator, and I don't remember our conversation. Almost instantly after hanging up, I heard sirens in the distance.

I got out of my car and walked over to the gathered spectators, but I wasn't walking. I was floating.

"I didn't see him," I said.

No one answered me, they all just looked at him lying there and I couldn't look at him anymore. I wanted to cry but I couldn't do that, either. The world stayed turned up, really bright and intense and too much everything.

Once the cops arrived they took me back over to my car while they put a plastic sheet over the body.

The cops were very accommodating but seemed bored. They didn't cuff me or read me my rights but I was pretty sure I was under arrest.

It took me a minute or two to calm down, but someone brought me a little bottle of water and I was sipping it and the water was so cold it was burning my fingers and tongue but I kept sipping. I felt like I hadn't blinked since the moment I saw the guy sit up.

The cop talking to me had grey hair coming out of his ears and he was writing on a clipboard.

"I didn't see him," I said again. I didn't want to say I'd mistaken him for garbage.

"Well, that's why they call 'em accidents," the cop said. "They don't call 'em 'on-purposes'."

Nut Sauce

Connie Snapchatted me and said she wasn't sure if she wanted to meet, but we had plans that Friday and the fucking quarantine wasn't stopping them. I'd paid for her Onlyfans and her allowance at the beginning of the month and I wasn't going to miss my designated weekend. My dick had been dry since January, the last time I'd seen her.

I'm a 33 year old boomer and I haven't been sleeping right since all this bullshit started so forgive me if my thoughts and narration are a little erratic here. Going to be a lot of stream of consciousness brain-dumping going on. I'm just not a good writer, or a good anything, really. Sorry to the professionals.

I was jamming on that Bored in the House song all Friday. Everyone thinks Tyga made it but it's actually this genius artist from Detroit named Curtis Roach. I don't know anything else he's done but fuck does that song slap. I love that the beat is just his fist on a wood floor and fingersnaps. I get nothing but good vibes off the guy.

I picked Connie up at her place on Friday night. By then I was listening to Keith Urban's version of Higher Love on repeat. I'm not even a huge country fan or a Steve Winwood fan or anything but for some reason I ripped it off YouTube after that shitty Zoom telethon thing Lady Gaga put on. I just like the way his voice hits those notes, that kind of sugary, nasal country twang thing he does. You'd never know the dude was from 'Straya. I made a playlist of Keith and Bored in the House and jammed them both on repeat all fucking week.

I told Connie about it all when I got to her place. She said she hadn't heard either song yet.

Connie's a cam girl and e-thot who makes like five figures a month. But I still get her for my price (20\$ a month on onlyfans, \$500 a month from seekingarrangement) so I'm fine with it. I've known her for several years so I got grandfathered in. Doesn't take much to make a SWAM like me happy. I know I'm worthless in the big scheme of things. Not that it matters right now.

Connie's a brunette, looks Hispanic but I've never asked her nationality. She has that supremely cooled vibe of someone who never has to worry about human attention. The free air of someone who can walk away and always find someone else. I hate that about her and anyone else who has it. I see it on Joe Burrow all the time, if you need a famous reference. That Alison Roman cooking chick, too. I hate them. They are valuable and I am worthless but hey that's life.

The \$500 a month isn't a lot — from her other sugar daddies Connie probably gets like at least a grand or more a month, but I was one of Connie's first regulars. I was her first date after she posted on seekingarrangement. Plus, I'm way younger and better-looking than most of the other sugar daddies, which isn't to say I'm good-looking, exactly.

I've been staying at my parents during the lockdown. I had an apartment but I broke the lease when everything shut down and I stopped working. I'll get another one when we're back to normal. A job, that is. And an apartment. I made good money — I worked in sales — and I was smart with it so I'm living off some investments I made and savings. I can make it probably nine months before I need to start panicking.

My sleep schedule is so fucked. I cannot lie down and try to sleep if I'm not tired. It's like, I'm afraid of fear when I close my eyes. But I don't want to talk about that. So I just sleep when I can. But my body never wants to be tired at the same time. It'll be tired one day at 8 PM like you're supposed to be, and then another day it'll be tired at 2 AM and then I'll sleep ten hours and then be up all night until 7 the next morning. It's fucked. I've always had this problem but it really started after I quit my job.

The door was open when I pulled up to Connie's. She's got this nice little one story number on a nice little suburban street. You'd never guess an e-thot lived here.

The front door was open. She was in the kitchen, eating cold chicken off a cadaverous rotisserie bird. We hugged. It was good to see her.

"Why are you so much taller than me?" I asked, noting her unusual height.

"I'm wearing heels."

Sure enough, she had these stiletto numbers on.

"Take them off."

She did and was a bit shorter than me. That was better. Tall women freak me out.

"How you been?" I asked. "I've missed you."

We hadn't seen each other in months. One thing or another kept coming up, and Covid wasn't helping.

"I can only spend tonight with you," she said. "One of my other regs wants me for tomorrow and I need the money. I'll make it up to you next month."

"How many regs do you have, even?"

"Like twelve. Don't get pissy."

"Well, yeah," I said, getting exactly pissy. "I know that. Every young hot woman these days has an option to be a Disney princess, basically. Every dude is replaceable, even the attractive, successful ones."

"Have you slept?"

"Yeah, I got like two hours yesterday evening."

"That is literally going to kill you."

I took Connie back to my parents' place. The drive was really nice. The sun was so fucking bright and Keith sang about higher love and Curtis rapped about being bored in the house. I tapped my hands on the steering wheel and Connie fucking texted next to me. We saw the setting sun and trees and cows and you'd never know there was a pandemic going on.

When we got home I discovered my sister Violet was already there, sitting downstairs in front of the TV. I didn't know she would be home — I thought they all went over to my grandparents to help with the garden. My grandparents can't go outside right now since they're in their eighties, so Violet and my parents go over there and weed the garden and other shit while my grandparents smile and wave from the living room window. I went once and now I make up excuses not to go.

I snuck Connie in quietly, cursing my decision to give away my apartment, took her upstairs to the bathroom. I wanted my money's worth, but of course I didn't say that out loud. I was also hoping a good fuck would help me sleep.

So I tried to fuck Connie in the upstairs shower but she wasn't responding. I was admittedly thirsty. I'm not an incel but I'm

definitely not worthy enough to attract a woman without waving some money around. C'est la vie.

We went into the bathroom and got naked.

Every time I stripped down in front of Connie she'd mention my square-shaped dick. It was weird. She kept mentioning it because she said her dad's dick was square-shaped too. Her dad raped her when she was a little girl, like six or something. I asked her once, "What did he do with you?" and she looked at me and went, "Everything." and I was like, "Awww..." all sad-like (I wasn't being sarcastic at all, I meant it, that's fucked up) and she didn't say anything.

So yeah, she told me her dad's dick was square-shaped yet again when we were getting naked. I told her I didn't need to hear that.

"You bring it up every fucking time this happens."

"You would, too."

I was already hard and so Connie bent down and went to work for that five hundred dollars I'd sent her at the beginning of the month. I let her slobber for a bit, probing the inside of her sweet 24-year-old mouth with my dickhead and then I stopped her.

We stepped into the shower, which was already running and was nice and steamy like a porno.

I started trying to fuck her, trying to get it in. But it was like it wasn't fitting. The water was hot and steamy and it made us nice and slippery. Her body looked way hot, even if her face was kind of jacked.

Connie looked like Kate Mara if Kate Mara had a baby with that maid from that one Roma movie — it's in black in white, I don't remember much about it, I just remember the maid because she had a baby but it was stillborn. Then she saves the rich kids from drowning. I don't know, I was fucking high that day when I watched it, but I remember the maid and I know who Kate Mara is and that's what Connie looks like — a blend of Kate Mara and the Mexican native maid from Roma. But she's got a tight little body and a nice tummy and a great, smooth ass.

"Stop, stop, STOP," Connie said after a few minutes of me poking my boner into her squishiness. The water roared and my ears were pounding, I was so fucking horny. I kept trying to stick it in until Connie pushed me away and I almost slipped. Would've been a hell of a crash if I'd fell over, and possibly a serious injury. No one wants to go to the hospital right now.

Connie didn't say anything, just stood there with water dripping off her in the steam, looking at me all pissed off.

My lust cooled down a bit. My dick softened. I took it in my hand and kept stroking, not wanting to lose the fire.

"Sorry," I said, tugging. "Won't happen again."

Connie rolled her eyes.

"Just cum already," she said, kneeling down and taking me into her mouth for the second time.

I obliged her after another five minutes of jerkage and ball sucking, spraying nut sauce all over her face, trying not to groan too loud.

"That was just what I needed," I wheezed when it was over.

Connie stood up and mumbled to herself, "Yep, it's a beauty..." before rinsing her face off, kneeling under the shower stream. She looked like a Renaissance statue for a second there, water hitting her face, her eyes closed as she washed my chunky egg goop cum off her lips and cheeks. Then she stood up and used my sister's shampoo and bodywash without asking while I tried to hug her from behind, sticking my soft cock between her ass cheeks. She acted like I wasn't even there.

After, we went to my bedroom and Connie went on her phone again while I found a Netflix movie with George Clooney called Michael Clayton, I think he played a lawyer or something, but Connie wasn't interested in it. I just wanted to cuddle her anyway.

She fell asleep briefly but she was on my arm funny so I moved and she woke up and looked at me like she wanted to kill me. I just lay there, not tired.

Then two minutes later she started texting again and she started crying.

"What is it?" I asked.

She didn't answer for a second.

"What is it?" I asked again.

"I think my grandma has the virus and I can't see her."

"Where's she live?"

"California."

"Not much you can do about that."

Connie turned away.

"It's hard," I heard her say. She wasn't talking to me. "It's so fucking hard sometimes..."

I wanted to cuddle her more but I figured I'd best leave her be. She was technically filling her part of the bargain — spending the night with me. And my balls were already drained so I wasn't itching for that part of the arrangement anymore.

We fell asleep apart from each other. The more I thought about it, I was getting sick of her, honestly. Her attitude.

At least pretend you're interested, I thought. It's not like she was doing this for nothing. The more I thought about it, the more I thought it was bullshit. I wasn't getting what I paid for. Low effort.

The next morning my sister Violet drove us in my dad's truck to Brighton. Connie had given us this address. The houses were so enormous they made my parents neighborhood look middle class. I could've taken my car but Violet was downstairs eating Rice Krispies when we got up and said she had to go into town anyway. Connie had woken me up and I was groggy as hell so I didn't give a shit anymore.

My sister didn't really care about me spending time with Connie anyway. I brought home girls all the time when we were teenagers and in college. She just talked a lot. She told us she was getting ripped off over these concert tickets she bought. The concert got canceled because of the Rona and they were jerking her around on the refund. It was this country show she was going to in the summer but it got canceled and the guy who sold her the tickets was being a cunt about it. The artists were all guys with beards.

Connie sat in the back on her phone, not talking to us.

We drove through the sub under beautiful sunlight and along big, beautiful homes. Expensive cars in the perfect driveways. Trees with flowers.

"The house was back there," said Connie after we'd driven a bit.

We turned around and went back up the street. The house looked like all the others — big and successful. The guy must be a doctor or something. I was jealous — this motherfucker could afford multiple sugar babies. Why the fuck did he need mine?

I got out to talk to Connie. I wasn't going to stand for this shit anymore. I wanted to say a bunch of shit but I couldn't come up with anything other than, "I'm not paying to see you anymore. This is pointless."

"K," was all Connie said.

"Well, we should probably make a parting gift," I said.

The world was really bright, the sunlight making everything bleached and white.

"Like what?" said Connie, eyeing me suspiciously.

I looked around and saw a little lone dandelion growing out of a crack in the cement by a sewer grate. I bent down and picked it and handed it to Connie.

"That's for you," I said.

"Thanks," said Connie monotonously. "Go get some sleep."

She walked off to one of her twelve sugar daddies. It was the last time I saw her.

My sister and I stopped at the post office. Then we went home where I jerked off and finally fell asleep.

Sociology Class

I'd never felt so old as I did when I walked into the sociology class. I felt like I was surrounded by literal children.

I'm only 41. It's amazing how fast college students look like children. I remember when even high schoolers looked like big, smelly adults.

I was taking a community college class on sociology to further my career in social work. I'd had no experience when I started doing it about two years ago out of nowhere. For the first year, I walked out of the building expecting to be fired the next day.

So I signed up for the class and paid the 350 dollars out of pocket for it and informed the boss that I would need Monday and Wednesday nights off starting in January.

I walked into the classroom and it smelled like a classroom and a whole bunch of nostalgic memories came flooding into my brain. I took a seat and the seat was nice and bouncy and comfy and I was sitting at a long table and I felt pretty good, not like when I used to take a seat in class when I was younger. Now I felt like, "It's this teacher's job to entertain us and give us the information and all I have to do is pay attention and when it's all over I can ask for a little raise provided I get a B+ or higher."

Then I saw all the kids. There were all these children sitting on their phones with laptops in front of them. Some of them had facial hair.

I didn't have a laptop. I had a notebook and an actual backpack. Almost none of them had backpacks. They had tote bags and things like that. I hadn't been to school in nearly twenty years which isn't that long ago. Whatever.

Then the clock up above the dry erase board (I'm old enough to remember when schools switched from chalkboards to dry erase boards, it was right at the turn of the millennium, like, out with the old and in with the future) struck the hour.

The teacher walked in.

He walked to the front of the class.

I say "he".

Now, I say 'he' because the (presumed) guy had a deep voice, and masculine features.

But.

He was wearing a dress, and what may have been fake tits, and makeup and everything else.

"Your first test is to determine if I'm a man or a woman," he said to the class right off the bat without giving his name or anything. "You're to give your opinion based on my appearance alone, and why you've come to that conclusion, one way or the other. That's your first assignment for today."

He put his bag down in front of the podium and passed out sheets of white paper.

"If you fail this test it will severely affect your grade," he said.

Several of the students chuckled but he didn't smile. I couldn't tell if he was kidding or not.

He passed out papers to the whole class — just blank, white sheets of paper. When he passed by me he smelled heavenly, some sort of fruity perfume.

"You have ten minutes," he said.

The other students began writing with pens and pencils.

None of this seemed legal to me, asking a class to guess what gender you were and holding their grades hostage, but the children all obediently began scribbling on their papers. I was the oldest fart in the room by far.

I looked down at my sheet of paper and sweat beaded my brow.

Full disclosure: I'm not comfortable with the whole tranny thing yet. People can do what the hell they want with their bodies as far as I'm

concerned but why do they keep insisting that I have an opinion about it when I'd never even thought about it one way or another until like six years ago?

But shoot, how hard could this be?

I observed the teacher, now at the front of the classroom sitting at a piano and reading on his/her phone.

I thought of ways to identify a man from a woman regardless of dress or appearance.

First I looked for an Adam's apple. I'd seen "To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar," not too long before then. It's a movie released when these kids were still swimming in their daddy's ballsacks and it stars Patrick Swayze, Wesley Snipes and John Leguizamo as drag queens. And there's a scene in that movie that taught me that Adam's apples are dead giveaways for whether a person is a man or a woman.

There was a problem, though.

I couldn't see the guy's neck. He was looking at his phone, tilting his chin down and holding his phone down against his chest, real covert-like, and his chin completely obscured any hint of an Adam's apple one way or another.

(Note: I'm going to refer to him as a guy until I'm convinced otherwise, that is my first guess)

My next thing was to very discreetly catch a glimpse of his crotch for any giveaway bulges, but I couldn't see his crotch either, because he was standing behind the podium and I wasn't going to go out of my way to get a good look at that.

So I just sat there and tapped my mechanical pencil for a bit, trying to think of other ways to go about this.

I patiently waited for him to look up or change his posture or something, but he just kept thumbing his phone. He looked up once but only moved his eyes and not his chin. He looked right at me. His gaze was as fierce as a bird of prey.

I realized I was staring at him and I quickly looked at my paper and pretended to be writing. My sheet of paper was still completely blank.

I noticed one of the boys in the class – he looked maybe Middle Eastern or Mediterranean – had already finished his scribbled paragraph and was typing on his phone again nonchalantly.

I tried to sneak a glimpse at his answer– I figured in this situation a zoomer's opinion is good enough for me– but the little shit actually turned the paper over on the desk and kept playing on his phone.

I swallowed.

I needed to come up with an answer.

I weighed my options.

If he was a guy, why dress like that and then ask us? Obviously he was at least a transvestite. If that made him comfortable, then rock on. But if he was a man in women's clothes, as he appeared to be, why bother asking us at all?

If he was a woman, why was his voice so deep, and his chest so broad, and his tits so pointy under the blouse he was wearing? Why was his chin so Superman-esque, and why was his skin so weather-beaten? If this was a woman, this was a woman who'd lived a hard life.

Fuck it, I thought. This is stupid anyway.

So I summoned my old method of dealing with a crisis from my grade school days – I wrote down the first thing that came into my head and convinced myself the test didn't fucking matter anyway.

I guessed he was a man, and listed the deep voice and the fact that his tits looked fake as my reasons for coming to that conclusion.

I put down my answer in my terrible handwriting. I wrote maybe three sentences. I half-assed it, I guess you could say. Some things never change.

Well, long story short, he turned out to be a woman.

The students finished and the ten minutes were up and he clapped his hands and said, "Time's up, let's have them," and he came around and took all the papers and he took mine and that heavenly Skittles scent came over with him.

"I have a feeling most of you assumed I was a man in drag, at least at first. Well, I was assigned male at birth, but I've been a woman for about four years now. One of the things I'm going to teach you is that gender is a social construct. It's not necessarily what other people see, but part of our deep inner sense of self. Understand that, and you'll understand sociology."

That was the day I learned that trans women's voices don't really change, even when they take estrogen pills.

So I technically failed my first test. Oh, well. And apparently I was the only one who guess he was a man. Everyone else had guessed he was a transwoman and would prefer to be called "she".

He never said anything to me about it.

I mean, she. She never said anything.

I got a B- in the course and I'm still waiting on my raise.

Bright-Ass Moon

I lose my job on a Friday and go home with this strange, weighted feeling about me.

Jim, my now-former boss, is a good guy. He let me know about the situation instead of just canning me.

It was right after lunch. I was at the vending machines getting Peanut M&M's. It was a Friday like any other. I assumed I'd be coming in to work on Saturday.

Jim came over and started talking to me about how the Jeffs, these two assholes that run the shop floor, apparently wanted me gone. He was willing to fight them on it, but rather than put Jim through the stress of having to defend me I just bowed out gracefully, fully aware I wasn't particularly good at my job. I gathered all my shit and shook a few hands on my way out. The few people I talked to seemed surprised I was leaving.

It was a good job — 30 dollars an hour, which seems like a fortune if you've never made it in this economic climate, but I still just get by. I have a bit of savings, but not much.

Still, the situation rocked me some. There's still this fear that tugs at me, that weighted feeling I mentioned earlier. I do my best to ignore it, thinking of all the options I could pursue and writing them down on my iPhone's notepad.

I go home and try to take a nap but I keep getting the sensation that I'm falling.

Instead, I jerk off to Pornhub and PornZog and SpankBang and various porn forums for four continuous hours. By the time I finally shoot my load, it's getting dark outside and a thunderstorm has come and gone.

I clean myself up and feel pretty down about everything. I'm 31 and I don't know what to do with my life and now I don't have an income. I second guess my leaving so quickly — I could've gotten unemployment if I'd let them fire me, although I tell myself this is better. I don't like taking shit from the government for nothing anyway.

I decide to pray, something I don't do often. I rarely get on my knees and pour my thoughts out to God formally.

I kneel down by the side of the bed and fold my hands. I bow my head and find myself staring right into a six-inch-long skidmark, fresh

from my asshole, rubbed into the sheets from my marathon jerk off session. It smells vile so I take a moment to strip the bed. It's then I remember I have no clean bedsheets available.

I kneel again and mutter a quick prayer into the mattress cover, thanking God for all the good in my life and for giving me the job in the first place. I ask for Him to help me find my way on this new path. I cross myself and stand up.

My prayer hasn't alleviated that feeling of weighted loneliness, so I call my old high school buddy Fillmore to see if he wants to come get bedsheets with me.

"Yeah, it'll be just like that time we got you socks," he says. I haven't seen Fillmore in about two months.

I drive over to his place and we end up going out for a beer. I tell him about my day. He offers a sympathetic ear like the good friend he is.

We go to Jameson's, this Irish-themed place, and he buys my beer for me. I get a Leinenkugel Summer Shandy and we both get Hooligan burgers. I can't finish mine.

We talk about other stuff, what we've been up to. Fillmore's unemployed himself so he has a lot of free time.

The NBA Finals are on and neither of us watches basketball but the intensity of the game draws us in. We comment to each other on how much we hate sports.

"Bunch of rich assholes caught up in their stupid game," I say.

"As if throwing a ball around were important," agreed Fillmore.

We watch LeBron James furiously argue a call with the ref.

Later, I drive Fillmore to Meijer and buy a set of pristine white bedsheets. Not sure what they're made of, but they're the right size so whatever. They cost 40 dollars. I'm going to be carefully tallying every dollar I spend for the foreseeable future.

On the way back to Fillmore's place, which is actually his parents' place, I tell him I don't want to be in the controls industry anymore. I don't fit in, have no talent or passion for what I'm doing, and the decent pay doesn't compensate for the hours I work and the time I lose with friends and family. Thing is, if I choose to do anything else, I'll likely be dirt poor. There seem to be no good options, but I keep saying I'll figure something out.

Fillmore commiserates. We both went to the same college for radio and TV production and the Recession happened right as we were graduating. We were quickly schooled in the lessons of the Real World. We've suffered no illusions about our lives. We take what we can get, although Fillmore's got a good deal because he's got an inheritance from his grandparents and he lives with his parents rent-free in this really classy, nice old house on North Star Lake. But both of us would like satisfying careers that also pay enough to live comfortably, which is apparently asking a lot these days.

"We're creatives, you and I," he says in the car. "Not everyone is cut out to be a lawyer or a doctor or an accountant."

"Right, but there's no money in what we're good at unless you're insanely connected," I say.

Back at his place, we sit in the old 1963 Volkswagon Bug parked in the garage. Fillmore got it a year ago off this guy he found on Craigslist. He paid 8 grand for it. He'd always wanted one and he saved up for it (how, I have no idea since he hasn't worked since like 2012). The Bug's got a dented hood with a giant novelty Band-Aid on it, but other than that it's in decent shape. The former owner put a lot of money into the engine and it looks really clean and healthy for such an old car.

Fillmore tells me how he wants to put in a radio and how he needs to get the hood replaced and get the insurance worked out before he can take it out on the road for long trips. He says it's nerve-wracking to drive, like you're cruising along in a tin can. But you can tell he loves the thing. He says 45 mph is its favorite speed.

I sit in the driver's seat and feel the thin steering wheel and the thin gear shift and Fillmore puts the sunroof back and we sit there in the garage like that, just chilling and talking about the Bug. He opens the hood and shows me where the spare tire would go. We look at the engine in the trunk.

I'm getting tired but we walk down to the lake. Fillmore put the dock in the water this year and his family's speedboat is there, too. He says he's thinking of taking it out on Sunday.

The lake looks incredible in the moonlight. There's a full June moon in the inky sky, casting this milky pallor over everything. The water looks like black silk and the dock creaks.

"Bright-ass moon," I comment. "Everything's lit up like daytime on a dimmer or something."

"That could be a song name," Fillmore says.

We walk back up to the car and say our farewells.

"Sorry about the job, but you'll be all right," Fillmore tells me. "Just sucks not knowing what you're going to do next."

I tell him I'll try to view this as an opportunity.

We give each other an awkward, one-armed hug and then I'm in the car and out the driveway.

I drive home on the freeway under the bright-ass moon. I keep waiting for the fear and loneliness to take me over but, thankfully, it never does.

Weird Mood

I walked the streets of Ann Arbor alone.

I'd met up with Biden (no relation to the president) earlier but he got upset because he found out Edna Krapappel (Bart's teacher on The Simpsons) was dead. He'd been pirating the golden years recently, binging them, and figured everyone was still alive.

"Krabappel's dead?" he said when I informed him. "When?"

"2013," I said. "Long time ago now."

"You mean, the character, right? They killed the character off like they did Flanders' wife."

"They killed the character off eventually, yeah, but no, I mean the actress, Marcia Wallace."

"She died?"

"Yeah."

"In 20-fucking-13?"

"Yeah, October 2013. Like, I want to say a couple days before or after Lou Reed."

"How did I not know this? What was I even doing in 2013?"

"I was working at Kuka, I'd just started. Uh, you would've been in Toledo, I think."

He got this weird look on his face and stopped being talkative. About two minutes later he was like, "Dude, I gotta take off."

We were at The Fleetwood Diner, a little twenty-four hour joint on the city's east side. It looks like a 1950's place with stickers all over the inside of the walls. It's tiny, made of airstream silver tin.

They're famous for their "hipster hash", a breakfast item. I always get the tuna melt.

Biden tossed a ten on the table for his omelet and was off down the street. I watched him go and finished my tuna melt.

Before our food came he'd shown me this video of a song he'd written on acoustic. It was really pretty, made me think of sandalwood panels and campfires and snow outside. I had it stuck in my head now.

I paid, put my earbuds in and listened to The National and The Black Keys' new albums. It's been hot out, and even though it was late and dark I didn't need to wear my hoodie.

I strutted along, letting the music tow my thoughts in whatever directions.

Then, I saw her.

It was Bailey Zsarkel. We'd worked at the state parks together years ago, after I was in college. She was this little hippie girl then, with dreads. Her dreads were gone now but she was wearing this weird Indian get-up complete with a jewel stuck on the center of her forehead which is weird because I'm pretty sure she's something like Czech, English and Norwegian.

She was always super friendly and happy and really pleasant to be around, an adorable young thing. She made it known that she dated older guys, too, so all the horny older maintenance dudes were always buying her Dairy Queen and shit. She was the positive energy of the carpenter shop.

We'd ride together all the time on the maintenance and safety checks. She was a great work friend. Many great conversations. I remember I recorded a video of her once with this tiny frog she'd found under a trash bin and she was singing to it. I wanted her to marry me right then but we were never more than work acquaintances. I kept that video for years until I got rid of the phone. I'd watch it when I was feeling down.

She was coming out of Nexxus (a club) with a gaggle of friends, male and female.

"Hey Bailey," I said as she and her group walked by me. I don't know why. Normally I would've just let her pass but right then I felt the insatiable urge to say something.

She turned and in the next second about four or five emotions went across her face. It started with curiosity, then lapsed into an irritation that the person getting her attention wasn't attractive or valuable-looking (I'm not), a bit of concern and fear over whether this unattractive dude was about to hit on her, then a spark of recognition as she realized it was an old co-worker, and finally a bit of a disinterested side-eye — her last thought in that last second must've been something like, "Oh, it's him..."

"Dominic," she said, flashing a horsey smile. She always looked like she could've been Tom Petty's cute twenty-something daughter. Her eyes were mostly looking at the Jimmy Johns' across the street. "How have you been?"

Never was a question spoken with less interest.

One of her drunk friends stuck out her hand for me to shake. I took it and she pumped enthusiastically without introducing herself. Bailey's friends laughed.

"I've been great," I said. "I'm a millionaire now."

I'm not. I don't know why I said that. My general mood and their initial reaction to me must've brought it out.

Bailey raised her eyebrows.

"Oh, you are?"

"Yeah. I invested in weed and then they legalized it. I'm fucking loaded."

"Wow, good for you."

"Can you buy me a new car?" slurred one of her drunk friends. I ignored her. They were all done up in that weird Indian get-up stuff. Forehead jewels and belly-dancing shit. Nexxus was probably having a theme night.

"How have you been?" I asked her. "I see you got rid of your dreads."

"Yeah, a couple years ago. Uh, I'm good. I'm running for office, actually."

"No, you're not."

"I am. I'm running for city council next year."

"Dude, I received like thirty friend requests a day," said one of her friends to the group and not to me. "All from people I'm mutual friends with. It's like, what's going on?"

"WILL you be MY FRIEND?!" slurred the really drunk one.

"I blame Russia," said a male friend in the back, tall dude with his arms protectively locked around the neck of the friend request girl.

"You're just that popular," said Bailey. She looked back at me.

I gotta go and I'm not sure why you stopped me to begin with, it's not like I know you that well, says the look.

"K, well I'm off to buy something," I said. "See you."

"Bye..."

I could hear them laugh all the way down the street even with my headphones on.

I went home and slept for like twelve hours. It was early afternoon by the time I got up. I had a voicemail from Biden. I called him back rather than listen to it.

"Sorry, man," he said, sounding hungover. "I've been having weird mood swings with my meds getting adjusted and for some reason that Krabappel news fucking ruined me. Piece of my childhood I didn't even know I had and it's gone forever. Or something. It's just weird that it could've been gone and all this time went by and I didn't realize it until now. Life, man."

"Where did you go?"

"I was gonna just go home and fucking crash but instead I went to Babs Underground, and like I said for some reason that news made me really fucking sad so to distract myself I just started buying everyone shots and was like, toasting her, going, 'To Mrs. Krabappel!' And so everyone started calling me Krabappel. I got fucking decimated and I kept showing them my sandalwood song. Lyfted home. Which reminds me – if you take me to get my car I'll buy us Fleetwood again."

"K."

While I drove to get him, I didn't listen to any music, and I got that music from the end of the Halloween episode where Homer gets stuck in the third dimension and ends up in our world and sees an erotic cake shop. That really melancholy French horn version of the Danny Elfman Simpsons theme with the chimes playing in the background.

I had that stuck in my head the whole time I went to get him.

Sometimes life is just shit happening and none of it pays off.

For the Love of Murgatroyd

The day I crashed my car was the same day I met real power.

I don't have any friends at work, but if I did, Don would be the closest thing to one. He's the guy I work with the most, the guy I've talked to the most about our not-mutual interests. I pretend to be interested in him and he pretends to be interested in me. It's better than spending 10 hours a day alone on the factory floor.

Don's another controls engineer, and he's been at it for fifteen years now. He's got a mustache and a 50-year-old's burgeoning jowls and a huge gut and prescription safety goggles and a daughter in high school who wants to be a dancer.

I never wanted to be this industry — a cousin got me into it. I needed to pay my bills. At the time I had an even shittier job. I'm sure you can relate.

But I've survived, and I've been at it four years now. I'm not good at controls, but I'm decently competent and the industry is really hurting for bodies. Or at least that's what I've heard. I've picked up a few things but it's not a very educational environment. Everyone's just here for the paycheck like me.

My car got wrecked at lunch, courtesy of three things — 1) a chain-link fence outside the BDubs I went to, 2) a retention pond swollen with an inordinate amount of May rain and 3) a foot that thought it was on the brake and not the gas.

It only took five seconds for four years of payments to go down the drain. It was a silver 2016 Honda sedan and I'll miss the faithful little guy. The cop who answered my despondent phone call was a saggy-faced hounddog of a black guy who typed into his phone. He reminded me of Danny Glover and asked me three times how much I'd had to drink that afternoon.

As they towed my totaled car away, I thought of Bukowski's poem where he compares a car to a woman-- one that only you truly know and understand.

When I got back to the factory, which was only just down the road (that's what was so infuriating, I should've just fucking walked) a whirl of thoughts spun around my head — my powerlessness, my acute awareness of my situation, my inability to help myself, my inability

to catch a break. I'm far from home, far from the friendships it took my entire youth to build. I am On My Own in America, and it doesn't feel like freedom to me.

"We gotta go to admin," says Don when I get back to our tables. We're set up in the rear end of the factory, responsible for the floor pan section of the line. There's new technology going in further up and we've been dead in the water for over a week now.

"What happened?" I ask. I haven't even had a chance to tell him I'm rideless.

Don shows me the printed email. I scan it without retaining any information. I can only wonder how the fuck I'm going to get back to my hotel room that day. I don't know anyone well enough to ask for a ride, not even Don, though I'll probably end up asking him.

"It's a meeting," he says. "They want the whole team. We're gonna get yelled at."

And then he says something he's never said before.

"It'll be all right. Just follow me."

He gets up and I follow, confused as to why he would preface this with such a strangely paternal remark. We've had these meetings before. Usually just Mueller and one of his toadies will ask us stern questions about where we're at and then let us go.

We walk from the factory building to the administration building, which looks like a high school from the 70's — long and low and made of alternating panels of metal and glass. It takes about fifteen minutes. There's an old fashioned felt bulletin board in the lobby area and rubber mats. The hallways are lined with plastic mailboxes stuffed with random folders and papers. The monotony and tedium of office life permeates all.

The sheer unbridled maleness of the place is prevalent in every carpet thread. Everyone we pass in their cubicles or offices looks down and types or scribbles out their tasks. There's an odd tension here, and I've been around long enough to know it's not normal. It's because of something. A presence. A disruptive one. It doesn't usually feel like this in here.

Two suits are in the meeting room Don leads me to, and I've seen them before on the floor, looking stressed out and yakking on their cell phones. It's Mueller and one of his cronies. Mueller has like twelve cronies and I can never remember their names because they come and go so erratically. They're the highest of the high in this hierarchy.

Today, there's the same nervous energy pouring off them, the same kind I can sense in the rest of the place.

They don't shake our hands, but they ask me and Don what we do and how long we've been at it.

I tell them. Four years, and I've been on this job for two months.

"I've met you a couple times before, actually," I tell him.

"Yeah, I'm trying to remember a time when I appreciated you," says Mueller's crony. It's a quick little insult, designed to sting and flit off faster than I can respond to it. I can see he's sweating.

Don and I sit in the rows of chairs set up theater-style in front of the long meeting table at the front of the room. People file in and fill the seats and the room gets crowded. I recognize faces and names but no one talks to me and I don't want them to. I am unfortunately in the front row, across the table from Mueller and his crony. I assume the meeting will start now and Mueller and his crony will tell us how dissatisfied they are.

But then, he appears.

He's dressed in black, and his skin is so tan it looks leathered. He's probably in his 50's but wants to look 30 and has the money to almost pull it off.

He's got facial tattoos, this weird grid of stuff on the lower half of his chin under a handlebar mustache. He's got indecipherable cursive on his cheeks and above his eyebrows. His black hair is so thick and greased it looks permanently frozen, as if he's on the back of some expensive motorcycle on some impossibly free American highway.

He's accompanied by a young woman with skin like his, an ass like a ripe pumpkin, and eyes as cold and hot as a jungle night. She slinks in behind Leathers and takes a seat against the wall, as far away from us wagecucks as she can be. She looks 19 and is dressed like an

Instagrammer — taut belly showing with a gun-shaped piercing dangling from her navel, platform shoes, and a denim skirt so short we can see her black string-thong.

Leathers stomps in on his own clean-as-fuck boots. He stops in front of the table, right across from me. Everyone on my side of the room stares up at him.

We've never seen him before, but his vibrations tell us exactly who he is. Mueller introduces him but he's so quiet I don't catch his name. Everything about the guy screams darkness and ruthless conservatism. It screams wealth and, "Serve me or I'll make you sorry."

The irritation on him is palpable, even though he's flashing us predatory grins of sharp, chiclet-white teeth. He probably thinks the grins look friendly, or that we're dumb enough to see them as friendly, but they look like a wolf or a shark. His eyes are a demonic twinkling brown. He smells like desert sweetness, oily perfume from the back of his freedom Harley. Sunglasses dangle from the collar of his shirt. He probably took them off just before coming into the room. They probably cost more than what we make in a month.

He starts talking without any introduction.

"Do you— any of you— have any idea how expensive this is."

It's not posed as a question.

"Do you have any idea what an unimaginably intricate web of plastic tubing and sparks and metallic shards we are dealing with here? Do you have any idea what any of this labyrinthian mechanical undertaking — of which you meatloaf-eaters are each responsible for a minuscule fraction of — costs in total?"

The silence is as thick as the meatloaf we apparently eat.

Leathers talks with his manicured hands. His clean-as-fuck motorcycle boots don't move, not even enough to creak the custom leather or clink the silver chains.

"Now I have sympathy for those trapped in the matrix," he tells us. "I get it. Shit happens. Setbacks are had, people have mothers, you're just paying for your kid's spaghetti-o's and your wife's IKEA patio furniture. I get it."

His boot moves, the right one. It swings towards us in a menacing step. There are creaks and clinks of leather and silver.

"But I'm on my way to fucking Bali right now. Do you think I want to stick my head in this mess and breathe this air today? Because apparently the people I'm paying the biggest fraction of this financial clusterfuck to..." — he gestures at Mueller — "...can't seem to get the sheep to fall in line and do what *they're* getting paid for."

He steps back and prepares to fire the first volley from the cannons, chest puffing up.

"So for the love of murgatroyd, let the abilitating START!"

His voice booms outward on the last word. I wonder if abilitating is a word at all.

He points at me.

"You. What's Ohm's Law?"

"Uh..."

I don't know what that is. I've never even heard of it. I don't know what to say, my eyes automatically flick to any sympathetic face in the room and find only downcast eyes or eyes looking obediently up at Leathers.

I haven't felt this icy kind of terror since high school.

Leathers is waiting for me to answer.

"You're a controls engineer right?" he says, no longer smiling.

I don't even need to answer before the tripwire happens. The next events play out in like five seconds but it'll take longer to explain them.

"HOW THE *FUCK* DO YOU NOT KNOW THAT," Leathers screams at me, and then he turns to Mueller. "AND HOW THE *FUCK* DID HE GET HIRED?"

His voice bounces off the walls like shotgun spray, and we absorb it like tactical foam.

"He told us he knew it for the interview," says Mueller, who normally exudes rich-dad confidence but now looks like he's under a guillotine.

Bullshit. Mueller didn't interview me and that question never came up in the actual interview anyway. The interview consisted of me saying what jobs I'd worked on and of them saying we'll call you and then a week later they did.

"They're lying," I say loudly. It's an instant reaction, a misdirection of the stress and strain I've felt from losing my car this afternoon. All heads snap in my direction with eyes bugging.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP," Leathers screams in my face from across the table, but I'm too hot to listen.

"Maybe that's your problem," I say, looking down, shoulders shaking. "You hire people who lie to you."

The words are out and I can't believe I've said them. Mueller and his crony are looking at me like I just told them God is gay and Jesus is his buttboy — all pursed Christian lips and furious, accusing upper-middle-class "*shutthefuckupyoumoron*" suburbanite eyes. I see Don looking at me and his face is as horrified as a person who's watching a livestream of a mass shooting.

Leathers laughs like someone just told him a frustratingly stupid joke.

He leans down and gets in my face. The economic power radiates off him. His eyes are pill-popping watery.

"You do realize that if I send you packing before this is over, you will no longer not only be able to make a living in this industry, you will not be able to make a living in *any* industry, and I can make sure of it before your pale, corn-syrup ass leaves this ROOM."

His breathe smells like caramel and mints, some maple syrup concoction.

I know in my heart this isn't a big deal for him. I'm talking to the spider in the center of the web right now, the alpha predator. This guy is the director of many, many economic threads, and this must be a large one or he wouldn't be here. The lines out back are probably in excess of a billion dollars. They won't even let us see the new technology they're putting in.

Leathers' girlfriend in the corner snickers, on her phone.

"Now, I'm a compassionate mammal," he says, not waiting for an answer from me, rising to his full 5 foot 6 six inches again and addressing the whole room. "I've got plenty of honey to go around. I can take care of some of the less neurologically fortunate members of this great nation. BUT I NEED SOMEONE TO PUSH SOME BUTTONS AND GET ME SOME PARTS AND I NEED IT RIGHT FUCKING YESTERDAY."

The room is silent.

Leathers clasps his hands and unclasps them, spreads them like a priest giving a blessing.

"Heads will start getting chopped by the end of this week if something does not improve. If I don't start getting production numbers sent to my phone, and if those numbers don't make my balls tingle..."

He turns to Muller.

"...do I even need to finish that sentence?"

Mueller shakes his head, lips pursed.

Leathers addresses us one last time.

"Do what I'm directing your pissant little flow of financial security — your wonderful little piece of the American Dream — INTO YOUR GRUBBY LITTLE BUTTHOLES FOR."

He points at Mueller and the crony one last time.

"There will be no second visit. This either happens, or I cancel Christmas."

He turns and leaves the room. His girlfriend follows with her eyes on her phone. Off to Bali.

That's it. The only thing that lingers is that cloying sweet oil smell.

"Any questions?" Mueller asks us.

We don't answer.

The problem with modern capitalism is that there's no way for benevolence to rise to the top. It's all people like Leathers — brutal calculation and malevolence and execution. They see the world as a system, and there's no salvation coming. The system, for them, IS the salvation. There's no room for ethics or compassion. If you don't do it, your competitor will.

We are locked into the simulation, and everything is a performance. Jon Stewart's testimony to Congress on behalf of the 9/11 responders was a fucking performance. Everyone on TikTok begging for attention, educating and gyrating and pontificating into Joe Rogan mics—that's all performance. God knows what even the most decently-presented moguls and millionaires of our time do when they're not visible to the rest of us. Child trafficking is a billion dollar industry. Are you spending money on that? Cause I'm not. And I'm technically in the global 1 percent, as I'm reminded anytime I try to point out the gross injustices of our economic sorting to anyone on the right of the political spectrum.

That's what I think on my way back to the parking lot. I'm so worked up I forget I don't have a car till I'm nearly to my parking spot.

I pull out my phone and see what I can do.

Good Night

I was scared of the dark, so dad brought me the moon.

I called him into my room for the twelfth time that night. I couldn't sleep. The Darkness was too pervasive. I'd lose myself in it. I was afraid I'd stop existing, that something would come snatch me and take me away forever.

Finally, he sighed and said, "All right. I know what to do. Just a sec."

Five minutes later, he walked into my bedroom holding the moon.

It was smaller than I thought it would be — only about the size of a baseball.

"I thought it'd be bigger," I told him.

"It's about the same size as it is in the sky," he said, examining it. It was so smooth yet rough, so bright yet dim.

"Doesn't everyone else need it?" I asked.

"They won't mind if it's just for tonight," he said. "And they've got the stars, anyway."

He set it on my table. It stayed perfectly balanced, a little angel-orb, a cool sphere of powder. I reached out for it.

"Don't touch it," he said. "That's the only one we got, you know."

I withdrew my hand. The moon's light cast a ghostly pale radiance all over my room. It was like some spell had been cast.

"How did you get it?" I asked.

"Just went up and grabbed it," said my dad. "I needed the stepladder, but that was it. It's right there. Easiest thing."

"It's so pretty," I said, mesmerized.

"Yeah. It is. Are we good?"

I couldn't stop staring at it. All four years of me believed my dad had gone up to the sky, plucked the moon off it like a piece of fruit and brought it down to me just so I could fall asleep without having anxiety attacks over the darkness. My own personal cosmic night light. My dad was the world's most casual hero.

"Yeah," I said.

"Good," said dad. He motioned for me to lay down and tucked me in.

I nestled into the glow. The pale glow was comforting. All of a sudden my bed seemed cozier, warmer; the Darkness farther, tamer.

"Good night," he said from the open doorway. "Love you."

"Love you, too."

He shut the door and it was just me and the moon. I stared at it until I fell asleep.

When I woke up the next morning, the moon was gone. I leapt up and darted outside and craned my neck, scanning the firmament as fast as I could.

I found it— hung over my neighbor's tree, almost caught in the branches. There it was in the sky, faint but right where dad had faithfully returned it.

Years later, after he passed away, I discovered the old moon in my dad's closet in a box of stuff. It was made of polyurethane, some spun plastic. You tapped the bottom, a little metal touch sensor, to make it glow. It came with a little USB cord to charge the light inside it.

I took it and kept it, and it's still in my drawer, waiting to be brought out whenever it's needed.

One-Hitter

I hadn't smoked weed in like four years but then I went over to Mira's and everything went to shit.

She came over to my parent's house where I live, and we fucked around in my bedroom. She talked about how horny she was but I wanted to talk about my second novel. So we compromised and talked about John Lennon and the philosophy of the mind.

Then she busted out her one hitter and I didn't want her to leave so I said sure, I'd hit it with her. We hit it and it wasn't too bad. We watched some Gordon Ramsay. My mind glowed but that was it.

I get paranoid on weed. I start thinking I'm not real. Plus shit is happening in my life with one parent having cancer and the other parent being potentially unstable because of other parent having cancer but yeah. I was really good not thinking about anything I didn't want to think about. I steered my own thoughts real good.

Mira got up at some point and said she was going over to her friend's house. I could see the name "Dave" popping up on her screen a lot.

"I'll go with you," I said. I mean, what the fuck? We hadn't seen each other in months and she comes over to hang and now she wants to leave.

"That's fine," said Mira. "I need a ride."

We took off, my parents were watching TV. I said goodbye to them — I always do these days. Certain events make you appreciate your family relationships more.

Her friend was the Dave from her phone screen and he looked like David Krumholtz, the actor. I mean, exactly like him, only without gray hair or anything. Dark hair, beard, olive complexion, dressed like Hollywood.

His house was bigger than I'd anticipated. There were a bunch of people there. Some kind of low-key party.

Dave lived on a lake and we were out by the dock at first and Mira insisted we all hit the one hitters again but this guy named Kenyon

had his own shit and it was powerful but of course I didn't know that until after I'd smoked it.

It was this weird, kind of dark evening where you couldn't see the sunset but it wasn't raining and all the wood of the dock looked really splintery and old like in an old horror movie where something slimy comes out of the water and fucks everyone's shit up but fortunately that didn't happen.

We hit the one hitters and of course Kenyon's shit was potent as fuck, but I had to hit it because otherwise what was I doing there? Right away I started feeling myself slipping. I forced my thoughts away from shit I didn't want to think about.

It was actually pretty good at first. We sat in the living room with these dudes named Kenyon and Rasheed. They were both tall black dudes — Kenyon had short hair and Rasheed had long hair.

The living room was dark, too. I sat in this big fluffy chair and Mira had her own chair next to me and Kenyon was next to her and Rasheed was next to me.

I don't remember what we talked about except I could see Kenyon and Rasheed's auras — Kenyon's was this lovely blue and Rasheed's was this vibrant orange. I told them both about it and they laughed.

We were so fucking stoned. I did the best I could not to think of the shit I didn't want to think about but of course on weed it's like your mind's hijacked so it happened eventually but before it did, more people came into the room and started hitting the one hitters.

One of them was Dave, and he sat in the chair with Mira. The other was this older guy with white hair and old Navy tattoos, the kind where it looked like someone drew them on his skin with shitty felt pen, and his arms were really built and wiry, and he wore this button-up shirt that hung off him and his whole body looked really fucking hard, like he was made out of plastic or something. His name was Rich.

Rich was the one who derailed it all. He said something about me. I can't remember exactly what it was, but it was dismissive and disrespectful.

He sat down on the couch and took the one-hitter and put it in his lips and said whatever it was he said about me. He said it really man-like, really smoking-dude-in-a-biker-bar-like, really "I'm a badass

and he isn't and you all know it so let me get some easy social karma" like.

He said it because he didn't think I'd say anything back to him.

So I did.

I was pissed about being high and Mira only thinking about her pussy and not our friendship and being over here at all with these assholes and other shit I didn't want to think about. I was so stressed out about not thinking about that shit that I snapped back at Rich.

"Oh, really, sir?" I snapped really aggressively. It was all I said. It doesn't sound like much, but it was one of those things where the words don't matter — what I really said was, "Fuck you, let's fight."

That was all Rich needed.

He was calm. He hit the one hitter and put it back down and was like, "Ok."

He got up and came over and stood in front of me. He looked really tall.

"Get up," he growled and I realized I'd fucked up but at least this was distracting me from thinking.

I stood up. I was taller than him. He was also really old but way more in shape than me.

I was seriously pissed, too, but I have this high aversion to any kind of pain. I looked at Rich's balled up fists and his hard-plastic body. I knew I'd never win a fight with him. He looked like he'd fought his whole life, and I'd never even fought once in my twenty-some years.

I tried to be diplomatic. I held out my hands. I made myself clear I wasn't a threat, even saying so out loud at one point. People chuckled but a few of them were trying to get Rich to calm down. Mira didn't say jack. I could smell someone hitting the one-hitters again. It was probably her.

I don't remember what Rich said to trigger the thing I didn't want to think about. All I remember is all of a sudden thinking about my dad and having to say goodbye to him forever and it just happened involuntarily.

My throat tightened up, my eyes got wet, my lips twisted and these moans started coming out. My cheeks got wet, too.

"Aw, shit," Rich said, and it was in that moment I realized he looked kind of like an uglier, shorter Clint Eastwood. He turned away and sort of waved his hands.

"The hell, Rich?" Dave said.

"I get freaked out when guys cry," he said.

He walked out of the room and was gone.

No one comforted me or anything like that, I just stood there and let it out and I touched my mouth a lot which was comforting for some reason and I was vaguely aware of Kenyon or Rasheed — I can't remember who cause I couldn't see their hair or their aura anymore — guiding me back to my chair where I sat down again.

When I stopped crying I was by myself with Dave and the light was on. I was still high but doing better. Gordon Ramsay was on TV.

Rich came back in the room and tried to start shit again but Dave cut him off. I was too out of it to really respond, but I think I held my own pretty good considering.

"I don't wanna talk about it, it's over, you're killing my buzz, stop the shit, shut the fuck up, blah, blah, blah blah blah blah blah," Dave snapped. He actually said the "blah blah blahs", snapped them really fast.

Rich left again. I didn't know where Mira or Kenyon or Rasheed were.

I sat in my big comfy chair and tried to be calm. My heart was seriously racing, but I wasn't thinking about anything I didn't want to think about and I wasn't so high anymore which was great.

I tried to think of something friendly to say.

"I know this is a weird time to ask this question," I said to Dave.
"But are you David Krumholtz?"

Dave chuckled.

"That's one of my favorite actors," he said, but he wasn't being serious.

I sat there and said nothing else and waited to finish coming down.

Super Hawk

Within fifteen minutes, the tweet became the most viewed item of all time on the entire Internet.

It was text and an image.

The image showed the president, red-faced and grinning a grin of unsettlingly white teeth. A scrim of sweat beaded his forehead. His eyes were small and dark and twinkly.

He sat at his desk with his tie off and the first button of his button-up shirt undone, revealing a sweaty collarbone. His skin had the texture of an orange that has been left in the fruit bowl for a week. His hair hung in his face. Most people had never seen him this unkempt.

There was what looked like an open suitcase set on the desktop. Inside it was a keyboard and numerous buttons. Most notably, there was a large, mushroom-shaped red button in the center of the keyboard. There were caution stripes of yellow and black all around it. The plastic guard over the button had been flipped up, leaving the button exposed and ready to be pushed.

It was over this button that the president's open palm hovered.

The president's pose and his maniacal facial expression were enough to make the picture an internationally unsettling sight.

Then there was the text above the picture.

It read, "My dick is hard right now, you guys."

The tweet was sent at approximately 8:13 PM. By 8:20 the entire world had seen it and was glued to their phones, laptops, TVs— any screen they could find.

TV cable news salivated, bloggers and pundits broke their fingers from typing so fast, and every comment section on every social media site was filling with data faster than the servers could register it.

Gradually, the story emerged.

The president had been acting normal after dinner that evening. He'd held a meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, revised a speech on an immigration bill he was trying to push through Congress, had a cup of tea, and announced he'd be retiring to bed early.

That was around 8 PM. At about 8:10 PM, a staffer tried to get into the Oval Office only to find the door locked.

The president had apparently locked himself inside the Oval Office with the nuclear football. The two men responsible for the football had left it inside while they'd gone out to talk privately with the President's Chief of Staff over a matter that was initially kept confidential but was later revealed to be the "bodacious" ass of the President's daughter. Though they were never supposed to leave the nuclear football under any circumstances, the handlers had shrugged and thought, "What's the worst that could happen?"

Three minutes after the staffer politely knocked on the door, the tweet appeared.

Now the handlers, the rest of the White House staff, most of the President's cabinet, and the top officials of the military were all crammed into the room outside the Oval Office, taking turns pounding on the door and trying to hear what was going on inside.

The windows were unfortunately unbreakable (and the president had drawn the curtains shut), and the locks impenetrable. The office was a veritable fortress, and for good reason.

Several military officers all took turns trying to ram the door down, but the practice was abandoned after three successive dislocated shoulders. It was clear the door was not going to give way, even after a SWAT battering ram was fetched. Explosives were briefly considered and quickly ruled out.

The rest of the world, all watching with bated breath, concluded that the President was clearly having a breakdown of some sort. The unsupervised nuclear football just happening to be present with him was nothing more than the worst sort of luck.

The image and the tweet were poured over repeatedly by every news and media outlet. What seemed like every person on the planet offered their frantic opinions.

"My dick is hard right now, you guys" scrolled repeatedly at the bottom of every news network.

"What could he possibly mean by this?" all the talking heads asked excitedly. This was easily the most interesting thing to happen so far this year, which was really saying something.

"Is this a secret code? We can't rule that out," said Sean Hannity. "It could be a signal – is it perhaps a distress call of some kind?"

"It could be that his dick is code for the warheads," offered Tucker Carlson. "If the warheads are 'hard', it may mean that 'the warheads' are ready to go."

"We stand upon the brink," said Wolf Blitzer. "The message could mean anything, but whatever it does mean, you can count on CNN to keep you updated."

"Truly, a tweet that will live forever," said Rachel Maddow, a large image of the tweet superimposed next to her head. "And we here at MSNBC and our sponsors will be there for you regardless of how this turns out."

"Is this really that surprising?" exclaimed members the opposing party as they appeared on split screens of every news show available. "We've always said this president was unhinged and mentally unstable, and now we have our proof!"

"Not so fast," screamed the president's own party on the opposite sides of the split screens. "We mustn't rush to judgement until all the facts are in!"

Finally, an important observation was made upon zooming in on the image.

"Look at his pupils," noted one astute commentator on CNN. "They're completely dilated."

"He's lit as fuck," blurted Jake Tapper, the f-bomb coming over the airwaves uncensored as the control room was too jazzed by their current ratings to bleep it. Already, management was jacking up prices on advertisers.

Thus, the diagnosis for the president was now shifted from nervous breakdown to a drug-induced psychosis.

The experts weighed in. It was agreed that LSD was the most likely culprit, although mushrooms, ecstasy and DMT were also considered.

The debate raged on in front of the world's wide eyes, everyone well aware of the possibility of imminent nuclear war, but then the unthinkable happened:

The President sent another tweet.

In this one, he had taken his shirt and jacket off and was standing atop the desk, holding the phone so it pointed down at him in a standard selfie angle. You could see his entire body, tilting crazily to the left as he held the phone at a slant. One wild eye and lock of hair could be seen in the upper corner of the photo. The rest showed his pink torso, his lighter pink nipple, his fleshy gut swelling out like a beachball and his pressed pant leg and foot.

His polished shoe was now held aloft, poised over the red button.

"I AM THE SUPER HAWK," said the new caption, in all caps.

If the first tweet had been Fat Man, this second tweet was the Tsar Bomba.

Already memes had been sprouting over social media like wildflowers, all sorts of humorous takes on the situation.

Within two minutes of the tweet, 4chan and Reddit were down and rumored to have collapsed entirely. Twitter/X itself was replaced with an image of a foreboding-looking white X with the words "Back soon" under it. Facebook and Youtube had crashed. The only up-to-date source of information was now— to their executives' unimaginable delight— the 24 hour news networks. Pundits weighed the incident's notoriety to 9/11, the only comparable event in recent history.

Outside the Oval Office, the government officials were still trying to figure out why the hell the president would've taken a hallucinogen. No one had any answers, and people were beginning to angrily blame and accuse each other of various wrongdoings and incompetence.

Eventually, the president's 13 year old son sheepishly tapped the Secretary of Defense on the shoulder. He had something to tell him.

The Secretary and the youth went into another room. Twenty seconds later the Secretary- normally an even-keeled and stone-faced fellow- could be heard bellowing, "YOU FUCKING *WHAT?!'*"

He towed the kid out by the ear, and announced to the group that the President's son had placed an especially potent tab of LSD in the President's evening tea. The son was upset at the president for yelling at him earlier, after he'd ripped an especially pungent fart during a meeting with the Ambassador to Mexico and then quipped, "Sorry, too many tacos."

The maintenance crew had just finished taking the beaten door off its hinges with a drill as this news was announced.

The President's son was quite distraught, tears on his adolescent face, and he stammered to the shocked audience that he'd only meant to "freak his dad out." He was shushed and shuttled off to his room. His fate would be determined once it was assured that nuclear hellfire wasn't going to rain down on all of humanity.

The president was found lying face up in the center of the Oval Office, flat on his back with his arms spreadeagled around him, making snow angel motions. He'd removed his pants and was clad in nothing but boxer shorts with the Playboy bunny printed on the crotch.

"Mr. President, are you all right?" exclaimed everyone, crowding around him.

"The world is a mirror," murmured the president, smiling up at the ceiling.

The nuclear football was still on the desk, open and thankfully untouched. The two handlers quickly bundled it away as discreetly as they could, doing their best to avoid the harsh death glares from everyone.

Phone calls were placed to foreign countries to reassure them the situation was under control and that there was no need to launch counterstrikes of their own. Most of the messages had to be given to subordinates as it was reported nearly all foreign leaders were laughing too hard to come to the phone.

The president's frazzled advisors addressed the ravenous media in the Situation Room. They announced that president was cared for, perfectly healthy and in good hands. The advisors explained that he had merely suffered a bit of "stress-induced gastritis" but was now back to normal and in good spirits.

"He would like everyone to know that he will return to the service of the American people right after a good night's sleep. He thanks you all for your concern and cannot wait to get back to tackling the urgent issues this great nation faces."

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, and began the process of discussing, dissecting, and attempting to capitalize on the event.

Unremarkables, Anonymous

"Hi, I'm Joel, and I'm ordinary."

"Hi, Joel," said the group.

"Joel, why don't you tell us when you first knew you were unremarkable," said Denny, the group leader.

They sat on metal folding chairs arranged in a circle in the church basement, between old tile and fluorescent lights and ceiling squares that probably had asbestos in them. They ate plain bagels and drank cool iceless water out of white paper cups.

The place's scent reminded Joel of grade school and that made him uncomfortable.

Joel wanted to sit down. He left hand clutched his right arm above the elbow. He always did this when he was nervous.

"There was never really a moment," he said, looking at the old tile, which was the color of oatmeal. "I guess I could say I just know from the way I'm feeling right now. I don't want to talk about myself because I know no one gives a fuck about what I have to say."

"Language, please," said Denny, concern in her eyes. "But so you're saying, there was never a moment of recognition?"

"No," said Joel.

A heavysset guy next to Denny raised his hand. Denny called on him.

"Hi, I'm Chris, and I'm ordinary," said the guy.

"Hi Chris," responded everyone.

"That's actually pretty common," Chris said to Joel. "You can just tell us the last time you knew you were unremarkable. Other than right now, I mean."

Joel thought.

"I guess it was when I was sitting on my couch today and I realized I haven't spoken meaningfully to another person in weeks," he said. "I don't text, I don't do social media, and that's why I'm completely alone. That's why I came here."

"How did you hear about us?" asked Denny.

"I typed, 'Best ways to kill yourself' into Google and instead of the suicide hotline, this came up."

"The suicide hotline is useless anyway," said Chris. "Believe me, I know."

"Ok, thank you, Joel," said Denny, who was good at telling when new members didn't want to say anything else. "Welcome to Unremarkables, Anonymous."

"Welcome, Joel," intoned the rest of the group.

Joel sat back down so fast his chair gave a great bang. He still clutched his arm.

A heavysset guy with a Kentucky accent raised his hand.

Denny called on him.

"Hi, I'm Rudy, and I'm ordinary," said the heavysset guy. "Doesn't he have to tell us one thing he's insecure about?"

"That's true, Rudy," said Denny, who'd forgotten all about it.

"It can't be his weight," said Chris, trying to make a joke and failing like always.

"My complexion," muttered Joel, irritated he was still the center of attention. "Obviously."

The group nodded sympathetically. Joel's face was noticeably scarred from a long and arduous battle with teenage acne.

"That's fine, Joel," said Denny. "Let's all thank Joel for sharing with us and for being brave enough to come here for tonight."

The small group treated Joel to a smattering of golf claps. Joel clenched his arm and thanked God the moment was over. He wished he hadn't come, but at least now something was sort of happening to him.

Denny stood and addressed the group. Her real name was Denise but everyone called her Denny, like the defunct chain restaurant. It was the most interesting thing about her.

"Well, thanks for coming everyone," she said cheerfully. "Let's talk about how we've been doing since we last saw each other. What are some things that have been bothering people lately?"

A skinny, homely girl raised her hand.

"Yes, Courtney," said Denny.

"Hi, I'm Courtney, and I'm ordinary," said Courtney.

"Hi, Courtney," chorused the group.

"Podcasts have been bothering me."

"What about podcasts?" asked Denny.

"The people on them are annoying. Especially younger people."

"What about the younger people on podcasts do you find annoying!"

Courtney twisted the end of her long, frizzy ponytail around her right pointer finger. It was something she did when she got nervous.

"They're so giddy at the thought of being listened to that they never stop talking about themselves!" said Courtney. "I listened to a podcast today – it was supposed to be about Margaret Atwood, but the

girls spent the first twenty minutes giggling and talking about how nervous they were to be on the podcast and how weird they all were, but you could tell they didn't really think that, they were just trying to be cute and they knew everyone would think they were cute and I just knew no one would ever think that about me and so I didn't listen to it at all."

The group murmured in solidarity with Courtney's experience.

"Remarkable people are often blind to their own privilege," said Denny, nodding strongly. "They may call themselves 'weird' or 'nerds' or whatever, but they've never experienced the social isolation or rejection that comes from actually being those things. They just wear them as fun masks to spice up their own lives from time to time. Thank you, Courtney."

The group gave more polite, boring applause.

Another woman, this one immensely fat and butch, raised her hand.

"Hi, I'm Margaret, and I'm ordinary," she said.

"Hi, Margaret," muttered the group.

"Internet cartoons have been on my nerves for a long time," said Margaret, speaking through a wad of chewing tobacco tucked in her cheek. "It's kind of getting at the same thing Courtney was just talking about – the people that write them seem like such egomaniacs. They get off on being so cute and clever, they think they're such relatable individuals, but they're not special at all. And the fact that people actually RESPOND to this is just..."

Margaret shook her head in frustration, chewing furiously on her tobacco.

"I can't even finish that sentence. It's just so depressing to me. That 'OMG it's so ME!' bullshit. I can't stand it."

She spit into her white paper cup.

Denny nodded again, and the group murmured agreement.

"Yes, many Internet cartoons are overwhelmingly cloying and self-absorbed," she said. "It's the same attention seeking as a child doing a dance for their parents — 'Look what I can do!' Now, normally people will begin to ignore this behavior once a person is no longer a child, but these people never had to experience that transition because they're not ordinary. They keep getting the ego gratification, for one reason or another. So they keep doing it, and they become so confident that they will always be loved by everyone that they begin to do it in very saccharine and self-conscious ways. They stop trying to be any good because they've started thinking that their audience will love them no matter what they do. They've never had to experience rejection or sorrow, not the way that truly ordinary people do."

The group made more agreement noises.

"Anyone else?" said Denny. "Thank you, Margaret."

"It pisses me off to see anyone else happy," said a scrawny fellow on the group's periphery. "Because I know in order for me to achieve such a thing, there would have to be a fundamental shift in how others see me, and I don't know how to bring that about."

Everyone groaned.

"You say that every week, Roy," said Margaret.

Roy looked at his feet.

"It's still true," he grunted.

"Does anyone other than Roy have anything?" Denny asked, sunny as can be.

"Well, hang on," said Roy. "I said that, but I have something else to say, too."

"Other than you're tired of seeing other people happy?"

"That's basically what Margaret and Courtney just said. But yeah."

"All right, Roy," said Denny. "Share it, then."

Roy cleared his throat.

"I did something this week," he said. "I was sitting around thinking about how unhappy I am and how it pisses me off to see anyone else who's not unhappy. And I was sitting in my living room eating these leftover tater tots that I'd microwaved the night before, and I have this old glass chess set that I brought home from my parent's after Christmas."

"Okay," said Denny, and the group's interest was indeed slightly piqued by this change in rhetoric from what was usually their most predictable member.

"And I was like, I'm gonna teach myself how to play chess," said Roy. "I'd just let the thing sit there because I'm unremarkable and I knew I couldn't figure it out and even if I did figure it out I'd probably suck at it, but I stopped caring. I just wanted to do it to do it, you know?"

"So how did it go?" asked Denny, rapidly losing interest in Roy's story.

"At first, not good," said Roy. "The game was easier to learn than I thought — all the pieces just have rules as to how they could move. I'd always thought there was, like, math involved in terms of the basic structure of the game, and I suck at math."

"But you didn't have anyone to play with," said Denny.

"Well, that's the thing," said Roy. "I actually went online and found this forum where people play and I started playing digitally and I found I really enjoy it. And... and it turns out I'm pretty good. Like, for no reason."

"Playing chess?" Margaret asked. Everyone except Denny seemed genuinely interested in Roy's story.

"Yeah," said Roy, a touch of wonder in his voice. "I found something I enjoy. I played all night. I lost my first few games, but then I started winning. I won every game I played after the first few."

The room was absolutely silent.

"You won?" whispered Courtney. "You won something? Continuously? Reliably?"

"I was so happy I went right to bed," said Roy. "It was the first time in years I haven't stayed up all night and fallen asleep in the morning and slept all day. I woke up at like noon."

"So you're remarkable at chess," said Denny. "That's nice. I'll bet no one saw that coming."

"Do you think I could be remarkable at something, too?" Joel asked Roy, leaning over and almost whispering. "And I just don't know it?"

"IMPOSSIBLE," screeched Denny. "You only just got here! Does anyone else have a complaint or an observation?"

No one said anything. These people did lead very boring lives, after all. But a small flame had been lit inside everyone's heart. They started wondering.

Margaret wondered about the old plow she had lying out in her backyard shed. She'd always wanted to attach it to her pick-up and plow snow. Maybe she could be remarkable at that.

Courtney thought about the plants in her room. She had two of them – just a spider plant and some succulents. But when feeling sorry for herself for being unremarkable, she often would water them and admire the way the beads of water rolled down their leaves and darkened the potting soil. Maybe she should have more plants. Maybe she could be a remarkable gardener.

Joel thought about his video games at home. He wasn't great at playing them, but there were so many. Maybe he just hadn't found the one he was remarkable at yet. And after all, there were people who made quite a good living off of playing video games these days. Maybe that was his remarkable call.

The other folks we haven't met this evening all had similar thoughts – biking, candle-making, toy collecting, dishwashing, clogging.

The only one who didn't have those thoughts was Denny.

"Well, I suppose that'll be all," she said quickly, knowing when to end a meeting lest these people get a life change and possibly stop paying the ten dollar membership fee. "Shall we recite our words?"

Everyone stood and clasped hands, Roy included.

"I am ordinary, and that's okay," said the group. "Ordinary unites us, through race, gender and class. We have more in common with each other than with people in any other demographic. We are invisible, but we are invisible together."

"Thank you, everyone," said Denny. "We had three members speak today and one new member! That's a new record. Is there anything else before we go?"

Denny liked this job. The meetings were always short and the people were all easily placated. She was remarkable at helping other people accept their unremarkable-ness. What would happen if she lost that? She'd go back to being totally unremarkable! That was totally not an option.

No one said anything. Joel still clutched his arm, in disbelief he'd spoken actual sentences in front of like ten other people and itching to get home to turn on his PS4.

"No?" said Denny, giving everyone one last chance.

No response.

"Okay then! Meeting adjourned!"

A Brief Encounter

She was unloading the groceries when she saw him come out of his apartment. Her husband was at work, and it was a sunny winter day.

He appeared with a big blue hamper full of clothes, locked his door and came down the stairs. He didn't say anything to her or look at her.

There was snow all over the parking lot. It looked like vanilla ice cream. It had snowed a lot the previous day. She'd driven home from her mother's. Normally it took an hour, but today it took two hours.

She kept unloading the groceries, bag after bag hung on her arm – she could get all of them in one trip, she was sure of it – as he went to his car, which was parked next to hers.

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He was taking the laundry out when he saw her. She didn't look at him and seemed nervous that he was there. He did his best to not look at her, to show her that he wasn't interested, that he wasn't going to hurt her. People were so jittery and untrusting of each other these days.

He juggled the full laundry hamper with the jug of detergent on top, struggling to get his keys out of his jacket pocket. He didn't want any of his clothes to fall in the snow. He finally did it by balancing the hamper against the car and clicking the key fob with his free hand.

His shoes sank in the four inches of snow. The parking lot was all melting patches of what looked like thick vanilla ice cream. He'd driven home from a recording session the day before and what normally had taken forty minutes took an hour and a half. He'd taken all night to go to sleep, tossing and turning.

He got the laundry basket in the back seat, got in and pulled away.

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She went inside and put the groceries away. She was texting her husband when she noticed her sunglasses were gone.

She checked all over their apartment before going back outside and retracing her steps. There they were, on the sidewalk.

She went outside and nearly slipped on the stairs. The melting snow was turning to ice. She caught herself on the railing, thankfully, and trodded down the crunchy sidewalk to where her sunglasses lay.

Just as her fingers touched the sunglasses, she heard a car pull around the corner and into a parking spot right in front of her. She looked up, and it was the upstairs guy.

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He had put his laundry in the washer at the laundromat and was pulling into a parking spot when he saw the young women come back out and grab some sunglasses off the sidewalk.

"Goddamn it," he thought. "Now I have to act unthreatening again."

He'd seen the young couple many times, even spoken to them once when his internet went out and he went downstairs and knocked on their door to see if theirs was out, too. (It wasn't) But he'd seen them a couple times since then and neither of them had said hi or interacted with him and they'd even seemed rather scared of him — he was a big, average-looking guy who didn't smile much. So he could understand why people would be intimidated or averse to his presence. He did his best to stay out of people's way.

He put the car in park and waited for the woman to go inside.

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Her sunglasses retrieved, she was about to go back inside. The guy was waiting in his car behind her. She could see him on his phone.

There was a bucket of salt on the stairs left by maintenance. There was a silver scoop in the bucket and she took it out and started salting the sidewalk. She decided to ice the stairs real quick so no one else slipped.

She'd never talked to the upstairs guy at all. He'd come downstairs once and talked to her husband about the Internet, but that was it. He never said hi, never said anything, just kind of had this vaguely

angry look on his face. None of the other neighbors said they'd talked to him much either.

"He keeps to himself," they all said.

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The woman was salting the sidewalk with the scoop from the blue bucket at the bottom of the stairs.

"Fuck it," he thought. "I'll just walk right past her. She won't mind."

The guy got out of his car and walked up the sidewalk. She didn't look at him. He did his best to make himself small and unthreatening, again. He looked at the ground and kept his hands at his sides.

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The guy got out his car and walked toward her as she scooped another handful of salt from the bucket and spread it on the ice. He was looking at the ground and not saying anything.

She decided to say hi to him.

"Hi," she said in a small voice as he got close.

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"Excuse me," he said without looking at her. As he passed, he thought she might've said, "Hi" in a quiet, small voice but he said "Excuse me," at the same time so he couldn't be sure.

Too late now anyway. The moment had passed.

He tromped up the stairs and into his apartment, took off his shoes and hat and sat on the couch browsing Reddit, waiting for his laundry to be done.

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He'd grunted, "Excuse me", as he walked past her. He smelled like the laundromat. Had he heard her say "Hi"? Maybe. But if he had, he hadn't responded or even looked at her. It was like he didn't want her there.

She sighed and put the scoop back in the bucket and went back into her apartment. Her husband would be home at any minute.

The Giggle Squad Gets Lost

I dragged my forty-six-year-old ass around the concert, desperately searching for Savannah and her Giggle Squad.

I was acutely aware of all the waves of discomfort following me. It was very uncomfortable for me, too, but I'm an average-looking middle aged guy so who gives a fuck about my feelings.

The point is, I didn't even want to be here.

My wife, Joanna, had insisted I accompany Savannah to the show. It was a present for straight A's on her Freshmen finals. The artist was named Billie something. I had no interest in the music; in fact, I can't listen to it. It just sounds like autotuned gibberish to me, really laconic and melancholy, like if Novocain was a music genre. I don't understand what a young rock star has to be so sad about. But I'm glad it makes Savannah happy. She's a good kid, though the teenage hormones do turn her into quite the little mega-bitch from time to time.

"Joanna, I'm going to be getting side-eyed from every mother there," I told my wife when she informed me I was taking Savannah.

"No, you won't," Joanna replied as if the very idea was the most inconceivable thing ever.

"If you saw me or a guy like me walking around a concert full of teenage girls and you didn't have context, you'd give me a second look and you know it regardless of whether I was with a girl who looks like she could be my daughter."

"I have the conference the next day," she said, waving me off. "Up at 5 AM. I can't get out of it. It's just Savannah and Jaclyn and Kaleigh. You'll bring them there, you'll watch the show with them, and bring them back. Easiest thing ever."

"The Giggle Squad," I said. That's my nickname for Savannah and her two best friends. It's the ultimate dad joke and watching Savannah desperately screech at me to never use it in front of them is truly life-fulfilling. Moments like those are why I became a father.

"I'll send money for parking," said Joanna. "You can take the Jeep, it'll fit in the parking garage better."

Joanna had made her mind up so I just quit arguing and accepted. Maybe I was being paranoid. How bad could it be?

And so a few weeks later on a sweltering Tuesday evening, I toted Savannah and the Giggle Squad down through traffic to the Little Caesar's Arena.

They spent the whole way there on their phones, all of them in the very back seat and living up to their nickname. They never said anything out loud the entire trip. It freaks me out, to be honest, how these little zoomers do all their interacting through their phones. But given the looks and smiles and laughs they shared, I knew they had to be communicating digitally.

As soon as we walked into the venue I felt it on me. I was not welcome. This was not *for* me. It was unmistakable, but it wasn't one of those things you could acknowledge without causing even more problems.

Still, I wanted to walk over and tell these people, "I know, I know. This was supposed to be a bonding experience for my wife and kid. Lay off, for Christ's sake."

The first thing the Giggle Squad did once we were through the gulag of security was spend their saved money on t-shirts that cost fifty fucking dollars apiece. They all put them on over the tank-tops they'd worn and immediately took selfies for whatever the fuck app they use now. Then they asked me to take a few pictures for them. I obliged them before taking a few moments to snap some pictures with my own phone. Savannah grew more impatient with each picture I took.

"We have to go to the bathroom," she announced once I was done.

"K," I said.

I waited for them outside the bathroom. I could feel the uneasy eyes on me, the teenagers and their mothers taking notice of the old guy on the bench directly across from the women's bathroom. *What the hell is HE doing here?* I have just as much paranoia about creepers, but at that moment I knew it would be a long evening. I'd have to keep the Giggle Squad close.

Savannah and her friends took their time. When they finally reemerged, I had to go myself.

"Wait here," I told them. In addition to draining the vein, it would be a relief to temporarily remove myself from all the searing, suspicious side-eyes directed my way.

The men's bathroom was almost empty. I was gone five minutes. When I came back the Giggle Squad was nowhere to be found. Poof. Gone.

I checked the nearby snack bars and merch tables. No sight of them. Maybe they'd gone to our seats.

I texted Savannah.

Where are you guys?

The service in the stadium was terrible. The little service LTE bar was filled with just one tiny block that refused to budge.

I told myself not to be nervous and kept walking around, trying to make it obvious I was looking for someone. I went around the whole stadium vestibule, the whole circle, checked every snack line and merch line. No sign of them.

In addition to my growing worry as to Savannah's whereabouts, the side-eyes were starting to get annoying. Fucking everywhere I went – dirty looks from the mothers. Dark looks. As a dad myself, I get the caution, but another part of me is hurt and pissed off – I'm receiving these just for existing. Judged on sight.

I searched for ten, fifteen minutes. I couldn't find any of them.

Goddammit, Savannah. She was always like this, making impulsive little decisions whenever she got excited about something. Maybe she'd even gone back outside for some fucking reason.

Where are you? I texted her again. The first text still hadn't sent.

I did two more laps around the stadium before giving up and going to our seats in hopes she would meet me there. I texted her one more time informing her of my location but I knew it probably wouldn't do any good. No sign of her. I was supremely pissed off but I decided it was best to pick a spot and wait for them. Plus, I was getting a tad worried myself.

No sooner had I sat down then the lights dimmed and the place went nuts.

Billie what's-her-ass came on, doing her bullshit. She was willowy and blonde and looked and sang like she was loaded on painkillers.

I stood up with everyone else, hands in my pockets. I kept feeling my phone vibrate. I'd check it but no sign of Savannah. Both texts had failed. I looked every which way as discreetly as I could, praying Savannah and her friends would appear. Both to relieve the aspersion of a strange middle-aged guy standing in a sea of adolescent girl and to prove that my daughter and her friends weren't in trouble somewhere.

I felt a hand on my shoulder after the second song. I started and turned to face a short fireplug of a police guy. He motioned downward for me to put my ear next to his mouth.

"Sir, could you come with me?"

For a split second I thought something was wrong with Savannah, but the looks on his and the other security guards' faces said it all. They were here for me and me alone.

I set my jaw and followed them out. The guy kept a hand on my shoulder, just tight enough to let me know not to run. Everyone watched me go. Their smug expressions all said the same thing — *Serves you right, perv.*

Savannah, if you don't have a good reason for losing me, you're fucking grounded, I thought.

"Sir, we've had several complaints about you," the officer said once we were out in the vestibule again. Techno nonsense pounded the cement walls.

"Complaints? About what?"

"Are you here with someone?"

"Yes," I said, staring him in the eye. "My daughter."

"Where is she?"

"I have no goddamn clue. She disappeared when I went to the bathroom."

"And you thought you'd just go watch the concert without her?"

"I looked for her everywhere. I figured she'd meet me at our seats. You may have noticed there were three empty seats next to me in a sold-out venue."

"You didn't try to contact her?"

"I did several times, but the walls in here prevent any cell service from happening."

"Uh-huh, do you have proof of this?"

I showed him the texts on my phone.

"Hmm," he said. "Yeah, the service in here does suck. Do you have any proof of identity?"

"Proof of *what*?"

"Proof that she's your daughter," he said, his tone sharpening.

"Yes," I said.

I showed him the pictures I'd taken earlier. Savannah looked more and more pissy with each one. Her friends looked polite.

"I don't see you in any of these," he said. "I'm going to need to see your ID."

"Am I under arrest?" I asked.

I was really pissed now. I couldn't believe someone had actually complained to security about me.

"Sir, we're just making sure there's no trouble," said another one of the security guards – a bigger, younger guy who looked like an extra in a Marine recruitment ad.

"If you guys want to be helpful, I'd appreciate it if you'd help me find my daughter," I snapped. "If I'm not under arrest, that is."

"You're not under arrest," said the fireplug.

"We're just making sure there's no trouble," repeated the Marine.

"I didn't even want to come to this goddamn thing," I said. "I wanted my wife to take her."

"Sir, calm down," said the fireplug. "Where did you last see your daughter?"

"I lost her around the bathrooms. She's with two friends. She's fourteen, the tall one with blonde hair in the middle of the pictures I showed you. Her friends are shorter, one's Mexican and the other has glasses. They're all wearing t-shirts with this Billie singer on them."

"You're sure you're here with them?"

"Yes."

"All right, well, we'll take it at face value," the fireplug snapped. It was obvious he didn't really believe me.

"Dad?"

I spun around and there was Savannah and her friends. They were all eating Dipping Dots.

"Where the hell have you been?" I said.

"Jaclyn had to pee and we didn't want to wait in the line again so we went to the other bathrooms on the other side. Then we went to our seats but you weren't there so we went and got Dipping Dots and then the show started so we just watched from the entrance by the Dipping

Dots cart for the first two songs. I texted you like ten times but the service is so bad in here."

Her brow furrowed as she took in the security guards.

"What happened?"

"Your dad was just telling us you were lost," said the fireplug.

"I'm sorry," said Savannah, legitimate guilt coming over her face. She thought this was because of her. "We should've just waited for you."

"I really had to go," said Jaclyn, speaking out loud for the first time that evening.

"It's fine," I told them. "All taken care of now."

I considered telling Savannah about the complaints right there but thought better of it.

"We're all set here," I said to the security guards. "Are we all set?"

"Sir, you enjoy your evening," said the fireplug. He and the Marine walked off.

"Thank you," I said, using my eyes to tell the guy to go fuck himself.

All of a sudden I was absolutely livid. What had those people said about me? What had they thought, all because I'd just been walking around trying to find my missing daughter? Did they really make judgments that quickly? All these fucking spoiled suburban bitches and their brats could go fuck themselves.

"Can we go in now?" Savannah asked. "She's already on the fourth song."

I gave every mother in our vicinity the death glare of a lifetime as the Giggle Squad and I took our seats again. My face burned the rest of the concert. I stood with my arms crossed. It seemed to last forever. One woman next to us offered me what appeared to be a

mozzarella stick from a greasy cardboard platter. A paltry peace offering. I pretended not to hear her.

The Giggle Squad seemed to enjoy themselves, and Savannah even included me in a Snapchat story during her favorite song, which is how I knew she was in a really good mood. So that was nice.

"Sorry you had to get security, Dad," said Savannah on the way home. She was quiet. Their thumbs tapped relentlessly on their screens. Her friends had barely spoken all night.

"It's not your fault," I lied. "You tried to tell me. If the texts had gone through none of it would've happened."

"I should've just waited."

"It's fine, Savannah. Did you have fun?"

She smiled in the rear view mirror.

"Yeah," she said. "I did. We did."

"Thanks for driving, Mr. Nowell," said Kaleigh, speaking for the first time that evening.

"You're welcome."

There was more that could've been discussed, but what was the point? I wanted to let my daughter have her evening.

We sped home. I had work in the morning.

The Good Guy

She walked in and found him brooding on the couch, laptop open on the coffee table. All the lights were off. Not a good sign. He was already in a bad mood.

She flipped the kitchen light on. They greeted each other.

"I tried writing today," he said. "I didn't get anything done. Then I just saw this chick put out a status on Twitter talking about how she was insecure because she didn't get enough followers. She had over ten thousand. I retweeted it and literally nothing happened. I'm fucking invisible and it's killing me."

She took her coat off and tried changing the subject.

"How was work?"

"Fine. How was the bar?"

"Fine. The Mexicans were talking about me when I came in. Ramon was all, 'You didn't say hi to me yesterday,' and I was like, 'Yes, I did,' and he was like, 'No, you didn't,' and Silvano and Antonio are all chuckling and I was like, 'Yes, I did, cabron'!' and they thought that was hilarious."

He grunted, hunched over like a monk at an altar.

She sat down on the couch next to him. He had a document open. It was blank. Also not a good sign.

"I have a shit-ton in my draft folder right now but it's all coming out constipated," said Roy. "I'm fucking losing it."

She knew better than to argue with him.

"Maybe take a break."

"Yeah."

"You want something to eat?"

"I'm good, thanks."

She made herself a salad and sat in the chair. She turned on *The Office*, which they both liked. She really wanted to watch *Miss Maisel* but she knew he didn't care for *Miss Maisel* so she compromised.

"I will never trust a writer the *New Yorker* does a cover piece on," he said after another few minutes.

Oh, no.

He was looking up potential rivals. He got unbearable when he was looking up potential rivals. It was like he was torturing himself.

"Their latest feature is on Sally Rooney," he said, as if she'd asked. "This twenty-seven year old Irish girl the literati is calling the first great Millennial novelist. I'd never heard of her prior to this article."

"I've never heard of her, either," she said, quickly selecting an *Office* episode he liked and hitting play.

"The article really, really pissed me off," he said. "Women get everything handed to them. The industry is like eighty percent female. Where's the fucking feminism on that? Does that sound balanced?"

"This is such a great episode," she said, stuffing lettuce and carrot slices in her mouth, eyes lasered in on their flatscreen.

"Listen to this pretentious, high-minded shit," he said, reading from the *New Yorker* piece. "'There is a part of me that will never be happy knowing that I am just writing entertainment, making decorative aesthetic objects at a time of historical crisis'. Jesus Christ Almighty, get over yourself."

She didn't say anything, turned up the volume. The pleasant piano chords and accordion of *The Office* theme filled the room.

"She says that like she doesn't expect anyone to understand what she's saying," he grumbled loudly over the music.

"Mmm."

She stuffed more cucumber slices and pieces of hard boiled egg in her mouth, focusing in on the TV as though she was trying to get hypnotized.

He would get bored with this soon. He always did.

He was a good guy. Really. Every person had their shit side and this was his. He was insanely jealous of anyone more successful than him at his chosen passion – writing. It burned his balls to see anyone getting their break, especially someone younger than him.

"People like her are why people like me have to live with decisions made by people like Trump," he continued, still hunched over with an unhappy scowl on his face. "She needs us men and yet she's probably never even thought about where her shit goes when she flushes a toilet. I'll tell you where it goes. It goes to a sewage plant where the *men* she looks down on make sure she never has to walk through it on the street. You're welcome."

"Her agent probably put those statements together for her," she said quietly, knowing the Office intro was drowning her out.

"What?"

"Nothing."

She picked at a stubborn piece of lettuce with her fork. It was slathered in succulent vinaigrette, but the fork wouldn't pick it up, the prongs not sticking through, the leaf was too thin. She jabbed at it.

He kept talking, quite upset.

"She gives off that air of a person who would look at a guy like me and be repulsed and yet still consider me an oppressor. She doesn't even know what it's like to not have health care."

K, that was it.

She gave up on the lettuce, hit pause just as the intro song ended and gave him a 'Fucking really? Really?' look. She'd tried being patient, tried ignoring him. It was time to engage.

"I know what you're thinking," he said, seeing her expression. "I'm bitter, I'm jealous, so fucking what."

"I didn't say that. I'm trying to watch The Office. It's the Willy Wonka episode. You love this episode."

"These people are fucking phony and no one cares," he whined, face illuminated with silver-blue laptop light. "They just turn it around – you're jealous, you're bitter, oh shut up, no one cares what you think anyway. Maybe I am. I'm still right."

"You're being totally unreasonable. I just got home from work, too. Can we please just watch The Office?"

More silence as he read some more.

"She got her Master's degree in literature," he snorted.

"Oh, my *fucking* God, Roy."

"She was bred for this, debating people in fucking Serbia. And she'll be the one the history books will remember, while millions of more qualified souls die with dirt beneath their fingernails."

She put her empty salad bowl down. It clattered on the end table and the fork toppled out of the bowl and to the floor.

"Great art doesn't look down at you and smirk because it knows something you don't," he declared loudly. "Great art gets down on your level and plays the game with you."

"K, I'm watching Miss Maisel now," she announced, exiting Peacock in record time and opening Amazon Prime.

"And gender doesn't have anything to do with this," he said, not hearing her. "I can name several women in my little corner of Medium alone who produce work that's vastly superior and more weighted than anything this self-absorbed mick twat has written."

"How do you even know that?" she shrieked. "You've never read her! You literally just found out she existed like ten minutes ago!"

Miss Maisel's menu screen came up. She waited to hit play— she wanted him finished ranting before she started watching it. If he interrupted Miss Maisel, she'd really lose it.

"There's just something really annoying about people who talk like this," he mumbled. She could see the little flick of his finger on the track pad out the corner of her eye, him scrolling despondently. "There's an 'On the Basis of Sex' advertisement next to the article."

He snorted again.

"They know their audience."

"I want to see that movie," she said. "You're taking me to see that and you're going to learn something."

"That movie looks terrible."

"You're being a complete baby right now, Roy."

He didn't say anything. He knew she was right, and she knew that he knew.

"Can I watch Miss Maisel? I want you done ranting before I hit play."

"Her face is going to sag off her skull as she gets older," he mumbled. "You can already see it happening..."

He must've been looking at a picture of the young Irish author right then. She wondered if the author was pretty.

He was at his happiest when he'd just finished something. A new story or poem or piece of the novel he'd been working on. She loved that about him.

He was a good guy. A good boyfriend. They'd been together nearly six years. Six good, relatively drama-free years.

He paid most of the bills working a job he didn't like and didn't complain about (much). He had attainable goals and pursued them in attainable ways. He was responsible with his money. He worked out three times a week and kept his body in reasonable shape. He cooked every now and then. He did the chores when she asked, and sometimes when she didn't.

While today was an annoying exception, he frequently asked about her – how she was doing, was she all right, did she want a shoulder or foot massage cause he wanted to practice? He insisted on taking her out—even when she was being a brat and told him she didn't want to, he was savvy enough to see through her bitchiness to what she really wanted. He was a decent mind-reader, able to detect when she wanted attention and when she wanted space. He didn't ogle other women, at least not in an obvious way that she noticed. He put up with her own petty temper tantrums and PMSing and daddy issues. He kept his spaces of the apartment clean. He bought her meaningful, thoughtful gifts at her birthdays and Christmas instead of just tossing gift cards her way. He fucked her good and regular, always making sure she finished before he did. He had no qualms about smooching on her clit, yet didn't (always) expect blowjobs in return. He shaved, both upper and lower. He could pick her up against her will and carry her into the bedroom and toss her on the bed and undress her while she pretended to fight him, which was so arousing it made her dizzy.

In her opinion, all this was more than worth putting up with his envious, childish rants. They were the worst thing about him, and in her experience, that was a good deal.

He had these irritating little pockets of mood where he needed to vent on his misfortune of being ignored by the publishing industry. He was never super loud, never violent, never unhinged – just bitchy, bitter ranting, not even really directed at her, just directed at his laptop screen. She couldn't imagine what it would be like if he ever got published and successful. What would he complain about then?

He was prolific. He wrote every day. Writing was his goal. He wasn't lofty or shiftless about it. He knew about small victories and making a little progress page by page. He did his homework. He read constantly, burning through several books a month— how to build an audience, story structure, gaming the algorithm. He knew about querying agents and submitting to publications and maintaining a social media presence. Nearly every week night, unless they had something planned, they'd sit in front of the TV and he'd work on a story or the novel while she watched Netflix or knitted a scarf or scrolled Tiktok or something else. He let her read his finished stuff, and a good bit of it was fairly impressive, (though nothing she would spend money on – not that she'd ever tell him that).

"Is any of this bothering you?" He said, finally looking at her with sad, frustrated eyes. "I know I'm being a dick but I'm fucking losing it right now."

"No, I think you have a point," she lied quietly.

She'd already decided she was going to look up this Sally author. She wanted to see if the girl was pretty, and to read some of her prose, which was probably good, which was why he was so irritated.

He looked at her hard, knowing she was bullshitting him.

"Ok, yeah, I think you're being a baby," she said sharply. "But I can see why you'd be upset. You work really hard and get nothing and it seems like she just lucked out and now a really prestigious magazine is all about her."

"Little cunt. Fucking sheer luck and everyone loves her. God, I fucking hate that."

"Don't use that word. It hurts my feelings."

He moped.

"Sorry," he grumbled. "I'm just frustrated."

She could tell the steam was out of him. She heard him click the track pad – exiting the window with the offending interview. She breathed a sigh of relief to herself.

He closed the laptop, looked up at the TV.

"Did Midge start dating Dr. Ettenberg yet?"

"No, but it's obvious she will."

She got up from the chair, sat down next to him, scooped against him. Their fingers entwined.

"Sorry I'm such a baby," he murmured.

"You're not a baby," she said, leaning her head against her shoulder.
"You're just a big, dumb man."

He kissed her on the forehead as she hit play.

Waiting for Tomorrow

I think Scott Weiland's death is the saddest death of all rock musicians.

Hear me out here.

All the other ones got to go out in some blaze of glory. Even Layne Staley, who died in a similar fashion, got his proper sendoff. He was still relevant when he went — people were wondering what had happened to him and hoping for a comeback.

Scott was done by the time he died. He was a shell of himself. His former wife even said so in that Rolling Stone article she wrote. He was playing small clubs. He had embarrassing videos of himself on YouTube, so obliterated he couldn't remember the words to his songs. His voice was going — you can't abuse your vocal chords like that for twenty years and expect them to stay intact.

I like STP. I don't think they were particularly innovative or special but they earned their place in the world. And if you listen to their songs, they're just as human and just as devastating as anything Kurt Cobain or Billy Corgan wrote.

Particularly the lyrics from the song Plush. Particularly the one lyric, "Got time to wait for tomorrow." I feel like that's what Scott was always doing, including when he overdosed on his tour bus. Smoking, drinking, snorting, swallowing, and waiting for tomorrow.

But so that brings us to me.

I can relate to a lot of 90s rock because it's the last time that sad straight white dudes had a mainstream cultural spotlight on them. That music encompasses what it feels like to be an invisible white guy in today's society.

I'm the most unnoticeable motherfucker ever. People aren't even threatened by me because they never notice I'm around. It used to bother me, but they say embrace what you can't change. So I started thinking — how could this be useful?

I started stealing as soon as I knew I could get away with it. I took conventional shit first — little things. The first thing I ever stole was this rubber snake from the desk of a kid who sat next to me in

eighth grade. He never even realized it was gone. I still have that little rubber snake. I keep it in my glovebox.

It wasn't long and I graduated to valuable items — money, jewels. I became an expert shoplifter. Security cams had nothing on me. I broke into my first house at 17, my first business at 20.

I got so good at it that I started giving things back. I took items, kept them for awhile, then returned them. A lot of the times, no one even noticed they were gone. The most fun is when the person realizes something is gone, then can't explain it when the item returns.

I started stealing more high profile items. I went Ocean's 11 on Vegas and Washington D.C. I have numerous souvenirs out of the Capitol, the White House and the Supreme Court. I took a snippet off Amy Coney Barrett's robe — DURING A FUCKING HEARING — and she didn't even blink. I've stolen the Hope Diamond three times now. One time I had it for almost a year. You didn't hear about it, did you?

But like all mastered skills, I got bored with my gift for theft. It had become too easy. Truth be told, it had always been too easy.

I started thinking, what's the most valuable item a person can steal? There are diamonds and jewels and gold bars and clothes and material items all over the place. Everything is replaceable.

What isn't?

I'll tell you what isn't.

People.

Specifically, people's remains.

Which brings me back to Scott Weiland.

I've been stealing from celebrity graves for awhile now. To be honest, it's the only thing I bother stealing anymore. I have a lock of Marilyn Monroe's hair and a lock of Mitch Hedberg's hair. I have a scrap of Dean Martin's tuxedo, and a scrap of Mr. Rogers' tuxedo. I have a toenail off Andy Kaufman's left pinky toe (yes, he actually died). I have a ring off Elvis's pinky (yes, he actually died, too, and no, I didn't chop it off).

But when someone's cremated, not buried, I can't normally get my hands on them. So when Scott died, I sprang into action. I was on a plane that evening. I was at Hollywood Forever for his memorial. I was clean, I was efficient. I was at my absolute best that day. And I succeeded.

I keep Scott Weiland's ashes inside this brass turtle that I got from my grandma. The turtle's shell flips up and there's Scott, in a baggie with a twisty tie on it. His family has no idea. They have a mixture of crushed seashells. Don't worry, though. I'll give Scott back in a few years.

But for now I want to sit here and listen to Plush again, the acoustic version, which is way more melancholy and captures the spirit of the song way better than the full band version. Very lonely. Just like an invisible person's life.

Just me and what's left of the voice that sang the words, waiting for tomorrow.

4th of July 2018

Gotfredson and Honeycutt sipped their lemonade. It was a real scorcher, and the lemonade was a perfect balance of sweet and sour and cool and crisp, biting and caressing the tongue just so. Gotfredson's fiancé had made it, and she had a gift for lemonade.

Gotfredson had invited Honeycutt over to sit on his porch and beat the summer heat with a glass of liquid sunshine and some wholesome American conversation. He was having a get-together the following Sunday to celebrate his recent engagement, and he wanted to invite his old friend Honeycutt personally. It was the 4th of July.

They sat in deck chairs and watched over the lake across the street. There would be fireworks later. The lake was crowded with party boats, all of them blasting pop music.

The two men had their political differences, as you'll see in a moment, but they agreed on many issues such as gun control (well-meaning but generally didn't work out as intended, especially in an obvious oligarchy), the bullshit distractions of identity politics, and cautious, reasonable limitation of government power. Still, Gotfredson was a MAGA Trump supporter, and Honeycutt was a Bernie bro who'd held his nose and voted for Hillary. But as we're about to see, a fiery debate will be sparked upon Gotfredson's flippant remark about the recent retirement of Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy.

"Buh bye swing vote," said Gotfredson. "My boy is going to get three SCOTUS picks in his term."

"Yep, country is completely corporate owned now," said Honeycutt without thinking. He took an awkward sip of his lemonade, immediately regretting his remark.

Gotfredson let out a sputtering of laughter that sprayed lemonade all over the banister in front of them.

"Jesus, dude, come on," he said when he'd gathered himself, using the sleeve of his shirt to wipe his face.

He laughed some more. Honeycutt glared and decided to forage ahead anyway.

"Every decision is going to come down on business's side now," he said. "Workers, including you and I, are completely fucked in the long term. Just cause I agree with you on the idiocy of the left doesn't mean I think the dipshit Republicans are any better."

"We should avoid this discussion until you have some time to gather yourself," said Gotfredson, trying to avoid the conversation entirely, but Honeycutt was miffed. He pressed on.

"The only difference is the Republicans are honest about selling us out," Honeycutt declared, lemonade glass clenched in his fist.

"Relatively honest. But I'm not even mad, man."

Gotfredson laughed again. He loved arguing and winning and pissing off libtards. Not that Honeycutt was THAT much of a libtard.

"This is what I've always thought," Honeycutt said, raising his voice over Gotfredson's guffawing. "I usually just keep it to myself."

"Even if it were true, and it's not," Gotfredson said. "I trust a corporation a million times more than a bunch of fucking communists."

"Agreed," said Honeycutt. "But that's like saying I'd rather be eaten by a tiger instead of a pack of wolves. I'd rather just not be eaten."

"Somehow, I think it'll be just fine," said Gotfredson. "Your mind is still stuck in the 'Democrats are the party of the workin' man' and that shit is dead and has been for 25 years, dude. I will gladly watch SCOTUS bust unions into dust."

"No, I'm not," countered Honeycutt. "No one's on our side. There hasn't been a cohesive labor movement in decades. But I hope you're right about it being fine. I really do. I'd rather be wrong on this."

"Why would there be a LABOR movement, dude?" said Gotfredson, getting a tad louder. "That movement won and there's more laws protecting workers than ever in history. The Republican Party is essentially a populist party now, and that's a fact. A few dozen old fucks dying and being primaried is all that's left."

"There were," said Honeycutt, pretending he hadn't heard his old friend refer to the Trump Republicans as 'populist'. "They're being taken away piece by piece which sucks because this whole country was

founded on not letting some super-rich dude rule the working class from afar with no representation."

Gotfredson shook his head and took a great interest in a blade of grass some fifty feet away. He didn't speak.

"Again, I hope you're right," said Honeycutt. "Cause the left has absolutely lost its fucking mind and there's no cavalry coming. I still love you, brother."

"WHAT'S BEING TAKEN AWAY, MAN!?" Gotfredson exploded. "What rights have you lost? Seriously?"

"I want to freely move from job to job without having to worry about health care," said Honeycutt, ticking the items off on his fingers. "I want work/life balance without having to beg for it. I want to be able to have actual freedom to do the things I want to do without having to depend on some titan of business who considers me a number on a data file. I want the average person to be able to support themselves working a full time job, regardless of what it is."

Gotfredson shook his head, stared into his lemonade.

"You're upset about something you're not even certain of, man."

"I'm not upset, dude," protested Honeycutt. "I know you don't just want me agreeing with you every time you say something. What fun is that?"

"All I see is a bunch of Obama-era horseshit making it easier to sue businesses being reversed as policy, not laws. Them's the brakes of an overly powerful executive branch."

"This has been going on since way before Obama, man," said Honeycutt. "Obama actually did make it worse in some ways, but the left didn't care cause 'Woo hoo, black president!'"

"We live in the most worker-friendly country in the world," maintained Gotfredson. "When judging by ACTUAL reality on the metric of 'how badly can we sue' and 'how many extra taxes do we take away to pay for socialist horseshit?' If people want better jobs they can go get them
— "

"Not true at all," said Honeycutt but Gotfredson bowled him over.

"This is the most litigious society that's ever existed, people sue their employers for millions of dollars for shit they do themselves due to their own negligence, man. I think you're overreacting to this."

"I'm telling you, man, and you know I love you," said Honeycutt. "But just like the country couldn't go on half slave and half free, it can't go on with .01 percent taking almost everything and 99.9 percent fighting over what's left. It'll either get fixed or it'll turn into a dictatorship. It'll swing one way or the other. And whatever party takes power from those cocksuckers is fine with me. I don't care which side it comes from so long as it happens. That's why I've supported both Ron Paul and Bernie Sanders in different elections. And I'm talking about the inequality of bargaining power between employers and employees. Not saying I want a bunch of fucking corrupt socialist unions running things either, but there's gotta be a balance, man."

"Ok, dude," said Gotfredson, shutting his eyes against his friend's ignorance. "What 'bargaining power' do they need? Like seriously, what mistreatment are you thinking exists? Because I don't see it. Like at all. Anywhere. Ever. And I never have, even when I was at the bottom. I spent most of my life unskilled dragging the bottom and I was never treated like indentured or made to do unsafe shit because I made shit pay because I wasn't worth any more and because I was unmotivated and unskilled. Like, this is not industrial revolution worker life here, man. Literally tell me what bargaining power you want. I'm honestly, really, REALLY confused about all that."

He chuckled again, but it sounded more like a cough than a chuckle.

"I believe you about you being at the bottom," said Honeycutt, who had heard his friend's respect-inducing tribulations about his struggles in poverty many times before. "But that doesn't change my point about society being this unequal and thinking it can go on indefinitely."

"How unequal? For real, I get that there's a wealthy elite that are really REALLY wealthy but dude as far as the world goes you're in that group and I don't see you volunteering to live on the street."

"Oh, man, no," said Honeycutt, nearly spilling his lemonade. "You're saying Jeff Bezos and I have equal power? We're in the same group? That statistic only emphasizes how bad it's gotten. If a dude renting a one bedroom apartment is on the same technical level as the richest guy on the planet than it's even worse than I thought."

Gotfredson nodded grimly.

"Compared to the entirety of the world's population, you're in the same category, dude. The .01%"

"But then think about the difference between me and Bezos," said Honeycutt. "It's oceanic."

"And? And what? So halve his wealth. Makes no difference. Then you'll be mad about THAT difference."

"You don't think it's fucked up? From a democratic standpoint? That he can buy anyone or anything he wants regardless of ethics or justice?"

"So halve it again," said Gotfredson, quite sure of himself. "And again and again and again and again. Where do you stop? And 'democratic standpoint'? Dude, I've been telling you for over a year: democracy is a joke. People aren't equal."

"All I'm saying is, wealth shouldn't be able to buy the public square," insisted Honeycutt, trying to appeal to Gotfredson's logic. "Me and him SHOULD be equal before the law, but because he can pay for better lawyers or bribes or whatever, we wouldn't be. Let alone comparing him to someone from Cambodia."

"He can buy anything. So what? I'm going to live my life jealous of a yacht?"

"It's not jealousy," said Honeycutt, shaking his head. "That's a cop out."

"Until we turn the world over to robots, people will be running shit," said Gotfredson. "People are vulnerable to wanting things. Your butt-buddy Bernie Sanders made a million plus dollars. There's your principles laid bare. The biggest socialist in the country is rich as fuck. And he wants you to make the same amount of money as a gutter-dwelling sack of shit."

"Compared to the actual corporate overloads, Sanders is worth pocket change," deflected Honeycutt. "Besides, I almost believe he's controlled opposition now, the way he rolled over for Clinton. And he's worth maybe a couple million, tops. Irrelevant."

Honeycutt wasn't getting it. Gotfredson busted out the big guns.

"You know why Bezos and Musk and Gates are so wealthy? Because they're more driven and dedicated to success than you or I could even imagine. In what way you would care to limit people's success? And calling it jealousy isn't a cop out. It's literally what it sounds like from stem to stern."

This tired old argument nearly sent Honeycutt into hysterics, but he squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed the bridge of his nose and kept his cool.

"My point is, it doesn't matter how driven someone is. They don't get to tell or force the rest of us to live a certain way for their convenience. Same way the government can't."

"Sure they can," chuckled Gotfredson.

"You believe what you want, man," said Honeycutt. "But I'll never trust those fuckers, just like I'll never trust a politician."

"Wait, I forgot," said Gotfredson, holding his hands out as if to ask a crowd for quiet. "We love democracy, apparently. So New York and California actually get to tell us what to do instead of a bunch of rich people."

"Both sides are long gone," said Honeycutt. "Picking one or the other isn't the answer. And you know that's not what I said."

"I'll take rich people over communists, again," said Gotfredson, adamant. "You can't actually avoid being told what to do, dude. Like, there's not going to be a utopia where you get to steal things from anyone who hits a wealth plateau and ALSO let people act however they want to make them happy. The difference between the government telling me to do something and a rich guy telling me to do something is that I can quit my job. The government comes and kills me."

"Unless the rich guy gets so rich he buys the government and changes the rules to where you have to work for him or starve," said Honeycutt, quietly.

"Because that's what's happening," snorted Gotfredson.

"Look at ISPs," said Honeycutt, getting loud again. "Where's the choice there? I get a fucking mail message from AT&T saying, 'Thanks for choosing us'. It's like, I didn't fucking choose you. My apartment complex that I pay for said, 'Take AT&T or don't have Internet', which is impossible today. And even if I did have a choice there's only two real fucking choices anyway. That isn't capitalism, it isn't a free market."

Gotfredson shook his head and sighed.

"Dude, you're fantasizing scenarios of these tycoons conspiring and like, trying to kill people for fun."

"It is happening, man," said Honeycutt. "And there's the divide. You think it's a choice between a rich dude and a psycho communist government. I'm saying I'd rather find a way that doesn't involve having to make that choice. Wouldn't you rather have that?"

"No," said Gotfredson flatly. "Because the world you're theorizing is just communism."

He threw his hands up and shrugged.

"You're either free, and people will inevitably manage to get rich, or you're not and you're the property of the government."

"I don't think it is," said Honeycutt. "Just because no one's thought of it yet doesn't mean they won't."

"It doesn't mean they will, either," said Gotfredson. "Human nature doesn't change. It never has. The only thing that changes is us lying to ourselves about it."

"Well, let's just end it now, then," said Honeycutt, glaring and staring out at the lake where pontoon boats and jet skiers went about their holiday merriment, drifting and drinking and waiting for the sun to finish setting so the fireworks could start. "What are we waiting for?"

"End what?" said Gotfredson, gesturing at their surroundings. "Shit is good. There's more worldwide wealth distributed amongst a greater number of people than at any time in history. Sure, that kind of wealth has generated hyper-rich people, but which ones have gone apeshit and started killing people?"

He paused.

"Other than the Clintons," he said, and chuckled some more.

The two of them sat there.

"It's hard for me to have this argument and not take it to the mud, man," Gotfredson said after a second.

"I see that," said Honeycutt, maybe harsher than he meant to. "But I think this mindset is just as flawed as someone thinking the Democrats will save them."

Gotfredson looked at his friend incredulously.

"I'm not implying rich people are saving anyone," he said. "I want to live in a world where I can take care of myself and people who don't can fuck off into an early grave and not drag me down with them. If that world gives rise to hyper-wealthy elites then so be it."

"You don't seem to think those hyper-wealthy elites will do whatever it takes to hold onto their power, either, including ruin your life."

"I'll do whatever it takes to hold onto mine," said Gotfredson. "Why wouldn't they for theirs? You seem to think there's only one option once you pass a certain wealth plateau, and that's EVIL."

"I do," said Honeycutt. "And that's what it is. It corrupts you. I've spent time around these people. It's like they're not even human."

Gotfredson chuckled again. Honeycutt was in radio, and he had done a number of interviews over the years with a few regionally powerful CEOs. He didn't really know anything about those people, but Gotfredson liked him too much to call him out on it.

Instead he just chuckled and said, "Ok."

"They are cold, dude," continued Honeycutt. "They would exterminate you and me and a Cambodian orphan if it ever came to it. Actually, they'd pay the government to do it for them and then laugh while everyone blames the government. As if the government just does shit on its own without outside influence."

"Dude, you're out to lunch on this," said Gotfredson. "You actually chastise me for joking about wanting leftists dead and you just dehumanized an entire group of people based on arbitrary amounts of money and not actual ideology."

"The amount of money IS the ideology," insisted Honeycutt.

Gotfredson laughed really hard at that, which irritated Honeycutt to no end.

"And I didn't say they deserved to die," said Honeycutt. "Not once."

"Yeah, they're 'not human'," brayed Gotfredson, making air quotes. "They'll 'kill people for fun.' Yeah, okay, man. Sounds like they deserve to live."

"That's not saying throw 'em out a helicopter," exclaimed Honeycutt. "They'll kill people if it ever appears they'll lose their power."

"Well, just being wealthy doesn't make you any less human than being a scumbag poor person."

"Yeah, but no one cares about the poor person."

"Oh, I do," said Gotfredson.

"They don't have any broad influence."

"Because Millennials would have me paying their fucking way until I'm one of them," said Gotfredson, getting heated at the thought. "And they do have broad influence or the fucking Democratic Party wouldn't exist. Without the promise of the 'Gibs me dats' on the backs of people with actual fucking motivation, a Democrat never would've been elected."

He kept going, ramping up.

"You wanna talk about inhuman scum, how's about people without the motivation to go get a fucking job who would bust into your home and take things you worked for just because they're jealous as shit? Eerily similar to socialism, except you can't actually defend yourself from the socialist policy that's robbing you."

Honeycutt shook his head.

"We're not going to agree, man," he said.

Gotfredson kept ranting, finger in the air.

"Rhetoric like that — garbage 'Muh late stage capitalism' junk is exactly what gave rise to the radicalized right wing everyone is so panicked about now. You think people just randomly started wanting to kill communists? No. Listening to people talk that way pretty much led most people on the far right to say, 'Fuck it, let's start killing these cocks before they can poison our society any more with their filth.' That kind of thinking is what led to the Bolshevik revolution that 'cleansed' the privileged from society. Shit, I'd rather just kill thieves and degenerates than smart motivated people who accumulate wealth, but hey, I'm a bigot who doesn't want dicks swinging around little girls in the bathroom."

He finished, heaved a breath, and took a flask out of his pocket and dumped it into his lemonade. After a second, he dumped some in Honeycutt's, too. Honeycutt sighed and accepted the booze.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Gotfredson, noting his friend's sigh. "Are the hyper-wealthy lazy or dumb or...?"

"That's not the issue," said Honeycutt. "The hyper-wealthy are greedy and ruthless."

"I'm out, dude," said Gotfredson, throwing his hands up in disbelief for the third or fourth time, managing to balance his beverage without spilling it while doing so. "I'm actually shocked at this conversation and your lack of common sense."

"It is what it is, man," said Honeycutt. He sipped his spiked lemonade, and he smiled as a thought occurred to him. "Although, wealthy people can totally be lazy and dumb."

"Yeah, super common," said Gotfredson, rolling his eyes so hard they almost popped out of his skull. "It's the easiest way to succeed, being lazy and dumb."

"Well, it tends to apply to heirs more often," said Honeycutt. He sipped his vodka/lemonade. It was damn good. Quite the kick.

"Don't worry," he said. "We can always shit on feminism together."

Gotfredson chuckled.

"I guess," he said. "The mindset you're locked into is directly responsible for it, though. Check this out."

He opened his phone and showed Honeycutt a Tweet of a guy admitting to tears over the Kennedy retirement and the implications it could have for Roe v Wade and other issues.

"I just wanted to be honest with you instead of just agreeing," said Honeycutt. "You seriously don't consider me on the same level as him, do you?"

"I think you're more similar to him than someone as smart as you should be," said Gotfredson, putting his phone away. "Replace fascist and cis white man with rich guy and..."

He trailed off and paused, a thought occurring to him.

"But then, replace it with Jew and you have the alt right."

He shrugged.

Just then, above them there was a teeth-rattling thunderclap of an explosion, followed by a puff of black smoke over the lake. The two friends could hear cheers from the opposite shore, people celebrating the start of the fireworks.

"Am I still invited Sunday?" Honeycutt wanted to know.

"Yes," said Gotfredson without hesitation.

There were more thunderclaps in the twilight, some blooming explosive flowers of electric color as the fireworks show began.

Gotfredson's fiancé came out, having ascertained the argument was over. She quietly sat next to Gotfredson and took his hand and watched the sky.

"Happy fourth of july, fascist," said Honeycutt.

"Happy Independence Day, commie," said Gotfredson.

They clinked glasses.

Tattoo

Jessica argued with me the whole way there about that Ironic song by Alanis Morissette. She was convinced the first line of the chorus was, *"It's like rape on your wedding day."*

"She's clearly saying 'ray-ne'," I told her over and over, sounding the word out. "You can clearly hear the 'n' sound."

"No, no, listen," said Jessica, grabbing her phone and rewinding and playing me the line again.

"I don't hear it," I said for the fiftieth time.

"It's *there*," Jessica insisted. "I swear to God!"

We were driving in her four year old mini-SUV. Jessica was my co-worker. She was a year older than me and I was fascinated by her. I idolized her, to be honest. She had tattoos, she had piercings, and she was cool as heck. She was hot, skinny, freckled, all wet black hair and tanned cheeks and smoky eyes and white teeth. She smelled like California sunshine, if sunshine had a smell.

I, on the other hand, was on the wrong side of overweight, didn't wear make-up because I'd never really learned how to put it on, had a minor case of acne and constantly had scratches on my arms and wrists because my skin was so dry. I worked in mud and hay and animal shit and hanging out with Jessica always made me feel really dumpy.

I was raised in a super religious household. Practically Amish. I'm the second youngest of seven. All my older brothers and sisters are disciplined and professional successes. Most have families of their own. My youngest brother has cerebral palsy. He and I are only two kids that still live with my parents. We all go to church three times a week. I take care of my animals. I have a lamb that I'm planning on showing this summer. Tattoos, piercings, and anything other than Bible study and honest work are considered tools of Satan.

Which is too bad, because I'd always wanted a tattoo. Even a little one. It seems like a great way to mark yourself, to plant a stake in your identity, one the whole world can see.

Still, it had taken weeks for Jessica to convince me to get one after I told her my secret desire one day.

"You can get it somewhere your parents'll never know," she'd said, whispering for some reason even though we were alone. "On your foot or something. Or your waistline. You should do it!"

"I'll pray about it," I told her. And I did.

So Jessica had convinced me to come along with her today. Jessica was getting a nose piercing and I was getting a tattoo. Supposedly. My first.

Jessica and I work at a Forever 21 together. I got the job so I could pay the entry fees for my lamb showings. I'd been working there a couple months. My parents were nervous about me starting. They were nervous about who I would meet and who would influence me. But they'd agreed to it, because I was old enough to have a job of my own. I went to the mall and asked who was hiring and sent out applications online and Forever 21 was the first place to respond. I met Jessica on my first day.

I didn't tell my parents about Jessica. They thought I was going to the library right now. I prayed for forgiveness for lying to them, and I hoped God would understand.

I was nervous. To put it mildly. I was afraid of how it would feel. Jessica said it would feel like someone scratching a sunburn, or a sustained bee sting. I figured I could handle that. I'd been bitten, kicked, stung and burned by all sorts of things throughout my childhood.

We got to the tattoo shop — a small glass facade that's part of the main street in Brighton, in between a barber shop and a Triple A— and I started thinking about my Mom and my Dad and Harlan, my brother.

The door tinged as we went in and my heart was pounding.

Jessica knew the guy behind the counter and gave him a hug. She had her nose piercing done in like two minutes. I'd been hoping I would have more time to decide or possibly back out. I prayed to God that this would go well.

Then it was my turn.

The guy — Clyde — showed me books of tattoos. I took my time, seeing my parents' disapproving faces, but something propelled me forward and

I finally picked a little infinity sign once Jessica and Clyde made it clear they knew I was stalling. I got it just above my ankle. That way I figured I could hide it if I wanted.

I shut my eyes and Jessica held my hand while Clyde started. It didn't hurt that bad, and it only took about five minutes. I felt like I was in a dream. I kept telling myself I'd wake up and I wouldn't actually have the tattoo and everything would be fine. I let it happen.

"There you go," said Clyde when he was done. "Welcome to the club."

He gave me some lotion to put on it, I paid him 50 dollars (he said it was usually more because he's an experienced artist, but he gave me a discount because it was so small and because it was my first one) and we walked back out again.

We'd only been in there for fifteen, maybe twenty minutes. It only took that long to change a small part of my appearance forever.

Jessica drove me home and I was all nerves. I felt like the entire universe was pressing down on me. Jessica's nose ring looked great. She was laughing a lot about whatever it was she was talking to me about and she got Starbucks on the way back. I didn't want anything.

Jessica dropped me off down the street so my parents wouldn't know. I'd had her pick me up here, too. I felt bad about all this deception. I felt God watching me.

"By the way," Jessica said just before she pulled away.

"What?"

"I know it's 'rain' on your wedding day," said Jessica. "But I think Alanis originally meant to have it be 'rape.' And her management made her change it because it was too edgy. But Alanis made it sound just enough like 'rape' in the recording so people would know."

She pulled off without another word, tires flinging dust everywhere. Her mini-SUV roared down the road and out of sight.

I turned toward home and started putting one foot in front of the other. My permanently altered ankle, my left one, somehow felt heavier than my right.

I thought about everything, about God's will and how truth always wins. I've always been an unconvincing liar. I've always been obedient. But everything always comes back down to the unbreakable laws of nature, the laws God set up Himself. All the arbitrary nonsense humans pile up over them for whatever political or ego-gratifying reasons, they all fall away like flower petals the second God's truth arrives.

I knew what all this meant. I knew why I was so apprehensive. That reality would be my parents if they found out I'd lied. And they would find out, sooner or later.

I had to confess. That was the only way to make this right. God was making the answer plain to me. I'd lied to them. I'd never lied to them before, not like this. I liked Jessica, but she was a bad influence. She didn't care about me, not really. She kept me around because it was amusing for her, and because I made her feel more attractive. I said a little prayer for Jessica, that she would find guidance.

I was surprised to find that, despite feeling bad about lying, I didn't feel bad about the tattoo. It was mine, part of me now. God had allowed it to happen. And if He had allowed it to be etched into me, it couldn't be all bad.

I made it home, went inside, prayed that God would help my mom not be too mad when I confessed. My mom was in the kitchen, going through the mail.

"How was the library?"

I prayed to God to help me with my words and to help my mother understand. I didn't lie to her. I was twenty years old and not a girl anymore.

"I didn't go. I went out with Jessica."

My mom put her priestess face on. My siblings named it that. It's the face she makes when she's judging us with God's righteous thunder. I tried not to cower.

"Who's Jessica?"

"A girl I work with."

"At Forever 21?"

"Yes."

Mom's priestess face made it clear she knew exactly what was going on.

"What did that girl make you do?" she asked.

"Nothing. I wanted to."

"What did you do to yourself?"

God helped me say the words.

"I got a tattoo."

My mother's priestess face stayed on. She inhaled through her nose.

"Show me," she said.

I did, pulling my sock down. The tattoo was sore, very much like a sunburn.

Mom looked at me and my heart felt like a rose in a furnace. Her look was utter disappointment. I wilted under it.

"Oh, Ruth," she said. "You're going to regret that for the rest of your life."

She came over, reached down, grabbed my leg. Shook her head. Inspected the little infinity sign like it was a burn or a scar. (It was a scar, technically, but you get my point)

"Look at what you did to your pretty skin," she said. "Just wait until your father sees this. I hope it doesn't get infected."

I looked down at the gleaming smear on my ankle, the starkness of the black ink. The permanence of it. This little symbol would be with me for every memory I created from now on.

I didn't say anything. I didn't want to get emotional, either toward anger or sadness. I wanted to give her nothing.

I wanted her to see I was my own woman now, regardless of how she felt about it. That's why I allowed this to happen even as my inner doubt screamed at me. That's why God was with me in that tattoo parlor. That's why He'd allowed it. He wanted my mom to see that I was a woman, too.

"Go to your room and pray," my mom said. "Think about this. I don't know if you'll get to show your lamb this summer after all. Even if you can pay for it yourself."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. I held it together. God was with me, just like He was with my mom.

I went to my room, sat on my bed and tried to calm down. I didn't cry. I took my socks off and looked at my foot, still getting used to seeing the little sideways 8 on my ankle. I could feel it, a little patch of heat. I took the small bottle of lotion out of my pocket and took a dab and smeared it on the tattoo. It was cool and soothing.

Hours went by. I fell asleep.

I awoke to a knocking. I don't know how much time had passed.

The knocking was soft, painstakingly polite.

"Yes?"

The door cracked open and Harlan stuck his head in.

"Ruth?" he asked, quietly.

"Yes?"

"Can I see?"

My mood softened. I was all fuzzy from my impromptu nap.

"Sure."

Harlan opened the door, careful not to bang his crutches on the frame, came through, shut it again.

"Is dad mad?" I asked him.

"Dad's not home yet," said Harlan. He's 14 and actually really smart with computers. He can't walk without his crutches and he has trouble talking sometimes but I can always understand him.

"I heard Mom talking to you," he said. "I think she texted dad and told him. She's reading her old King James in the living room. She doesn't know I'm up here. What did you get?"

"Just a little infinity sign on my ankle," I said.

I showed him my foot, sticking it out over the bed.

He took two tentative steps into the room, eyebrows clenched in examination, leaning on his crutches and craning his head forward, kind of hovering, like he was trying to see into a box from which a dangerous creature might spring.

His eye fell upon the little symbol on my ankle.

"Why'd you get an infinity sign?" he asked, his eyes not leaving my ankle.

"I just saw it in the book the guy showed me," I said, turning my foot as we both admired my new accessory.

"I just thought it was kind of a symbol for God, cause God's infinite, and permanent, and this tattoo would be permanent, too. It just seemed like what God wanted."

Harlan examined it. His lips split into a wide smile.

"Badass, Ruth," he said in his quietest voice.

I smiled back at him and in that moment I knew God would make things all right.

The Stunt

It was 2011, and October had arrived three weeks prior and autumn was in full swing. A distinctive chill foretold that first hint of winter. The trees burned yellow and orange and red. The gutters were choked with dead leaves. A great yellow sun prepared to sink below the horizon, and the sky was light blue streaked with a smoky breath of clouds. It was, in short, a beautiful evening.

Brandon Holmes, age seventeen, pulled up to his friend Ethan Aries' house and honked the horn.

Ethan appeared a few moments later, throwing on cologne and the navy blue Varsity jacket he got for being on the swim team. He hopped into the passenger side and the two were off.

"What's going on?" Ethan asked, pulling out a small comb to tidy up his thick, greasy black hair.

"Party at Rachel Silverman's," said Brandon. "Unsupervised."

"Who's going to be there?"

"Billy," said Brandon. "Fish. Bunch of other people. Probably Paul. Bunch of other people."

"Paul's showing up? Paul Hoss? The squirrely one?"

"When doesn't he show up?"

Brandon flashed his turning signal and pulled onto the two-lane highway that ran like a spear through the center of their town.

"Everyone treats him like shit," said Ethan.

"Including you."

"Yeah, but that's just cause it's so goddamn easy, dude. I don't want to, it just *has* to be done. Have you ever looked at the kid?"

He finished with his comb and put it back in his pocket.

"Where's Silverman's parents?"

Brandon explained. The rumor was they'd gone out of town for the weekend, some benefit party in New York, leaving their only daughter Rachel by herself.

They'd left specific instructions: Nobody allowed over, remember to take out the trash Friday night, and don't forget to feed the cats. Rachel dutifully performed the latter two tasks and then threw a party on Friday night after she'd dragged the trash bins down to the curb.

The Silvermans lived on a huge farm off Route 82, and its remote location and spacious accommodations made it one of the best places for students of Robert F Kennedy High to congregate and act out. There was a pool, a rec room and home theater in the finished basement, an enormous back porch with a hot tub, and seven other rooms to find privacy. There were no neighbors around to complain about noise or parked cars. Unfortunately, Rachel's parents, both of them corporate lawyers, were extremely strict. Very few parties occurred and the ones that did felt almost like church functions.

Tonight the long gravel driveway in front of the Silverman's house was full of teenagers' cars. They'd all shown up within an hour of Rachel's private event posting. Texts and DMs on various platforms were all sent out in a digital flurry and soon the event list had ballooned to nearly the entire student body. Most of the kids had brought alcohol and even more had brought weed and several other substances.

Rachel had gone throughout the house beforehand, making sure everything breakable was in her parent's closet upstairs. She'd covered up the living room floor, which had just been re-carpeted, with rolls of plastic wrap from the garage and masking tape to make sure nobody stained anything. Then she'd taken to social media.

Brandon and Ethan arrived about half an hour after everything had started. They said "Hi" and "Thanks" to Rachel, whom they'd known since elementary school.

There were people everywhere. Standing, sitting, talking, wandering, smoking, drinking, cussing, swinging, kissing, necking, play-fighting, shouting, lurking. It was still early, and most were still behaving, no one drunk enough for any crazy yet. Social clumps were formed

according to class year and clique — freshmen with freshmen, seniors with seniors, gamers with gamers, athletes with athletes.

Brandon and Ethan plunged into the living room and joined in. Ethan's suave acquaintance Billy Orlander was already there, wooing a girl he hoped to have in bed by the end of the night. Ethan made a beeline for the garage fridge and coolers. Brandon accepted a beer and joined a ring of Twitch buddies.

Sure enough, Paul Hoss had shown up, just as Brandon had predicted. He was a skinny little freshman with a shag of sandy hair and a naive look on his narrow, acne-speckled face. Nobody liked him, but he still came to every get-together there was. He'd run to this particular party, all the way from his house in town, unable to get a ride. The run was a good five miles. Fortunately, he'd just finished Cross Country season and managed to arrive without fainting or throwing up.

As soon as everyone realized Paul was around, things began to get out of hand. He was a bully magnet, and it wasn't long before he was held by his ankles, dangled upside down in Rachel's bathroom with his head jammed in the toilet bowl. He gagged and choked on the water, trying to laugh along with the football players holding his legs.

"This is so 90's," remarked one of the players, phone in hand, documenting the moment.

This went on for about thirty more seconds before Rachel barged in.

"You're gonna break my toilet," she exclaimed.

The football players dropped the soaked Paul in a corner and walked out. Paul caught his breath, dried himself with a damp towel and walked back out, feeling dizzy and wet.

Around the same time, Ethan, who was already on the wrong side of tipsy, decided to do something crazy to lighten things up a bit. He'd always had a knack for getting himself injured with dumb stunts, pulled to impress or rile up others. As a matter of fact, if it hadn't been for Brandon's reasonable talk-downs, he probably would have been dead by then.

He finished off his fourth beer and looked around from his perch on the arm of the family room couch, a bit disgusted with everyone's calm, respectable attitudes. They were just standing around sitting,

or talking. Rachel's iPhone was plugged into the stereo, Kendrick Lamar blasting.

There weren't any authority figures around for miles, except the occasional car speeding by outside at 55 an hour. And nothing interesting was happening.

How upsetting. What a waste of freedom.

Ethan looked around the room, his mind swimming, searching something to throw or jump off. His eyes rested on the arched family room ceiling and he got an idea.

A few minutes later he'd dragged Rachel's giant trampoline onto the deck and removed the safety netting, positioning it so that if one bounced the right way, they'd end up in the deep end of the pool, about five feet away from the edge of the deck. He peeled off the canvas pool-cover and made sure the water wasn't frozen.

He went onto the porch where all the stoners were gathered and called the ones who would listen onto the deck. When he had a good-sized group gathered on the porch watching, he shrugged off his jacket and shimmied up the gutter onto the roof, aided by a few willing stoner hands, leaving his phone and wallet with a reliable stoner named Hal Cramden.

He climbed to the apex of the roof and saw the last line of sunlight disappear over the horizon with all its naked tree branches grasping like skeleton fingers. The air smelled like burning wood and leaves. He sucked it all in and his mind roared.

He was fucking young and fucking alive and fucking drunk and fucking invincible.

Down on the deck, Rachel and Brandon had forced their way to the front of the growing crowd, yelling for him to come down. Standing next to them, watching with wide-eyed intensity, was Paul Hoss.

For everyone else, a chant had started. It was quiet at first, then louder, then demanding. The crowd was a barricade of raised phones, cameras rolling.

JUMP, JUMP, JUMP, JUMP.

Ethan didn't need to be told what to do. This was the plan all along. He took two giant steps and leaped off the roof. He landed gracefully, feet first with his knees bent, in the center of the trampoline. It heaved downward with a stretching creak as the canvas threatened to tear. But it held, cradling his fall and throwing him up as quick as he'd come down.

This is where he lost control and started to wobble forward. His arms crazily pinwheeled backwards to right himself, and he landed SMACK on the water's flat, glassy surface. There was a huge crack as his torso collided. A few people gasped at the noise. Phones were still raised.

Ethan sank like a stone and bobbed up again, facedown. He lay like that and everyone stared, most through their phone screens.

Finally, after a few tenuous seconds, Ethan rolled over and clambered to the side of the pool. He was stunned but more than satisfied. He grinned as Brandon and several others yanked him from the pool's edge while Rachel and a few others pulled the cover back into place.

"That... was...awesome," he wheezed, finding his feet. Brandon glared down at him.

"You're fucking crazy, Aries," a few juniors yelled giddily.

A couple came over to ask Ethan if he was all right. He kept grinning and nodded. Brandon and Hal Cramden helped him walk shakily up the deck stairs and into the warm porch.

Once he was inside, Rachel threw a towel in his face and screamed for him to get out before she castrated him. Ethan leaned forward and tried to smooch her with big, puckered, mocking lips. She jumped back and he flopped to the floor. She screeched in frustration and stormed back into the house.

Ethan wiped himself down so that he was no longer dripping and strolled in after her, calling, "Aw, come on, honey, you already plastic-wrapped everything!"

With Rachel out of sight, Ethan was about to head for the garage fridge again when Brandon grabbed his shoulder and held him back. He snatched a handful of his friend's soggy shirt and hauled him to the nearest room, which happened to be the den.

There was a huge leather couch set in front of a flat screen TV, larger than the one in either Brandon or Ethan's parents' living rooms. It was flanked by two floor-to-ceiling mahogany bookshelves stacked with Mr. Silverman's reading material. A sleek, silver Macbook sat on the desk with a crystal lamp, more books, and various papers. Plastic wrap covered the floor in here, too. It looked like the house was being remodeled.

Brandon threw Ethan against the wall and the TV wobbled perilously until Brandon steadied it.

"You're going to get yourself killed," he snapped at Ethan.

"No, I'm not," said Ethan. "I'm done, mission accomplished."

He tried to break away, but Brandon's hand stayed on his shoulder. Ethan tossed his damp towel on the leather couch, which was also protected with more plastic wrap. Ethan wondered where the fuck Silverman had gotten all this goddamn plastic wrap.

"You've said that every fucking time," said Brandon. "No more of these bullshit stunts. You only get lucky so many times."

"Who the fuck are you," Ethan snapped back, belligerent. "I already said I'm done. I just wanted to rile things up a bit."

He opened the door and waved a hand to prove his point.

Indeed, the mood had gone from buzzy and frivolous to rowdy and loud. Everyone was drinking now. A few guys sparked a bong on the porch until Rachel shooed all the smokers onto the deck and spent another five minutes emptying a Febreze spray bottle. The smokers watched her and cackled.

"Just take it easy," said Brandon, leaving Ethan to admire his handiwork.

A throng of people saw Ethan standing there in the doorway and came over to show him their recordings of his jump. They clamored for his attention, one person handing him another beer.

Brandon went over to the kitchen refrigerator to see if Rachel had any pizza rolls or hot dogs to heat up when Paul Hoss caught up with him.

Brandon had his head lowered to see into the chill drawers at the bottom of the fridge when he heard Paul's hoarse adolescent voice intone, "Hey, Brandon."

Brandon grimaced and nearly banged his head on one of the shelves. He closed the fridge door and regarded Paul with a forced smile. Brandon was the type of person who wouldn't torment or tell off a loser just for the fun of it, but he still felt obligated to avoid their radioactive social presence. He'd never talked to Paul much, didn't even know how the fuck the kid had learned his name. He'd just have to be blunt and ignorant hope Paul would take the hint.

"What was up with Ethan on the roof there," Paul asked, trying to get a conversation going. He was still damp from his earlier swirlie and someone else had dumped a beer on him on the porch. "That was pretty slick, huh?"

"Yeah," Brandon muttered, his head down. There weren't any hot dogs or anything in the fridge, just a lot of vegetables and gluten-free stuff, so he opted for the potato chips and dip that were on the counter in front of him. He scarfed them down and paid close attention to the bowl, hoping his lack of attention would drive Paul away.

"He does things like that a lot, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Remember the time he, uh, wanted to hijack that bulldozer?"

"No," said Brandon. He was lying — he remembered that incident very well.

"Remember? At Scott Kilbane's house last summer? And they were redoing part of the street? And those construction guys left the keys in the bulldozer? And Ethan saw it and was trying to get in but you grabbed him and pulled him back and said he'd get arrested? And he tried to knock you out? And then that old lady next door came out and yelled she was calling the cops?"

"Oh, yeah," said Brandon. "Yeah, I guess I do. Now."

He stared down into the green bowl at the yellow, greasy, salty chips. He glanced at Paul, who stared at him unwittingly.

"Yeah, so, he's pretty crazy, huh?"

Paul helped himself to some chips. He crunched them loudly, stinking of beer and BO.

"He's a moron," said Brandon. "He'll be lucky to see 20."

"Everyone likes him, though," said Paul, gesturing to the family room where Ethan was the center of a circle of admiration, females included. Brandon couldn't help but notice the glassy-eyed longing in Paul's eyes as he took in Ethan's good fortune. "What other stuff has he done?"

"I really don't know, Paul."

"I remember the time he threw that old computer monitor out of the window in G wing, and it landed on the contractor's hood."

"You saw that?" Brandon asked, perplexed.

He thought it had only been Ethan and him in the old classroom that Saturday. The situation had gone from amusing to terrifying in mere seconds as they'd realized the trajectory of their aerial projectile. The smash and the car alarm were enough to send them flying out of the room and down the stairs and out of the building so fast it was like their feet never touched the ground. No consequences were faced that day, but it was after that incident when Brandon began policing Ethan's idiotic urges more forcefully.

"Yeah," said Paul. "You guys didn't see me, but I followed you in. Don't worry, though, I didn't snitch."

Thank God, thought Brandon, chewing. *He could've blackmailed the fuck out of us with that info. And that's fucking creepy that he followed us around like that. Like Gollum or something.*

He looked into Paul's thin, dumb-looking face and decided it was time to make his exit.

"Look, Paul, it's been really nice talking to you, but I have to go over here now."

The words fell out of his mouth like an armful of dropped fruit, and he spun around and headed for the nearest doorway before Paul could reply. He had to round a corner and go down the hallway, opening the first door he saw and ducking in. The shades were drawn against the setting sun and the room was dim.

This was the main floor guest bedroom. It was also the room that Billy Orlander had decided to try and get the girl he'd been flirting with to have sex with him. She was difficult, but had just been about to give verbal consent when Brandon burst through the door and flipped on the light.

There lay Billy and the girl, whose name was Danielle something, on the bed with their shirts off and their pants loosened. Brandon stared at them, and they stared back like surprised hamsters.

Finally, Billy spoke up.

"GET OUT," he roared, hurling a pillow at Brandon, who flipped the light off again and slipped out with a quiet, embarrassed, "Sorry..."

It didn't matter. The spark was extinguished, as Danielle reclapsed her bra and readjusted her jeans and slid her shirt back on as Billy protested.

"I'm sorry, Billy," she said. "I just don't feel right about it."

She got up and walked out as Billy stuttered a futile protest. She was gone, out the door to the clamor beyond. Billy's blue balls throbbed in his pants. He'd been thisclose to getting his dick sucked by one of the hottest sophomores Robert F Kennedy High had to offer.

He lay there on the bed seething. He itched to break something. Brandon Holmes' face would have to do.

He got up, threw his shirt on, stalked to the door, threw it open, strode stiffly down the hallway to the kitchen and to the doorwall where Brandon was now located, trying to get onto the porch so he could bum a hit off a joint and try to enjoy himself.

Billy snatched him by the shirt, spun him around, and jerked him forward so their noses were nearly touching. Brandon was too surprised to do anything.

"I hope you're happy, motherfucker," Billy snarled. He hurled Brandon back against the doorwall, which rattled as the back of Brandon's head bonked off it. Heads began to turn in their direction. A few guys yelled out, "Fight!"

"Look, Orlander - " Brandon started, well familiar with Billy's hairpin temper, but Billy threw a perfectly-executed right hook into the middle of Brandon's chest and the air rushed out of him. He squeaked-- a humiliating sound-- and sank to the ground, breath hitching. Billy was a wide receiver on the Varsity football team, and his muscles were rock hard this time of year.

Brandon probably would've been hospitalized that night if it hadn't been for the wannabe antics of one Paul Hoss.

After Brandon's rude disposal of him in the kitchen, he had climbed to the roof up same rain gutter Ethan had used, planning to pull the same stunt Ethan had.

Ethan was one of Paul's favorites in the senior group, so much that he'd never even had the guts to say anything to him. Paul figured that if he did the same thing Ethan did, he'd at least win some respect. So after Brandon mumbled something and went to the other room without looking at him, Paul wandered out onto the porch. One of the stoners kicked him in the rump as he walked by and told him to go home. Paul didn't even look up.

Now, on the roof with the chilled evening wind ruffling his hair and the treetops at eye level, he felt he finally had a way to impress at least some of the people at this party.

Down in the kitchen, Billy continued to pummel Brandon, who was still in a state of shock from that first juggernaut punch to his solar plexus. Rachel was practically hanging off Billy, who acted like she wasn't even there. Billy had started to kick Brandon when they all heard the scream from outside.

Paul had jumped off the roof and landed on the trampoline the same way Ethan had. Since he weighed less, it bent less, and threw him up again gracefully. But without the proper momentum from the trampoline, Paul would never make the pool. Now, a twenty feet in the air and feeling gravity's dreadful pull as he hovered over the pool's cement border, Paul Hoss knew there was no way he was going home on his own two feet.

He fell, fell, fell and slammed into the pavement face first. There was a soggy crunch, like someone dropping a trash bag full of wet

garbage. He lay bug-eyed, his jaw shattered, his right hand in the pool's shockingly cold water, in so much pain it became all he knew. A shudder wracked his broken frame, and his last breath slipped from between his lips, his punctured lungs giving out.

His last thought was, "Why did I do that?"

The only ones who noticed him at first were the stoners on the porch. One of them, an acne-scarred bub everyone called Fish because of his uncanny resemblance to one, blinked.

"Hey," he said to one of his friends. "Isn't that the dorky freshman you kicked earlier?"

His companions turned to look.

"I think he just jumped off the roof. Like Aries."

They all walked outside in their mind haze, and when they saw Paul's bloody, grotesquely-bent body lying next to the pool with a trickle of blood trailing down the lip of the cement and dripping into the pool, they weren't sure if it was actually happening. Then Fish, who was the least brainfried of the group, turned around and yelled for Rachel.

His friends joined him and they dashed back in the house, where Billy was lining up for a knock-out kick. Brandon had turtled and was taking a hell of a beating, but he had three older brothers and could withstand more than Billy had anticipated. Just as Billy's leg was cocked, Rachel still on his back like a baby monkey, the stoners burst in and Fish yelled, "I think that kid's dead!"

Nobody moved at first. Billy stopped, Rachel sliding off his back.

"What?"

"Come on!" Fish said, motioning to everyone wildly.

When everyone was outside and goggling at the body of Paul Hoss lying on the cement, bathed in blood soup, they all stared, taking in the reality of the situation. Nobody said anything for a few seconds, and then, one by one, phones came out and pictures and videos were taken. They would stay private, or as private as a picture can stay without being voluntarily shared these days.

Rachel Silverman broke the silence, letting out a shrill scream.

"My parents are gonna kill me!" she shrieked. She started trying to wrench Paul's body off the ground, to get him into a sitting position.

"C'mon, c'mon, you little shit," she said, hysterical, thinking of the trouble she was in. "You're fine, get up, get up!"

No one else did anything. Skinny Paul was too heavy for tiny Rachel's arms and she let him slide to the ground with a defeated thump. There was no mistaking the limpness of his body – the kid was indeed dead.

"Someone should call 911," Billy Orlander, of all people, said quietly.

A few kids had started to edge towards the door, in the direction of their cars. They weren't going to have any part in this. As far as they were concerned, they were never here. Within minutes, over half the crowd had drained through the house and out into the driveway. There was a chorus of car motors, and one by one they all sped into the night.

Rachel Silverman, Brandon Holmes, Ethan Aries and Billy Orlander were all that was left, eventually.

Ethan Aries took this the hardest. Not because he inspired Paul's death, but because he had never seen anything like this. He'd never seen a dead body before. His reckless nature died that night with Paul. He went home after being questioned by police. Nobody mentioned that he'd done the same thing earlier, any posts on social media disappearing into the void within minutes of Paul's death.

Rachel Silverman was grounded for a month and sent to therapy. Her parents never left her alone in the house again.

Brandon Holmes went home after being questioned. He stopped hanging out with Ethan after that. He took that night as a sign that he should make an effort be nicer to people, especially ones who are socially radioactive.

Billy Orlander was nearly arrested after the police saw what he'd done to Brandon Holmes, but at Brandon's insistence they let Billy go. Billy never did get to fuck that sophomore, but he did score the

winning touchdown that year in a playoff game against the school's hated rival, so that was nice.

Paul Hoss's parents settled out of court with the Silverman family for an undisclosed sum, and they moved to Chicago soon after. He was buried in the town cemetery. Not one of the party's attendees came to his funeral.

His gravestone reads, "Loved by all".

Hard Drive

My dad asked me to smash the hard drive. I don't know what was on it. I never asked him. That wasn't the point, anyway. Maybe it was work related stuff. Maybe he had me get rid of his porn collection so mom wouldn't find out. Who knows.

He just came into my room one afternoon and handed it to me.

It was one of those smaller ones. Flat, metal, silver, a little bigger than a smartphone. Pretty standard rectangle of thin industrial metal held together with screws. There was a sticker on the front with all the technical info, an HP logo up in the corner. Other than that I don't know how else to describe it — you know, whether it was solid state or whatever. How much storage it had. Any of that.

I don't know computers. I don't know much of anything, really. I went to school for English. I used to read a lot, so I thought it'd be a good idea. I thought I'd be a teacher or something. I was just doing what I thought I was supposed to do. I thought it would all make sense one day.

"What's this?" I asked when Dad handed it to me.

"I need you to get rid of that," he said.

"How?"

"Plenty of ways out in the garage. Hammers and stuff."

He walked out of my room without another word. It took me a second but I got the hint.

I think he could tell I needed something to do. I've been spending a lot of time in my room. It's like I've hit a wall. I don't know where to go or what to try. I have so many choices I'm paralyzed by them. I don't know if I'm afraid of failure or afraid of success or both.

I don't usually complain. I've been applying places constantly. It's a soul-crushing experience. Searching for the job, clicking, signing up for yet another website that I'll never use again, uploading my resume, filling out what city I live in, what state, my schooling. Over and over. I have a LinkedIn with barely anything on it, got a

summer job last year as a dishwasher at Outback but dad let me quit. No future in that, he said. Just put yourself out there.

The struggle began. I graduated last year from Eastern and haven't had any job prospects. The real world seems really hostile and non-negotiable right now.

I called myself useless earlier today, which my dad hates. He's one of those guys who doesn't believe anyone's useless. He works in the paint shop at the Ford Wayne plant. He's been there all my life, makes six figures a year. He says everyone on the line has a job and they're all part of the process. No one's useless.

I took the hard drive out to the garage. It was a gorgeous May morning, like the day's temperature was dialed in on a thermostat. The trees were exploding with neon green buds. The wind carried whiffs of grass and lawnmower gasoline.

I put the hard drive on the dirty garage floor, sticker down. It looked weird sitting there, this sterile piece of silver metal on dirty cement, surrounded by dead leaves.

I went over to the tool bench, found a regular hammer, walked back over to where the hard drive lay.

I took a few preliminary swings at the thing. Would it just break apart?

The hard drive proved tougher than it looked. The hammer barely dented the outer casing. I swung harder. Some dents, scratches, scuffs started to appear. This thing was going to be a piece of work after all. (I guess it truly was a "hard" drive lmao)

I swung harder, harder, harder. The sound of the hammer on the silver metal got louder, sharp snapping reports.

I crouched, swinging the hammer down in front of me with two hands like a toddler. I started one-handing it, like an expert carpenter who never misses a nail.

At first I aimed to break, to crush. But then the motions, the lifting and the heavy blows, started to feel satisfying.

I thought of the beautiful day surrounding me, the smells it carried. I thought of my dingy, stuffy room with a blanket clamped over the window, blocking the sunlight. My shelves were dusty and my nose was stuffed up all the time.

I spend all my time on my bed with my headset and sticks, playing Fortnite and Overwatch and Zelda. I talk to my teammates. I never talked about anything other than the game at hand. I don't have anything going on worth talking about and don't really know how to change that. I assume they're all pretty much in the same boat as me.

The hard drive was starting to look beat up, but not what you'd expect from the amount of strikes I'd dealt it. It looked like it had been, well, hit with a hammer a bunch of times. I'd been expecting it to shatter within the first three hits, breaking apart and vomiting green plastic circuitry and little bits of metal from its blown-out sides.

The hammer was so heavy, it was like it wanted to smash the hard drive. It was just the hammer, me and gravity. It was our job to break this contraption apart. And we did.

I hit and hit, striking a rhythm. I felt like John Henry driving spikes. It was a tuneless, toneless song.

No matter how much I smashed it with the hammer, the hard drive wouldn't come apart.

I went over to where the shovels and rakes and things were hung up on the wall. I found the sledgehammer, took it off its hook, dragged it over. I'm really out of shape. Lifting it to deliver the first blow was actually kind of difficult, getting it over my head.

I swung. The sledgehammer was more effective.

It only took a few hits and the hard drive finally gave out. It was all over the garage floor. The outer casing fell off and the inside looked like a CD with a small rotary dial plastic wheel thing in the center. There was a little metal Erector set arm over the CD like the needle of a record. Everything else was little metal plates and little screws. I savaged it all, lifting the sledge and aiming, letting gravity finish the blow.

I kept going. My arm muscles roared with blood. I breathed heavy, my armpits a bit damp.

The job was done.

I put down the sledgehammer head first, let the plastic handle clatter to the floor. I looked out the garage door, squinting in the sunlight. Cars went by out on the street. The world suddenly seemed very alive and full of light and motion.

I looked down to the wreckage at my feet and felt productive for the first time in months.

Real Money

I got to the guy's house and knew I was probably done with the life altogether.

He was an old bald guy, kissed my hand when he answered the door. The house was huge, opulent. This guy had real money. The bedroom he took me to was bigger than my apartment.

I'm not a twink. I'm a teddy bear. But as a Catholic kid, it's weird seeing old fat gay dudes get turned on by my hairy belly and beard and everything.

I'm also not gay. I started this because the money is incomparable. I've never even been laid that much— I've had one girlfriend and a one night stand when I was 19. That's it.

I moved to Nevada when I was 22. Reno.

Why Reno? I thought I'd be getting a job at Tesla. The Gigafactory. I interviewed for everything and it sounded sweet, but they laid me off after a month or two. I'd signed a lease, couldn't find anything else that paid the bills, and it turns out there's not a hell of a lot to do in Reno. So I started looking at the legal prostitution, wondering if I could get an administrative position or something. I knew the gig was legal, but I'd never considered being one myself.

I hooked up with this prostitute that my old boss was trying to fuck at a bar one day. She was older, about 27, and she was like, "You're cute as hell, you'd do really well in this. I can get you started. You're an adorable little bear."

She was a small woman, blonde, with fake tits and big nipples like Mike and Ike candy. She'd done some hard living— she was 27 like I said, but she looked ten years older. Her name was Julia. I told her I'd think about it, assuming I'd never speak to her again.

I called her up after a month of square job hunting. My bank account was dry and my bills were due.

My first client was a waiter who flew me down to Vegas to meet him. I was freaking out so hard I thought I'd cry. I'd never even seen another guy's dick in my life. I didn't know if I'd be able to stomach looking at it, let alone suck it off.

"Do you smoke?" the guy asked when I got into his car at the airport. I thought he looked like a lumpier version of Charlie Day. He was smoking a cig. I thought he was offering me one.

"Uh, no," I said. "Never smoked."

The guy smiled. His eyes were wet with crinkly crow's feet at the corners.

"I'm not talking about cigarettes," he said.

"Oh."

"Have you done this before?"

"Not really. No."

"I can tell you haven't."

He grabbed the back of my neck and forced me over to him.

"That is so fucking hot."

He kissed me and his breath smelled like weed. He grabbed my crotch, squeezed it.

"You belong to me now," he said. "Tonight, you belong to Daddy."

I was terrified and repulsed, but I let him do it. He'd promised me a grand for the night.

We hung out at Treasure Island, where he bought me dinner. I didn't eat much. He told me about his career — apparently he'd waiter'd in Europe where waitering is an actual career that you can make decent money at.

"But I couldn't resist Vegas," he said. "I couldn't resist the lure of Vegas. The lights, the noise, the boys..."

He took me back to his apartment off the strip and we made out. We hadn't been at it more than a few minutes when he was pushing my head down towards his fly.

I closed my eyes and did what I had to do.

His jizz tasted like a salty pool water. He made these noises as he came, and right before he came. He instructed me on how to jerk him off. It was similar to what I'd have my ex-girlfriend do to me. His cum shot out so quickly I didn't have time to pull it away. I took two full shots before getting his dick out of my mouth. I gagged and spat it onto the sheet involuntarily.

He giggled.

"I'm giving you an extra hundie for that," he said. "You are too fucking cute."

I didn't work again for another two weeks even though I had requests.

Obviously I did not tell my parents about this. Or my sisters. My older sister would've come down here and dragged me home by the hair. I didn't want to think about what my parents would do.

I wasn't able to sleep. I kept waking up feeling dude's hands squeezing my nutsack or fingering my ass. I'd never considered myself "cute" or particularly attractive, especially to older gay men. But these guys were thirsty. They paid, but they were thirsty. I'd had no idea what it was like to be treated like this. To not just be lusted after, but to be consumed.

"Look at that fucking *package*," one of the johns exclaimed upon seeing me for the first time. He was the youngest client I had, a guy in his 40's who looked like a real-life version of the Comic Book Guy from The Simpsons— obese with a brown ponytail and thin goatee. He was wearing a poorly-tailored tuxedo and had big thick damp glasses. He was so sweaty the sex was like wrestling with a wet orca or something.

They manhandled me. It was not a feeling I was used to. Tongues and fingers and cheeks and lips all over my body. One guy sucked my toes while jerking me off and I actually got an erection but couldn't finish.

I could never finish.

I never did anal. That was the line. I put that on my itinerary. Some guys tried to get out of it, one dude offering me 10 grand to take my virginity on the spot, but I always refused. I'm a big enough dude that no one ever really tried to do it by force. If I'd kept going after only the 8 or so clients I had, I might have not been so lucky.

I thought about "The Sunken Place" from Get Out when I was sucking these dude's dicks. I was never able to swallow. After that surprise hot shot from the first guy, I told every john to tell me when they were going to finish so I could get the fuck out of dodge.

The money they gave me wasn't always worth it. I could do two clients in a week and pay my bills. I'm not greedy. I did the bare minimum. I just needed to live.

But it was wearing on me. I was already so fucking tired.

I contacted Julia again.

"I really appreciate it but this isn't for me," I said. It had only been about four months.

"Just give it another couple of tries, baby," she said. "You're doing great."

I protested but she ended up talking me into doing one more gig. She told me to really try and get into it. I didn't know that I had it in me. I didn't particularly want to. But if I busted my ass, I could get a big enough payout to move back home. I thought about that 10 grand the old gambler had offered me for the honor of being the first man to core my asshole, but I knew I'd made the right decision. I wanted to be going home with my asshole intact.

I wore my tight briefs. I got the guy's address.

The guy met me at his front door wearing a bathrobe. He was another old, bald dude, glasses and wrinkled face. Looked kind of like a Martin Scorsese without any hair, more tall rather than wide. His lips were cracked. He was holding a highball and his gut sloped down. I could see he had a tent the second he opened the door.

"It's gonna be a great night, baby," he told me.

He took me to the bedroom and instructed me to lay down on my back.

"Don't take anything off yet. I want to see what you look like when you're just hanging out."

He sat down in an easy chair in front of a large tv and watched me.

I stretched out on his bed. It made me feel like a kid it was so big. I don't know that there is a bed size larger than king, but this bed was definitely it. I had to admit, it was mighty comfortable.

"You are so fucking adorable," the guy said, smiling. I was so fucking sick of hearing that. I wanted to scream.

"Thanks," I said.

I rarely learned my john's names, but this guy called himself Jimmy.

"Feel yourself through your clothes," said Jimmy, leering at me like Uncle Junior from the Sopranos.

I did.

I felt myself for awhile. I surprised myself by starting to fall asleep. One second I was feeling my balls through my jeans and the next I was jolting awake.

"I'm sorry," I told him. "I don't sleep much these days."

He smiled and got up. He took his robe off. He was in his 80s-- an old rich fruit-- and what was underneath wasn't pretty. I tried to hide my disgust. I thought of how much respect I had for women now, having to deal with men and their urges all the time.

"No, no," Jimmy said, smiling. "You're on this ride with me now."

He came over and lay down next to me.

The moment hit me like lightning.

I couldn't do this. Not anymore. The thought of Jimmy's shriveled Viagra-pumped dick between my lips was causing skull-vibrating rage within me. I couldn't do it.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Can I use your bathroom really quick?"

"Certainly, sugar," said Jimmy, smiling at me like a schoolboy. "Just down the hall. We passed it on the way in."

I speed-walked down the soft carpeting and shut the heavy door.

I was so distracted I pissed all over the floor.

There were paper towels and toilet paper under the sink and I mopped my mess up off the expensive-looking tiles. The bathroom smelled like flowers.

Randomly, I saw some spilled grape soda over under some empty soda can boxes in the other corner. Some off-brand of soda I'd never heard of. Rich person soda, probably.

I started mopping that up, too. I was stalling.

I didn't want to be here anymore but I didn't know how to bail.

It hit me again. I was thinking too much. I didn't have to be here. I could just leave. Why did it need to be complicated?

I had some money saved up. My bills were paid for the month. I could easily rent a car and go home. It's not like I was a drug addict. My parents would understand if I came back. And they'd never need to know. No one would, except maybe my spouse, if I ever had one, and even then not until we'd been together for decades.

So that was it. I threw away the piss- and- grape- soda-soaked paper towel, got up off the bathroom floor and just took off.

From down the hall, I could hear the creepy noise of the tv and see the light on the wall from Jimmy's bedroom. I couldn't see him. He never said anything or called for me.

I just got out of there and started walking. I had an Uber pick me up at the front of the sub division.

As the lights of the city sparkled on the car's windows, I'd never felt better saying no to something. And the future was still waiting for me.

Pink Funeral

I met Mavis when she was Mark, when we worked at Toys R Us together the summer after I graduated high school. I thought he looked like the guy from Harvey Danger, and that made me like him. We worked in the back storage areas together, scanning boxes and sorting boxes and doing various other things with boxes. He was a wry, sarcastic, nerdy dude and I liked him.

I got moved to cashier after only about a week and he got moved to the video game section. I hated that job so I didn't stay long. Mark stayed there for some time afterward.

We kept in touch, and I friended him on Facebook. Years went by, and I saw him once in a while. Our conversations were always the same— play catch-up and see what we were up to. We'd talk about ourselves and our homies and endeavors and politics. Mark was a good conversationalist. He gave good, honest advice. Our meet-ups starting getting further and further apart.

Then he came out as trans about two years ago and changed his name to Mavis. So, you know, a lot of shit must've happened. But because I didn't see him a lot, I had no idea it was coming.

I hadn't talked to Mark/Mavis in nearly 6 years when I found out he/she had died. The last time we got together we went to this old greasy spoon in Canton called The Rusty Nail. I used to go there after rehearsals with my first band and we'd call it The Busty Nail because of this one stacked waitress that worked there.

I don't remember when I heard he died, but I knew that he'd posted he was sick. I felt like I'd known him well enough to go to the funeral so once I saw that someone posted an event and invited all 320 of Mavis's friends, I told my buddy Ralph about it cause he was over and he said he'd come with even though he'd never known Mark or Mavis. He had nothing else to do.

The next Saturday rolled around and Ralph and I went to Northville.

The funeral was held in a lecture hall at Northville Community College. It was this modern-looking, really clean theater with a movie screen and seats and everything. It wasn't in a church — Mavis was an atheist.

I got in and the second row was completely full of people. The first and third rows were sparsely filled. About thirty people were there.

The room was way longer than it was wide, a big rectangle with a long set of seats running like fifty yards down. There was also a really long dry-erase board on one of the walls with nothing written on it. An open casket was at the end with the stage and screen, and there was an empty podium on the stage, too.

There was a movie screen set up showing pictures of Mavis when she was a kid and throughout her life. Mark went through a lot before he became Mavis. He was in improv comedy. Did some stand-up, too. He moved around a lot, working for landscapers all over the country – Michigan, Texas, Iowa, Colorado. He did a lot of invasive species studies. He worked at Toys R Us before quitting and going to college in his mid-twenties.

He got married to this horribly abusive landwhale of a woman and lived with her for a few years. Soon after the divorce he came out as trans and started dying his hair pink and growing it out and taking hormone treatments. He announced it on Facebook and Instagram and I liked both of the statuses cause good for him, you know? I remember both statuses only got like 10 likes apiece.

He was one of those guys that did not look feminine at all but he started taking the estrogen and taking pictures of himself looking sideways in mirrors. Soon, he started looking different. He had always been a paunchy dude, and he was going bald, and his face was wide, and his nose pointed. But he started to soften up and lose weight. He grew tits and started wearing make-up. It was really fucking weird, cause he still just looked like Mark to me, only with tits and make-up.

Mavis had apparently been sick recently, like I said before. I don't know what she was sick with and I didn't recognize anyone else in the audience so asking someone wasn't going to work. I didn't know if the illness was related to her transition, but I did know that she wasn't fully transitioned yet. She had that soft glow that happens when guys start taking estrogen; her skin seemed to get softer and whiter but other than that everything else was the same. Her facial hair did look like it was starting to go away, though.

Still, recently, when I happened to notice Mavis's profile whenever it came across in my Facebook feed, I saw Mavis and not Mark. I saw an obvious "she" and not a "he".

I walked into the lecture hall-turned-funeral parlor and took a seat with Ralph way down in the third row at the far right end. I looked at the screen for awhile with all the pictures of Mark's life. I realized

that none of the pictures were of Mark after his transition. It was only Mark, no Mavis. They were playing "See You Again" by Charlie Puth and Wiz Khalifa on a loop. I hate that fucking song.

I looked down the rows.

There was a huge cluster of people in the center of the three rows and I could see the casket in front of them and yes there was Mavis inside it. Her hair was still pink and she had make-up on and was wearing what looked like a pink church dress. She looked peaceful and pale and her hands were folded. I felt for my old friend. I wondered what it was that had gotten her. I know a lot of trannies kill themselves, there was no mention of that and she didn't look like she'd gone through any trauma unless she'd taken pills or something like that.

"She looks like Pete Buttigieg," Ralph whispered to me. "Only with a wig."

"Shut the fuck up," I said.

The weight of the ceremony was closing in on me. I wasn't getting choked up or anything, but seeing Mark in that box brought it home for me.

Mark had never had a good go of it. He'd always struggled. Now it was over. I don't believe in God or an afterlife but I hoped there was somewhere peaceful where Mark/Mavis could spend their time now, if there was any time left to spend.

The casket looked really out of place in this lecture hall. It looked like a Silicon Valley presentation space, one where some boring new product might be announced to shareholders.

The casket was wooden and carved and a glaring hot pink color— like little girl sports car hot pink— and there were pink flowers on it. It was the only thing in the room that looked remotely religious. Everything else was sterile and modern and that neutral blue-grey color, including the podium up front which looked like it was from Ikea. It even smelled like a meeting room, a place where guys shuffle paper and open briefcases and use boring terms like "budget review" and "quarterly profit" and show charts and stuff.

"Sorry," said Ralph. "I wasn't trying to be a dick. She just looks like Pete Buttigieg with a pink wig on."

"Thanks for being here," I said. "It's fine."

I'd been so shocked by Mavis's announcement about her transition. She'd been someone I'd gone to advice for — I remember soon after I quit Toys R Us, I went through my first break-up and I remember meeting Mark at Denny's and him shrugging his big shoulders and saying, "Yeah, it's hard, man." That really summed it up for me.

Then all of a sudden this revelation. She must have carried it for years. I knew that her divorce really took a huge toll on her self-esteem. It was so bad that she realized she'd rather live as a woman than a man. Or she'd always been a woman and couldn't hide it. I don't know how it fucking works. I can't say I blame her. Hell, sometimes I feel like just getting rid of my own cock. Sometimes I think that women have it way easier than men in our society, even if they don't realize it.

I sat there swallowing my sadness and reminiscing and looking at the casket, thinking of how I should really go down there and pay my respects like everyone else, look Mavis's corpse in the eye so to speak, but then she sat up.

Just like that.

I mean, she sat up in the casket. Like a normal, alive person. Her peaceful-looking embalmed body just sat up like someone lying in bed who's forgot something important they have to do.

She was smiling ear-to-ear when she did it and for a second I didn't know what was what.

"What the fuck?" I heard several people say. I hadn't really looked at the crowd much— I was too busy processing seeing Mark/Mavis in that casket— but I realized that several of the people here were transgender themselves.

There weren't any screams or freakouts or anything. Everyone just kind of looked at her. Her curly wig was pink and floppy on her head. Her glasses were on.

She climbed down out of the casket. She reached down to her knees, grabbed the hem of her dress and lifted it up and over her head. Underneath, she was dressed in a t-shirt and comfy-looking jeans. The t-shirt was red and said "Bazinga!"

Everyone was staring. A few people had been crying and now they were looking at her like she was, well, a zombie or something.

She stood there in front of us with this huge, shit-eating smile on her face and held her arms out like Christ crucified. Then she started applauding really enthusiastically like a parent at an unpopular kid's birthday party. Most of us watched. A few people tentatively joined in with her.

"Mavis, what the hell is going on?" someone from the cluster of people in the second row finally asked.

"I'm here to announce that I'm officially fully transitioned," said Mavis. "I'm the woman of my dreams. I can't wait for you all to meet her."

I stared in disbelief with everyone else. There was a smattering of applause. Mavis didn't seem to register the mood.

"I'm so happy," she was saying. "I'm so happy and I wanted as many people as possible to come to meet the real me."

Someone started laughing. Hysterically. Then someone else. More people started laughing. Mavis laughed, too.

I joined in on the laughter. I laughed. I laughed harder. Soon I was laughing so hard I fell out of my chair into the aisle. From down there, the backs of the front row seats looked like cartoon teeth.

Ralph was looking around slowly and he was kind of smiling like he does when he gets confused, and he looked down at me and was like, "Is this a prank? Are you pulling a prank on me? I mean, cause if you are, it's pretty hilarious."

I couldn't answer him. I was laughing too hard.

I have to admit, the first sensation I felt when Mavis sat up wasn't dread but a palpable relief. Seeing my old friend in the casket, motionless (she really had me fooled), and letting the finality of it all sink in was really getting to me. Replaying all those memories and letting the knowledge close in—those memories are all you'll have of this person. Now, I felt like the universe had granted me a second chance with good ole Mavis from Toys R' Us. I was shocked, but I wasn't even mad.

I was laughing on the floor so hard my face was hurting and I could hear Mavis start to explain herself to a few people who weren't laughing but yelling at her, like *really* yelling, and she was telling them to calm down, calm down, weren't they happy for her?

My Ex-Girlfriend's Wedding

I don't know why I went to Chelsea's wedding. We haven't spoken since we broke up. That was over four years ago.

I had a dream about two months after we broke up. She was sitting on my chest and carving into my throat with a knife.

"Holy shit," she said, all astounded-like, as she carved from one side of my jaw to the other.

I remember feeling my throat and there was no blood coming out. It felt like when you cut into dollskin or something, that polyethylene shit — half-plastic, half-rubber. I played with my neck flaps while she sat on my chest, and I realized I couldn't breathe. Then I woke up.

She's been dating this guy for about three years now. We dated for about three years. The guy she dated before me dated her for three years and then he stole her parent's wedding ring and she broke up with him. Her first boyfriend dated her for three years. Weird.

The wedding's being held at this Lutheran church. Chelsea's not Lutheran or even religious, so her fiancé must've picked it.

He's a handsome dude. Skinny. Looks good in a tux. Owns a beard oil company. They live in Detroit together.

I haven't dated anyone since we broke up. In fact, I haven't had any sex that wasn't explicitly paid for since we broke up.

The place is packed, the whole church. Really clean and new. Carpet's thin and the walls are white and there's handsome wood paneling. Big, vaulted ceiling with crucifixes and flowers and everything.

A guy plays the guitar and sings Eddie Vedder's version of "Girl from the North Country" and he sucks. I know it's Eddie's version because the lyrics are different from the Dylan version. The song's based on Scarborough Fair. The guy's singing about going to the north country fair and asking about a girl with long hair in a long coat.

The refrain goes, *She once was a true love of mine.*

Full, rich chords, strummed, one string hammer-ons. Very wistful, very pretty. Guy's guitar sounds great, his voice is terrible. Kind of a weird song choice for a wedding but it is technically a love song, so whatever.

The ceremony starts and all the bridesmaids and groomsmen are walking down the aisle one by one. They all file in as the guy plays the Dylan cover. It's really different from the Dylan version and I can see a lot of the older people murmuring to each other, asking if this is the Dylan song.

I don't know anyone here. Couple of familiar faces but no one I'd go up and say hi to. People I haven't thought of in a long time. They're like memories resurfacing. It's amazing how fast memories can travel. Like I'm just sitting there looking around and then BAM, there's someone from Chelsea's old job.

My younger brother's in the ceremony as one of Chelsea's bridesmaids. They never stopped being friends. He's probably the reason I got an invitation. The invitation read "Shit Just Got Real". The other bridesmaids are Chelsea's bratty little sister, this gay dude that we knew when we were together, her best friend from high school and two other friends of hers. I remember all of them but again, they're not anyone I'd say hi to.

I don't know why I came. I had nothing better to do. I wanted to prove to myself that I could, probably. There are other reasons but I don't bother explaining them to myself. I'm here. I did it. That's good enough for now.

I once asked my brother if Chelsea ever talks about me. They still hang out whenever he's in town from L.A. He told me she never does.

I do fine until right before the actual ceremony starts and then I'm done. I feel really out of place. This was a colossally stupid idea.

I get up and nope the fuck out into the hallway as the last of the bridesmaids and groomsmen come shuffling in. The guitar guy is still playing.

She once was a true love of mine

I walk the halls of the church. It reminds me of a school. It smells like a school. Like old books and stuff. Nothing in the hallways except pictures of the church throughout the years. It echoes.

It's early evening and the sunlight pours through the windows like lava or something. It's really pretty, and I can definitely see how God might live here.

I turn a corner and almost run into Chelsea. She's in her bridal gown, her arm hooked around her dad's. They don't say anything to me and I don't say anything either. She looks stunning. She doesn't know me. I move right past them, all of us avoiding eye contact. They are tensed up. There was a second there where she saw me. I know it.

Chelsea wanted to marry me, have kids. I didn't want to. Wasn't ready. That was years ago now.

So she'll always remember that, on her wedding day — just before she went down the aisle, she almost ran into her ex from several years prior.

She once was a true love of mine

I walk around the church and go to the gym where they're preparing the reception. There's a bunch of tables set out with white table cloths and caterers are setting up the spread. Looks like chicken and things related to chicken. Maybe some pasta. The cake's over in the corner — four-tiered, looks like a Greek temple or something. The basketball hoops are pushed up to the ceiling, out of the way. They've got these drapes of white lace hanging from the light fixtures, makes the place look like a giant spiderweb.

I sit down at one of the tables. I need to stop thinking. Lord, this was a stupid decision. I should just leave.

It doesn't feel like I sit there that long but pretty soon people start trickling in. I need to leave but for some reason I don't. I don't know what I'm waiting for, what I'm waiting to see happen.

She once was a true love of mine

I get up and go to a little vending machine area off the gym.

I'm hungry but I don't feel right taking Chelsea and her new husband's food. I feel like a ghost or an intruder or a ghost intruder or something. Even though I was invited. I feel like I was invited as a joke or an obligation or both. They probably knew if they sent my brother an invite they'd have to send me one, too.

I try to put in a dollar to get a Coke but it won't accept it. I try a few times before I see that the little price window is already lit up—someone already put in ten dollars and left it. I get a Diet and take the change — nine dollars in quarters — and I'm shoving it in my pockets when a black couple comes in behind me.

"Just gonna get a water," says the guy. They're both dressed to the nines in a grey tux and this pretty green conservative pantsuit get-up. I wore a dark polo shirt, dark jeans and slip-on brown shoes.

We start talking. They ask how I know the groom.

"I don't, actually," I tell them. "I used to date Chelsea."

Recognition shows on the woman's face.

"Oh," she says. "You're Alan!"

"Yeah," I say. I open my bottle of Diet Coke, get that satisfying hiss. "Who are you with?"

"We're their neighbors," they tell me. "Live in the apartment next door."

We bullshit some more and then the conversation dies off. They're looking back out on the floor where everyone's taking their seat. The tables are numbered. I never bothered finding out what table I'm at, or if they set a place for me at all.

The dude raises his eyebrows at me. They're both a little older than me, mid-thirties.

"You got some balls, man," he says. He's not being mean. He's just saying it to say it. "I wouldn't be able to come to my ex's wedding. How long were you two together?"

"3 years, about. And yeah, I thought it was really weird I even got invited. We haven't spoken since... you know. But it was a really stupid idea. I don't know why I came either. I'm actually going to take off. I don't feel right taking their food."

"Shit, man," says the guy. "At least stay for some cake. You made it this far."

"Nice meeting you," I tell them, and I leave. I want to ask them how they know about me, what Chelsea had to say about me, but I don't.

She once was a true love of mine

I feel like everyone is watching as I walk along the wall, heading for the exits. They're all sitting down, waiting to be told it's all right to get up and eat. I see my brother at the table with the rest of the people in the wedding party. He's laughing with one of the bridesmaids. I see Chelsea and her husband at the center of it all. They look both really excited and happy and tired and a little scared.

I make it outside, throw open the doors.

It snowed earlier today but the sun is blasting the clouds apart as it hovers over the horizon, ready to fall for the night. I'm facing west, looking across the parking lot over all the snow-caked cars. The sky looks like a stairway of iron clouds leading to heaven. It's seriously beautiful, I'm not smart enough to articulate it but I feel like God is watching me through that tunnel of clouds. I wish I could download that memory from my brain and put it on the Internet for everyone to see.

The air smells like winter, makes my nose numb. My feet are cold. I throw my still-full Diet Coke bottle in a trash can and put my hands in my pockets, feel the weight of the quarters.

She once was a true love of mine

I know why I came — I wanted to see Chelsea in her wedding dress. I wanted to see how she would have looked if I had stuck it out, said yes, put more effort in instead of letting our relationship fall apart.

It's selfish of me to want that. But I can be selfish. Stupidly selfish. It's one of the reasons we broke up. She has her issues, too. Maybe she's learned from them.

The line from the song keeps repeating in my head. It's as lonely as a train whistle in the night.

She once was a true love of mine

I'm happy for them.

They'll be fine.

I'll be fine.

I know it.

Oh

I am standing in a lane of hastily-parked cars. The street is full of them, total gridlock up to a police barricade at the end of the block. I have my phone in my hand and it's ringing.

It won't stop ringing. It's up to my ear. I keep hitting the same name, the same number.

She doesn't answer. She's not answering. Why isn't she answering?

I think of holding her for the first time in the hospital, the little pink blanket they swaddled her in, my wife all but passed out in the bed. 23 hour labor.

They take her out of the incubator, place her in my arms. She is warm and tiny and so fragile I feel like any sudden moves will make her fall apart like dandelion fluff. My heart floods.

I stop calling, get down off my car's roof. I look down the packed street. I don't see anyone I know, no other parents I recognize. There are kids running towards me, past me, but I don't see the one I'm looking for.

Harriet texts. She has Kevin. He wasn't in the same area of the building.

I look up google news and get more updates. I can't not. I need information and this is the only place providing it. The cops at the barricade won't say anything, won't let me through, don't care that I'm a parent. Everyone here is a parent.

There are news crews talking to escaped students. Everyone is surprisingly calm about everything, if not visibly shaken. Their voices are fraught, tense; their hands move a lot while they talk.

I find a link, look at the news stories, consume, consume, consume, scroll, tap, scroll. Nothing new. No information since I last checked it two minutes ago.

I already know the shooting occurred in an area of the building where Nellie has science class. But maybe she wasn't there. I know she is

usually there because I've picked her up right outside it at the end of the school day. But maybe she wasn't today.

I click on another link.

There's a video that starts to play.

It's taken by a kid that was inside the school.

I recognize the classroom as one of the science rooms. I've never seen the one Nellie has class in, not even for conferences which are held in the cafeteria, but it could very well not be Nellie's.

It's a Snapchat video, and there's a little tag of text towards the bottom. It shows a bunch of kids huddled on the floor of a classroom. The lights are on and they're all hunched over. I can't see any faces but I don't see Nellie, don't recognize any of the clothes or hairstyles as hers.

Our fucking school is getting shot up, says the caption.

Then, the gunshots. To the right of the phone-holder. The shooter is firing through the door at another group of students across the room.

The gunshots aren't gunshots. They're a rapid series of bombs going off. They don't fill the room so much as replace the room. The sound seems to shatter the air.

Smoke lingers at the ceiling. All the students freeze, paralyzed shapes. The desks stand stupidly.

With every blast, there are screams. Male and female.

The screams are not screams as we've been conditioned to hear screams. We hear screams that we're used to, movie screams. Acting screams. These aren't screams so much as involuntarily expulsions of air. They are high, bright-sounding, sharp-sounding. They pierce you.

It is the sound of cornered prey. This is what humans sound like when they've been caught by hunters.

I don't recognize any of the voices as Nellie's, but they might as well be.

I click out of the video and hit my phone app in the lower left hand corner of the main screen. It doesn't open. I click it. Still won't open, my thumb isn't hitting the screen right because my hand is shaking. I click it again.

"Come on, you motherfucker," I snarl at it. I'm sweating and my face is wet and red. I can feel my temples pounding, twin jets of blood forced under my skin and around my skull. My heart is going a million miles an hour. I came here right from work when I heard, didn't even tell them I was leaving. They'll understand. And if they don't, fuck them.

Harriet calls me again and I'm not answering. I have to talk to Nellie. I have to hear her voice.

Her phone doesn't even ring this time, just her voicemail message, "Hi, this is Nellie, leave a message."

We named her Eleanor, called her Nellie. Eleanor means light.

She had originally recorded an irresponsible- sounding voicemail message when she got her phone. I can't even remember was it was now, but I'd told her she needs to record a more straightforward one if she's going to be looking for a job, and she argued with me about it but it looks like she took the advice. I should've just let her be herself. What harm could it really have done?

The cops from the barricade are moving forward now through the rows of parked cars, telling us the school has been evacuated and that if we haven't found or heard from our children yet then we should go home and they will contact us.

I don't want to leave, but I turn and it takes me an hour to wait for the traffic to dissipate.

I continue to call Nellie and listen to her voicemail greeting multiple times. I finally talk to Harriet, who is as calmer now that she has Kevin with her. We both hold our cool. We do it for each other. Beneath the surface, we're boiling. I talk to Kevin who tells me he didn't see anything but heard gunshots coming from the science wing. He's taking this extremely well, too. I'm proud of him.

I think about Nellie when she was like ten, screaming at me because I didn't get her the right Hunger Games book. She'd been angry because I got her the one she'd already read and she'd asked for the next one in the series. She really let me have it. Something must've been bothering her and that just happened to be what set her off. But she came into my room later that night and apologized tearfully and sincerely.

The next thing I know I'm back at home and it's unseasonably warm, the sun's starting to go down, and I don't know what to do.

Harriet comes home and neither of us are freaking out but neither of us sound like ourselves either. We're silent after we say hello and hold each other for a minute. We gather our bearings on what to do next. We have to wait. I keep calling Nellie. We take turns. I pace a lot.

"She's going to come home any minute," I say, calling again. Any second now, and she'll answer her phone and tell me she lost her charger and it died. Or an unfamiliar number will come up and it'll be her, calling from a friend's phone and telling me where to come pick her up. Or the door will open and there she'll be.

Kevin goes up to his room and then comes back downstairs, then goes back up to his room again, then comes back downstairs.

Everything is so agonizingly calm. It is a tenuous calm. A calm like the thinnest web of ice on a puddle after a spring morning frost, waiting for the ascending sun to evaporate it away one molecule at a time until it breaks so quietly and softly that no one notices.

"We would've heard from her, Norm," Harriet is saying to me now. "We would've heard from her."

"I know, I know," I'm saying. "Maybe her phone died. Maybe she lost it."

Harriet says the one thing I can't hear right now and my calm breaks and I'm hissing at her so hard I'm slobbering.

"Don't you say that, don't you say that!"

I've never acted like this before in front of either of them. Harriet actually manages to get even quieter.

Kevin leaves the room again.

I finally admit to myself that I know something is terribly wrong. I have this horrible feeling and I can't explain it. I've had it since this morning when Gary from the office next to mine rolled his chair into my office and showed me his phone and said, "I don't mean to freak you out, man, but don't your kids go to this school?"

I won't admit this to myself until later, but I know it's coming before the phone call buzzes in.

For a second, I see the unfamiliar number and I answer and I think I hear Eleanor's voice. But it's not her.

The voice is tired, male, middle-aged.

"Is this Norman Bernice?"

"Yes."

"Your daughter is Eleanor Bernice?"

I think of Nellie on her bike when she was six, yelling at me because I wouldn't let go of the seat, the training wheels lying in the driveway. I've got my hand on the seat and she's got a little blue helmet on. Her brown hair is in braids she made with Harriet.

I think of her a few weeks ago, arguing with her mother about her prom dress, shrieking in a teenage rage about how she's shaped like a grasshopper and that no one will ever love her.

I think of her this morning, taking a GoGurt on her way out, arguing with Kevin because it's the last cherry one and he wants it and I tell them both to knock it off, you're acting like children.

"We are children," Nellie says. Then she's out the door.

I can't remember saying, "I love you." I might have. I usually do. But I can't remember if I did right now.

I don't remember answering the voice, but I must have said yes when he asked the questions, because the guy is speaking again and I'm hearing him but I'm not hearing him. I am otherworldly, somehow outside myself and shrunk deep within. The world is very large right now and very empty. I am on a ride I do not want to be on.

Harriet is next to me and she already knows what's going on and Kevin is in the doorway and he is so calm, like a statue, and I can only say one word into the phone.

Rapex

When Peter stuck it in her, the pain was blinding.

His brain didn't register the true origin of the pain right away. At first he thought he'd torn a groin muscle somehow. He tried to pull back out and nearly fainted. His cock was somehow stuck in her vagina. It felt like fishhooks were holding it in.

"What?" Marian asked.

She was tied to the bed, arms up over her head and secured to the headboard with these furry black handcuffs he'd bought them for Valentine's Day two years ago.

"Fuck," gasped Peter. He tried to adjust himself to a more comfortable position — his wrists were beginning to hurt from propping himself up over Marian— but his every tiny reflex caused more white hot pain to race up the shaft of his most sensitive organ.

His dick felt like it was being bitten. By something poisonous. Like Marian had hidden a rattlesnake in her snatch. He was sweating, beginning to pant. He could barely move.

Marian's eyes went wide and her brow creased in deep concern.

"Oh, no," she said, the truth dawning on her like some terrible blood-red sun. "I left my Rapex in..."

Peter looked down at her in horror.

"What the fuck! What the FUCK!? WHY?!"

"I'm sorry!" Marian wailed.

He was on top of her, their crotches fused together in a now-unfortunate coupling. Both of them were buck naked, and Marian's arms and legs were secured to the bed by the handcuffs and a handy pair of leather cords that Peter kept in the closet for games such as this.

The night had started off innocently enough. Peter had bought them dinner at Black Rock and then they'd seen the latest Nolan movie at the Emagine. They came home and made out on the couch while drinking a 2016 bottle of Pinot Noir. Then Peter took Marian by the hand and towed her up to their bedroom where she was delighted to find he'd spread actual rose petals on their bed. His erotic restraints were laid out on the rose petals, along with a feather tickler, a Whartonberg wheel, and a bottle of premium lube.

He stripped her tenderly, kissing every exposed inch of skin as he went, including her vag which she had forgotten to shave earlier despite their planned date night. She'd forgotten to shave her legs, too, but it was only because she'd been in a hurry to get to her hair appointment and had to take a quicker shower than she'd anticipated. Peter didn't even mention it, in either case.

She lay back on the bed, Peter kissing her on the neck. She was slick as a rain gutter between her legs, ready and open and waiting. He tied her up quickly and stripped down, his own genitalia bobbing like a fat pink wildflower as he removed his briefs.

He'd positioned himself over her and she'd felt him enter. She was expecting to feel his every naked, exquisite inch but there was this strange, unexpected tactile mute-feeling between them. "*I didn't see him put a condom on,*" she'd thought, and then he'd started freaking out.

"Oh, God, oh God, don't move, don't move, DON'T FUCKING MOVE!" said Peter, each word harsher than the last.

"I'm not!" protested Marian. She'd only tried to scratch her nose with her elbow.

Breathing harder, Peter regrouped and tried to remove himself very slowly. He hadn't gone more than a centimeter before he made a noise that sounded to Marian like a dog being stepped on.

"The pain's going to make me pass out," he gasped.

"Don't do that!" she said.

Peter didn't say anything, just heaved breath after breath with his aching wrists propping his torso up. Their bellies were pressed together, their crotches welded.

"Can't you just reach down there and try to, like, undo it?" Marian said.

"Oh yeah, you know, I was just thinking that," Peter snapped. He reached down between their legs, his hand trembling like he was about to touch something very dangerous and very easily frightened.

Marian winced at his harsh words.

"Are you mad?" she asked in a small voice.

"I'll be mad later," he said in a tone that told her he was very much fucking well mad, his fingers probing her vulva like a worm trying to find its hole. "Right now I'm trying to not lose my fucking dick in my wife's vagina."

A moment passed, the only sound in the room their heated breathing.

"How do you get it out of you?" Peter asked, probing. He had reared up on her a little to try and make seeing space, but he could only use one of his already-sore arms at a time, and he couldn't get very far, as any backward movement made him feel as though he was getting a handjob with broken glass.

"I have to, like, pry it out," she told him. "It's actually really complicated. It kind of sticks in there, and pops back out."

"You don't just, like, *slide* it up there and slide it out?"

"I have to kind of adjust it so it sticks. It's not something you could understand if you don't have a vagina."

Peter hissed in pain and frustration, probing with his fingers, trying to find a way in. They slipped and slid on the outer regions of her vulva. She was now bone dry and that probably wasn't helping, though she could feel some sticky moisture on her outer lips. His dick had shrunk from its previous engorged status but the spikes and spines on the interior of her Rapex device were still stuck in his flesh, hanging onto it like owl talons.

"FUCK," he yelled again, probing with more ferocity. "What is this thing *made* out of? Jesus!"

"Stop yelling at me!" Marian exclaimed. "I'm sorry I *ruined* our evening."

She began to cry.

Peter heaved another breath.

"It's all right," he said, giving up his probing and resting on his elbows, his forehead on her collarbone. "It's all right. I'm not that mad... I'm just... *frustrated* because - AAAGHGHGH!"

"*What?*" said Marian.

"DON'T MOVE, DON'T FUCKING MOVE, MARIAN!" he screamed. "WHEN I SAY DON'T MOVE I MEAN DON'T FUCKING MOVE AT ALL!"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to leave it in, I had it in for work today... you know how nervous I get having to work down there... stop *yelling* at me!"

She cried harder.

Marian worked as a secretary for a major law firm down in the city, and the city made her nervous, walking to her car in the evenings and all that. She'd taken to just leaving the Rapex in all week except for bathroom breaks, putting it in Monday before her shower and removing it for good on Friday evening, usually right before she took her "I'm home now" piss. She felt safer with it, like a pacifier. Feeling its presence down there all day, filling her, was a strangely satisfying security blanket.

"It's all right, it's all right," said Peter through gritted teeth. His dick was screaming at him, jammed in a hornet's nest.

They lay there another moment, labored breaths. Marian's wet eyes and her brow furrowed in concern. Peter's tongue dancing on the edges of his teeth.

"All right," Peter said again, assessing their situation as best he could through the horrific, bright red needles. "All right..."

"I can't get out of the handcuffs," Marian said. "I'm sorry, but I can't."

"I know," said Peter.

He saw the answer.

"We're gonna have to call an ambulance, honey. There's no other way. Let's just get it over with. Where's your phone? I hope it's up here, because mine's in my jacket downstairs."

"It's, uh," Marian struggled to remember where her phone was. She hated when he yelled at her and now she couldn't think. "It's, uh-uh-uh..."

For a terrible second Peter had the dizzying thought of looking over and not seeing the phone on the nightstand, but he turned his head in what felt like slow motion, and there it was.

"It's right here," he said, delicately reaching over and picking it up.

Thank God in heaven, he thought.

She'd showed him the Rapex thing when she bought it online a few months ago. He'd encouraged the purchase. More power to her. In Peter's opinion, women shouldn't have to be subjected to such constant fears of sexual violence. Let the next guy who tried to shove it in her get a nasty surprise, if, God forbid, such a thing should ever happen.

His every twitch a torture, Peter dialed 9/11 and hit send.

Ten minutes later there were colored lights outside their window and they could hear the front door being smashed in. There was a tremendous shattering of glass, and Peter knew it had to be the century-old grandfather clock they kept next to the front door. It had been a wedding gift from his grandparents, built by his great-grandfather in Norway.

"Sir, ma'am!" called deep, authoritative voices from the stairwell.

"We're up here!" they both yelled, Peter in a weaker voice than Marian.

"We broke your clock with the battering ram," the voice yelled. "We're very sorry and we're going to pick it up for you as best we can!"

There was what sounded like an entire SWAT team bounding up the stairs, and into the room strode two firefighters, two cops and a team of EMTs carrying a gurney and, for some reason, a set of oxygen tanks.

No one said anything for a moment as everyone took in what was happening and Peter and Marian absorbed the reality of being seen like this.

Finally, one of the cops spoke.

"Not a good night, huh?"

There was some standing around and deliberating. The EMTs and firefighters carefully inspected the married couple's tragically-fused genitals as best they could, shining their flashlights every which way and blinding Marian as they murmured to each other. They were all very professional and polite and none of them dared venture even a finger toward the conflicted area.

"Yeah, I've seen these things," said one of the firefighters, shining his flashlight right up Peter's buttocks. "They invented them in South Africa... didn't know they were actually for sale in the States, though..."

"How bad does it look?" croaked Peter.

"Well, there's some blood coming out," said one of the cops. "But not too much."

Peter was thankful he couldn't see their faces. All of them sounded like they were trying to hold back either tears or laughter or maybe both.

"I feel so stupid," sobbed poor Marian. Peter felt bad seeing her so upset, and he also felt bad for exploding at her earlier, but now he was focused on keeping perfectly still. Even talking produced lightning bolts of pain through his entire lower torso.

The emergency personnel clicked off their flashlights, their inspection complete.

"Well, I guess we'll have to cut it all off," said one of the firefighters.

Peter's eyes widened dramatically at the words "cut off."

"Wait, what?!" he shrieked, then winced.

"No, no, no, sir," said the firefighter. "We'll have to cut off the restraints and get you two on the gurney and take you in. They'll have to figure this out down at Providence."

Marian's hands and legs were freed (thank goodness, her wrists and hands had become so numb they felt like they were made of velvet fabric) and the entire team moved them as carefully as possible off the bed and onto the gurney, all of them looking like they were playing the world's most fucked up version of Light As A Feather Stiff As A Board. Loose rose petals flipped lazily through the air and stuck to the bottom of their rescuers' boots. Marian was still crying softly, unsure of where to put her now-free hands. Peter was heaving like a hiccupping infant, letting out little whimpers and squeals whenever moved.

"There," said the EMT once they were on the gurney, covered by their sheets and frozen in the same missionary position they'd been trapped in for nearly an hour. "Hard part's over."

Despite five different men guiding the gurney, Peter began to scream on the stairs. By the time they reached the front door Peter was in hysterics, tears rolling down his face, screaming, "Why why why!" over and over like Nancy Kerrigan. Marian was in tears, too. She felt just awful about the whole thing. If only she wasn't so used to having her Rapex in all the time. It was like forgetting to take your Apple Watch off before a shower.

By now their neighbors had all come out to see what was the matter and there was even a Channel 50 Action News crew on the scene. They stood in the street with their arms crossed and their necks craned.

The gawking neighbors and media figures were all treated to the sight of their friendly young neighbors stark naked and in mid-copulation, their bodies dotted with stray rose petals as they were hastily wheeled down their front sidewalk to a waiting ambulance by a team of

emergency personnel, several of whom were trying valiantly to stifle peals of laughter. The sheets flew back, flapping like ghosts and leaving nothing to the imagination. Both of them were in tears, Peter still moaning, "WHY, WHY!?" and screeching like a little girl every time the gurney's wheels hit a crease in the sidewalk.

They were loaded into the ambulance and the doors slammed shut and the ambulance took off.

Peter shrieked again when they went over the curb and Marian cried harder at seeing her poor sweet husband in such a state because of her.

"TAKE IT EASY," roared the EMT to the driver. "This guy's dick is probably shredded hamburger as it is!"

"Sorry," said the driver, tensing up.

When they finally got to the hospital, they were immediately admitted into intensive care, no paperwork necessary for the time being. Everyone in the wing came to see what was going on, the call having spread like wildfire through the entire hospital within a few minutes of being received.

Isidore Koufax, the top surgeon in the building and one of the greatest medical minds in the state of Michigan, was called in and took a good five minutes to inspect the unhappy couple.

He rubbed his bearded chin and went, "Hmm..." a lot as he conducted his examination, squinting his eyes and walking around the hospital bed like he was observing a car he might buy.

"What are you going to do, Doctor?" asked Marian after the five minutes had passed.

Koufax stopped "Hmm"-ing and stood up, clipboard tucked under his left arm.

"Well, I suppose we'll just have to see about getting *that* out of *you*."

He pointed at Marian.

"And then figure out how to get *it* off of *you*."

He pointed at Peter.

"But that's one nasty little device you've got there. Based on the x-rays, if we try to do it the opposite way, we'll destroy the skin of his penis so bad he'll be pissing into a plastic bag for the rest of his life..."

Now it was Peter's turn to weep silently.

"I won't lie," said Koufax, motioning for his nurses, all of whom filed into the room with their gloves and masks already donned and their eyes twinkling with fascination. Koufax slapped on his own blue rubber gloves as they surrounded him like a rap posse. "This is gonna be a long night."

Six hours and two surgeries later and Peter lay zonked out on a hefty dose of Vicoden in a new bed. Marian was by his side and holding his hand. She was calm now but still apologizing intermittently whenever he'd wince and grimace upon adjusting his position.

Poor Peter's groin was completely bandaged, done up like a diaper. His dick would likely fully recover — the wounds were not nearly as deep as they could've been — but only after a long, painful therapeutic healing process. And chances were he would have sore erections for an even longer period. Marian herself remained unscathed, the Rapex popping out rather easily once persuaded with some smooth shiny hospital tools.

Marian held her husband's hand and flipped around on the cable channels, watching a monitor up in the corner.

"You know," she said after a minute. "You could've just reminded me to take it out before you tied me down."

If Peter heard her, he didn't say anything.

Gym Story

It happened when the guy doing curls turned out to know the woman on the pulley machine.

I don't know the names of all the machines. I know the rack with the barbells attached to the sliding poles is called a smith machine and there's treadmills and the ellipticals and stuff but other than that I'm completely ignorant. I was only there (at the gym) so I could look hot and get laid more often.

This guy was on the bench kitty-corner to mine. We were both using the freeweights. I'd seen him before but never spoken with him. I'd never spoken to any of the other regulars.

I was stuck in my head, stewing over something I can't even remember now. Probably pissed off because I still didn't look like I wanted to even though I'd been going there daily since the previous fall. I was also hangry – I'd never eat until after I'd had my workout. Also I was just unsatisfied with my life in general, which I know now is just part of being human.

I'd just finished my fifth rep of five and my biceps and other arm muscles had that wonderful tightening feeling. I'd worked myself up into a mental frenzy trying to get that final fifth rep. I was really fired up, and I happened to look up and see straight across the way to where the pulley machines were.

The woman on the pulley machine was probably forty, overweight with drab curly brown hair and flushed cheeks. She looked like she hadn't kissed anyone in over a decade, except maybe her cats. She had these long, flabby arms that were flapping with every rep, like sloughs of wet bread dough.

"Disgusting," I said. To this day I don't know why I bothered saying it out loud. I was full of frustration and jealousy and adrenaline and some of it just got out. In hindsight, I really deserved what I got next.

"What's disgusting?" said the guy next to me. He dropped both his weights. They hit the mat with a thud.

He didn't look like a tough guy. He was dressed in a blue t-shirt with cutoff sleeves and had a boyish face and short brown hair and moon-eyes. He looked like an IT expert, Charlie Brown in his late thirties.

His belly was round and his eyes were round and his face was round. His arms didn't suggest he used the freeweights very often.

But the look in his eyes suggested my remark had pissed him off.

Now, normally I would have demurred. I'd have mumbled, "Nothing," looked back at the floor, seething to myself over how weak I am, and that would've been it. But this time, for some reason, between the look of this guy and the mood I was in, everything lined up perfectly and I let the anger push me over.

I looked right back into his brown boy eyes and said, "That."

I nodded at the woman with her arm flaps, wheezing as she pulled.

"That is my sister," the guy said, and his eyes were looking right back into mine.

Somewhere in the back of my mind an alarm went off, but my puffed-up gym self couldn't back down now. I had to escalate.

I dropped my weights and stood up. My heart was racing and the inside of my chest felt cold. The rage was coursing through me. Like a river. A fucking river of rage. I can't describe it except to say it was mixed with a desperate, lizard-brained fear.

I got right to the point.

"You wanna take this outside?"

I'd literally never said that out loud in my life before. I haven't said it since. I was expecting the guy to back down. He didn't look like he came here more than once a month, let alone someone who'd been in a fight before.

I'd never been in a fight, either, but it was too late for that.

The guy stood up, stepped over the bench and got in my face. His breath smelled like bubblegum.

We held the position. He looked me in the eye for a few seconds. I looked right back, hoping he couldn't see through me, how unsure I was, how my rational mind was repeating, "You're fucking up, you're fucking up!" over and over.

I didn't know if anyone else had noticed us. I didn't care. I was now having to recycle the rage through me. His proximity and unwillingness to submit was severely dampening my rage resources. Parts of my body were screaming at me to focus on self-preservation. This could get ugly. What if this guy turned out to be a black belt or something?

Again, too late. The only way out was forward.

Charlie Brown looked at me for a little longer, just enough for it to be uncomfortable. I held my gaze. If I looked down, that would be it.

"Yeah," he said after what seemed like an hour. "Yeah, I think I do."

Fuck, I said inside.

"All right, then," I said out loud.

As we walked across the gym to the front doors, I remembered we were dressed in gym clothes and there was a snowstorm yesterday and the temperature was in the 20s.

Neither of us spoke. I lead the way. We passed the treadmills. We passed the ellipticals. My feet were moving. We passed the front desk. Headed into the vestibule where there was salt strewn everywhere on the floor from people tracking it in and the rugs were stained with salt.

A guy on his way in held the door open for us. Both of us were sweaty and still dressed in our gym shorts. When we stepped through the door, the cold hit me like a massive, iron gate swinging shut. I struggled not to shiver, to make myself into a formidable and unwavering stone fortress. Hopefully I'd look intimidating enough for this guy to just give up and go back inside.

I contemplated what it must feel like to get hit in the face. What it felt like to hit someone else in the face. I didn't hate this guy enough to hit him in the face.

I was thinking about all this as I turned and we made eye contact again. It was fucking freezing and my sweaty hair made me feel like my head was encased in ice.

"So?" the guy said. He folded his arms. "What's your fucking problem?"

And just like that, in that very moment, I wilted. I looked him in the eye, sincere and open and honest. I might as well be, I thought — in another minute, he'd be kicking my ass and knowing me in a way that no one else did. My rage had completely fizzled out on the walk out here, a flash in a pan, nowhere to be found. The cold had killed it and left me weak and shaking.

I laid it out.

"I don't know," I said. "I didn't think you'd actually do it. I've never been in a fight before. I said, 'disgusting' because I thought your sister's arm flaps were—"

He cut me off.

"She's got diabetes," he said. "She's here trying to better herself. I didn't think you'd do anything after I called you on it, either. And now we're both cold."

I thought of how to never judge a book by its cover. This guy looked like a middle-aged Charlie Brown but he held himself like fucking James Bond.

A gym employee stuck his head out of the doors. He was a pretty boy, church-goer by the looks of it, very clean and with a body that I'd spent the last three months trying to attain for myself.

"Everything all right out here, guys?"

"Yeah," said Charlie Brown. "Just needed some air."

The employee went back inside.

"It's fucking freezing," said Charlie Brown, looking at me. Angry little me, who wilted at the first indication of real trouble. For a second I thought he was actually going to do something.

But then, he held out a fist and tapped me lightly on the cheek with his knuckles. Very gently. To my credit, I didn't flinch.

"You gotta learn to control your temper, kid," he said, and without another word turned and went back inside.

I stood there, not sure what to do next. My empowering spike of rage was gone, as if it was never there.

I went straight to the locker room, got my hoodie, and left.

I never went to that gym again.

The End of the Ceremony

I take another sip of water. It hits me. This isn't going to go well.

I'm standing at the podium and I'm feeling the type of anger that seems to surge through every cell in your body, the kind that makes you burst out in childish fits, the kind that demands to be seen regardless of the dignity it costs you.

The crowd is expecting my voice. They're all dressed to the nines. It's a special night.

A night for one of my biggest rivals. I'm here because my agent and my wife said I should be and I do what I'm told. I didn't know I'd be speaking until I got here.

My rival is sitting at a table about four feet to my left. I have prepared remarks in front of me that she and her publicist wrote. Her agent came up to me before the show and said, "She's so glad you're here. Would you mind if you read a few words?"

I had no choice but to comply. If I refused, it would look like jealousy.

I didn't see her until she got called out onstage to take her seat at the table of honorees.

There are portraits of her all over the banquet hall. Promotional things.

She's looking down or off-camera in every fucking picture, trying to seem pensive and mired in a deep self-reflective state, contemplating the struggles of her people and her own inner trauma, creating the next viral three-line poem in her egotistical head. She writes in all lowercase. She says it's to honor her mother's culture. Everyone knows it's about branding but they treat her like it isn't.

She's wearing Armani tonight. The dress is worth more than I make in a year. I take another drink of water.

We've known each other since college. She wrote these crappy little three-line poems and started posting them on Instagram. They are terrible, in my opinion. But people love them. She's sold millions of

copies of her two poetry collections. I just got published last year, and my editor called me today to tell me they're considering pulling my book because the numbers are so low. I spent a decade writing it and another five years getting it published.

I hate that everyone loves her. I hate how her dreck has made her richer than I'll ever be even though I bust my ass for every word. It's the type of hate that boils in the throat. It's the type of hate that you wish would just fuck off and stop wasting your time but it stays there, boiling.

She gives empty-headed white American women and girls the ego trips they've been conditioned to crave by this fucking culture. She makes them feel empowered and in return they give her enough money to buy a private island, literally. She bought one in the Caribbean last month. She's going to open an orphanage for Sri Lankan orphans on it, or so she says. 20 bucks says it's a front for a child prostitution ring within the first year.

She is the wave and I am the trough. And she won't see it, just as my ancestors chose not to see their advantages. It's amazing what mental gymnastics people will do to maintain the belief that they're the ascendant underdog, even after they've attained obvious cultural dominance.

I'm a white guy and she's a woman of color. In today's literary world, her voice is more valid than mine regardless of substance, just like a hundred years ago when mine was more valid than hers regardless of substance. It's just what the world wants. Sometimes you're the water on the crest of the wave, sometimes you're the water in the trough of the wave.

I look down at the prepared remarks. It's corporate drivel. Singing her praises, selling things. Self-deprecation on how, as a white man, I was the privileged one and somehow she beat me despite the odds. It actually says "chuckle" after a line.

After this I'm going home to the apartment I share with my wife. I caught her cheating on me with her personal trainer the other week. I couldn't even be that mad, because it was so cliché. I can't divorce her because I'll get raped in court.

I can't stand it. The rage boils over. It wins.

I point at her in her silver Armani.

"Here's the thing," I say.

Everyone perks up.

"I didn't want to be here tonight. I really didn't want to speak. I got asked to and my agent thought it would be a good idea. He said it was 'the right thing for me to do.' But you know what? Fuck the right thing. I say do whatever makes you happy. Be selfish. Cause everyone else is."

There's tittering in the crowd. No one knows who I am. They're not impressed. They just want me off now.

"Your work is crap," I tell her. "And someday people will realize that. And you'll be forgotten, just like the rest of us. It might take a little longer, but it'll happen."

I leave the podium and don't look at anyone. I feel like I'm having an out-of-body experience as my legs move me across the banquet floor to the exit. It's not like a movie. There's no gasps or exclamations of shock and offense. People are either quiet or tittering. A few are chuckling.

It's done now.

I make it outside and the night is cold on my forehead and the streets are wet and traffic hisses by. I grab the nearest Uber and dive in and slam the door behind me. The event is being livestreamed and my phone is already screaming vibrations, correspondence over correspondence. My wife and agent are the first messages. I leave them in my pocket to scream at me.

My forehead is hot. It feels good to do what I want for a change.

I look out the window and all the drops of water are like hundreds of eyes, staring in.

The Harleigh Incident

He saw both his career and his life flash before his eyes as his hand went under Harleigh's shirt.

She'd turned at just the right moment. He'd had his hand out, waiting for her receipts.

"Come on, Grandma," he'd said, teasing.

She'd spun, in a hurry, and his hand had gone straight under the collar of her button-up polo uniform. Green and red, with the little happy Italian mustache guy on the right breast. The guy's face was bulging out as Crosby's hand slid underneath him.

The look on Harleigh's face hurt way more than Crosby would've expected. It was a bright fear mixed with revulsion, as though she'd been touched by something dirty or dangerous.

There was a fraction of a second where both of them froze and took in what was happening. In that microcosm of time, Crosby realized he could feel her nipple and her heart beating fast.

Harleigh was 21 and the most attractive girl he'd ever hired. She made the other drivers smile and tell each other stories about her. The preppers loved her. The customers loved her. She livened up the place quite a bit.

She was personable and friendly and a good worker, pitching in on the phones and the line. She was usually on time with her deliveries. She got really good tips, which wasn't surprising.

Crosby yanked his hand out.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I did *not* mean to do that. I'm so sorry. I was reaching for your receipts, that's it."

"It's fine," she said, turning away. "It's fine."

Her face was redder than Crosby ever imagined it could get. She slid the pile of receipts over to him.

"It was an accident," Crosby said again, a glassy terror filling him.

He'd felt her nipple, the small pea of flesh at the tip of her left B-cup breast. His index and middle fingers had brushed it. He'd accidentally just made it to third base with his attractive 21-year-old employee. All he'd wanted were her receipts so he could tally them up and she could go home.

"I'm so sorry," he said again, sputtering.

This wasn't like him at all. He was an assertive boss, liked owning the place, liked being a mentor to all these young people. He liked giving them time off and hearing about their schooling and their hobbies and their plans for the future.

Even though he didn't blame her, Harleigh's automatic recoil battered his self esteem in ways he hadn't experienced since adolescence. For the first time Crosby felt old and reviled. He'd been single ever since his wife divorced him three years ago. They'd been childless after ten years of marriage. Crosby lived by himself in the house and had quit his job as an engineer and bought the Toarmina's shortly after the divorce. He'd needed a change of scenery.

Harliegh had strolled in with an application in her hand only a few months after he'd taken over.

"I need to give this to Sean," she said as she walked in. She was wearing green sunglasses, dressed in a sexy little get up consisting of trim jean shorts with suspenders over a red t-shirt that showed off her pale belly and pierced belly button.

"Sean's gone," said Crosby. "I'm the owner now."

"Oh," said the girl. She extended her hand. "Hi. I work summers for Sean as a driver, so now I guess I'm working for you."

He took the application, pretended to look it over.

"Why you putting in an app if you already got a job?"

"Sean made me do it," she said, snapping her gum. She looked like a hipster LA fashion model on her day off. "Every time I came back.

This'll be my fourth summer. Probably the last one, too, cause I'm done with school after next year and I wanna move to Miami."

"Well, thanks," said Crosby. "I'm full up now but when are you thinking of - "

"Sean always had a spot for me," interrupted the girl. "My name's Harleigh. That's Harleigh, without a 'y'. It's e-i-g-h."

"Very nice to meet you, Harleigh," Crosby had said. "When do you usually come back?"

"First week of May."

"All right, well, that's almost a month away, so I'll see what - "

"Sean always had a spot for me."

"I understand that, but Sean's no longer in charge."

Harleigh stopped chewing her gum, looked at him over her sunglasses. She clearly wasn't used to hearing anything other than a hard 'Yes'.

"I can't work anywhere else, Mister... what is your name?"

"Crosby," he said.

"Oh, yeah," said Harleigh. "Like the boomer singer guy."

"Yeah. So here's what I'll do for you - I'll call you the last week of April, and if I have an opening I'll let you know. If not, I can point you to another place that's hiring drivers. Trust me, you deliver pizzas one place, you can do it anywhere."

"But I like it here. I know everyone and they know me. I know the routes. I know all the orders. I've been doing it since junior year."

This girl wasn't getting it. But just then the phone rang.

"I'll call you," said Crosby, picking up the phone. "Again, nice to meet you. I'm glad you're interested in coming back."

He turned around and typed the person's order into the computer. When he'd hung up, Harleigh was gone.

May had come and Crosby had planned on not bothering to hire Harleigh, but then one of his other drivers got caught smoking weed in the freezer and had to be made an example of. So he'd called up Sean, the previous owner.

"Hire her," said Sean. "You won't regret it. She's a kick, that one."

He hung up, called Harleigh, and asked what day she could start.

Harleigh had been right — everyone already knew her and loved having her around. Even old grouchy Simmons, the dishwasher/prepper, cracked a smile whenever she would come in the door with her t-shirt under her arm and her sunglasses on her head.

Now, she was counting her tips, cashing out, not looking at him.

The tension that now permeated the kitchen was thick enough to wade through. They were the only two left. She'd taken a last minute delivery out to Grand River and had arrived back after everyone else had gone.

"Harleigh," he said again, marveling at how weak he felt, how childlike. "I didn't mean to do that. I swear on my life."

"It's fine," she said again, not looking at him. "I'm telling you it's fine."

She was scared of him. It was obvious. She thought he'd done it on purpose, somehow. That cut Crosby right to his core. A lovely girl like this, scared of a fortysomething schmuck like him. Over an incident that was so haphazard, so spontaneous, so stupendously random, that there was no way to explain it and have anyone believe his side of the story.

She finished counting her tips and left, saying, "See you" as she took off, still not looking at him.

Crosby went home, fed his dogs, showered, and tried to sleep.

He kept remembering his hand on her breast. Had he squeezed it, just a little? The second it had rested there seemed to take on all sorts of forms, every possible scenario in every universe, playing out. Had he squeezed it? Had he brushed it, pinched it? Had he wanted to do any of those things?

She'd acted like he had done it on purpose, immediately freezing and recoiling before going silent and nervous and tense. She acted as though he'd grabbed her and forced his hand down her shirt and fondled her, all while looking into her eyes and daring her to stop him.

The way she'd kept saying, "It's fine," when she clearly was anything but. The way she looked at anything but him.

His fingertips kept feeling her nipple. That hadn't just been a mere slip of the hand, a brushing of the shoulder or a bump of the hips. He'd been intimate with her, a 21 year old employee who was by all accounts a solid 10.

It was honestly one of the only intimate interactions he'd had since the divorce.

He felt himself hardening at the memory, despite his best efforts. His dick did what it wanted, like all dicks. He resisted it at first, but then his hand went between his legs and he masturbated. He came harder than he had since before the divorce, thinking of Harleigh's nipple and the tattoo of indecipherable cursive on the back of her neck. He masturbated with the same hand that had touched her.

He finished and was finally able to sleep.

It's not that big a deal, he told himself repeatedly.

She wasn't there the next day, his assistant manager informing him that she'd called in.

Then she wasn't there for another week. Apparently she'd taken sick.

It was the middle of the summer, and the kitchen was hot every day. Business went on. The weekend was slammed, the weekdays were laid back.

Then, the following Monday, the phone rang.

Crosby answered the phone.

It was Harleigh.

"Hey," she said. "I'm gonna be going back to school a little early this year, so I'm just letting you know you I'm not working there anymore."

Crosby didn't have anything to say except, "I understand."

He was about to thank her for all her help when the line clicked.

Crosby never heard from Harleigh again. No cops busted down his door, no phone calls from any lawyers were received. His life stayed the same. He stayed single and he stayed ordinary.

But he never forgot the incident, and the guilt and shame he felt, even though it was an accident. It amazed him how he could feel so bad about something he hadn't meant to do.

And in any case, Crosby didn't hire any more attractive young women after that.

Bless the Dead

Cammie walked up the sidewalk to the big house— a peaceful portrait of upper-class suburbia in early winter. The snowfall from the night before had been both soft and smothering, and the world seemed to be taking quiet breaths under its new blanket of snow.

The housekeeper answered the door, a stone-faced black lady who didn't introduce herself.

Cammie was led to the living room. The house smelled of poinsettias and cinnamon.

The parents were in an opposite corner under an expensive-looking painting of a woman at a piano.

"Why, why before Christmas?" the mother was asking, distraught.

The husband held her, not speaking.

The child, about two or three years old, was posed in front of them.

Cammie had received the phone call from a reliable client the night before.

"I know this is unconventional, but they'd need you over there in the morning," he said. "They want the photos for posterity."

"What happened?"

"Their kid died," said the client, a veterinarian/business owner for whom Cammie did an annual photo series of dogs he'd had as patients throughout the year. "Leukemia. He's an old college friend— the dad, I mean, not the kid-- and I told him I knew a good photographer. They'd pay, obviously."

"They want photos of the kid? The kid who..."

Cammie hesitated.

"...the kid who passed away last night? Like, the kid's body?"

"Yeah," said the client. "It's called post-mortem photography. They used to do it in the 1800's all the time. The wife is a real piece of work. It's probably her idea. But like I said, they make me look like a manager at McDonald's and they'll pay you whatever it's worth, both for your time and the photos."

Cammie had called the number, been given an address and a time. She didn't know what to expect of her photographic subject.

She was relieved to see that he didn't look too bad.

The kid looked peaceful except for his eyes. They had been propped open and he stared at nothing. If it weren't for the greyish hue of his cheeks and the emptiness of his gaze, he could've just been any other bored toddler.

He was dressed in a little blue suit and set up on a fluffy chair surrounded by an explosion of red poinsettias and toys. A Transformer was tucked into the crook of his right arm, and a stuffed Olaf the Snowman grinned his one-tooth grin from the kid's shoulder. There was a Christmas tree shining with tinsel behind him. Christmas presents wrapped in shiny red and green paper were strewn about as if tossed there by a lazy Santa.

The parents didn't acknowledge Cammie's presence. The housekeeper nodded to the dead child as if Cammie hadn't already seen him.

"Do what you do," she said. "He's all ready."

She left the room.

The parents stood in the corner. Cammie didn't wait, setting up her tripod and clicking away, using only the natural light from the bay windows. The sun blasted in, casting long beams of bright white onto the pristine carpet and the boy's still face.

His eyes were blue. They stared at Cammie through her lens and she began to feel creeped out. She worked through it, clicking.

In the corner, the mother continued to whimper.

"Christmastime," she said. "Why during Christmastime?"

"Shh," said the husband. His eyes were wet.

Cammie took shot after shot, moving the tripod and getting different angles. She took the camera off the tripod. The kid stared at her. He was sick-skinny and had a small blue baseball cap to cover his bald head, the skin of his scalp like porcelain. He looked like an especially well-made doll. Cammie half expected him to suddenly spring forth, screaming and going, "GOTCHA!" and then Cammie would have a heart attack and die herself.

She was sweating. Her damp fingers slid as she adjusted the focus. She had over fifty shots already, working fast. The scent of the flowers and the cinnamon – probably potpourri or some fragrance sprayed by one of those automatic spritzing devices that plug into outlets – was cloying and made Cammie want to gag. There was another scent hiding underneath it, one that Cammie didn't want to focus on.

She turned to the parents.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But how many did you need taken? I'm afraid I wasn't given many instructions."

The husband looked at her. He was forty-ish, handsome with a brown mustache flecked with grey and a simpering demeanor. His wife, mid-30s and pretty but going soft around her midsection and with a prominent double chin, was clearly the decision-maker of the house. She continued to whimper, blinking at her deceased offspring.

"How many do you have now?" the husband asked.

"Just over 50 individual shots, at least three sets from several angles."

The husband nodded.

"Go for a hundred, I guess."

"Do you want anything – "

"Just do a hundred. What you're doing is fine. Thank you."

Cammie turned and snapped, the camera clicking as the photos were captured.

A few minutes later and it was done. The little dead boy in his blue suit sat motionless with his blue eyes staring open, rimmed with a grey complexion that marked him as unmistakably dead and decaying right before them. The colorful toys and the violently red flowers seemed to accentuate his drawn grey cheeks. His irises were the same washed-out blue of faded jeans or a lake filling with rain. His pupils led to eternity. There was nothing behind them. His pursed lips looked like they were made of wax. He was as motionless as the furniture.

Cammie turned to the parents, still in their corner.

"That's 100," she said.

She thought about the pictures now burned into her camera's memory card.

Something about all this didn't sit with her. Last night when she'd taken the job, she'd been weirded out but strangely excited. But that had all morphed into a nebulous sense of dread, building within her as she woke up and then drove over here.

Just like that, Cammie took the memory card out of its housing at the camera's lower right side and held it out to the parents.

"Here," she said. "You can just have them all. I wiped this before I came over — the pictures I took are the only thing on them. I have lots of other memory cards. This one's yours, that way you don't need to wait for me to send them."

She held it out and the mother still refused to acknowledge her.

"At Christmas," she whispered.

The husband looked at Cammie stupidly, at the memory card in her fingers. Finally, after a minute, he spoke.

"Gladys," he called.

The housekeeper appeared in the doorway, so fast it was as if she'd teleported there.

"Yes, sir."

"She's done."

Gladys came over and took the memory card from Cammie's outstretched hand.

"You're done, young lady?"

"Yes," said Cammie. "Is there anything else you need?"

"You know where the door is."

Cammie didn't need another indication to leave. She turned on her heels, feeling the kid's eyes on her back.

She motored herself out of the room as fast as her legs could carry her, out into the foyer, her hand on the doorknob, the doorknob turning, the door opening to bright sunlight like the gates of heaven, the flood of cold.

She could hear the housekeeper speaking to the parents from the living room.

"He's been blessed now," she was saying quietly. "He'll be right here, in your heart."

Cammie shut the door and was outside, her camera still clenched in one hand with the flap of the memory card housing still open, her tripod with its legs still extended in the other.

The world heaved its slow breaths under the snow, a sleeping giant covered with a white blanket. As Cammie walked to her car, she heard the first drips splat to the concrete from the house's high eaves, the glaring sun's first victories of the day.

Refresh

The post is absolutely perfectly crafted. A masterpiece of Internet content.

I'm in the 2 year club on Reddit. I have a Twitter with 42 followers. I have a couple hundred Facebook friends. 20 likes for a picture or a status is a resounding success for me. I don't have a Snapchat or a Tiktok because I'm too old for those.

But this I knew would get me real attention. Everyone sympathizes with grandparents and incurable diseases. I was hoping for a thousand upvotes, easy.

I uploaded a picture of my grandmother's paintings to reddit. She was diagnosed with Alzheimer's 4 years ago. She's painted pictures her whole life. Beautiful landscapes and strange people. She bases them on photos she's taken.

The first drawings right after her diagnosis were normal. The ones a year later were less detailed. The ones from this year are just shapes and colors and smears.

She doesn't know who I am anymore, hasn't for the past year. She doesn't know who my parents are. She doesn't know who she is. She requires assistance with everything. She was put on hospice last fall but the doctors say she could live for years before she dies. She smiles a lot. Her eyes are sad. She fingerpaints now because she can't hold a brush, but they're letting her paint a lot less because they have to watch her constantly or she'll eat the paint.

She was a gorgeous young woman in her day, a real stunner. She aged gracefully. Only since the diagnosis has her spirit and appearance waned. She's going down swinging, just like most respectable people do.

I've crafted the post. The first paintings to the last paintings. it shows the paintings' obvious progression from skilled to sloppy. Truly tragic and human.

I uploaded it onto reddit's /r/pics last night. I really need to have some validation from the external universe. I'm quite depressed, not just from grandma's condition but from my own life.

I spend most my time alone. I am an average guy, and the world has no use for average guys. I am disposable. I have no girlfriend and don't see the point in getting married. Children are too expensive. A house is too expensive. A real life is too expensive. I am getting used to the thought of living my entire life like this — an empty apartment, occasional meals with friends who are also alone, a day-in-day-out job that I neither hate nor like, and hobbies and passions pursued in obscurity. I will probably die alone in my bed. A quiet death in my sleep sometime in the next forty years, with my mind free of the Alzheimer's that runs in my family, is the best I can hope for. I'm trying to wrap my head around that.

But a nice Reddit post with a few thousand upvotes is one of those little things worth living for. People can be quite kind and supportive if they really take a moment to see that you exist.

I log into my Reddit profile and see I have 30 notifications. I'm excited, though 30 notifications in 24 hours isn't a whole lot for a post like this. In fact, it's minuscule. I push away the beginnings of my disappointment and click my inbox.

There are condolences and comments of support and how beautiful the paintings are and how beautiful humans can be. None of them are particularly noteworthy or creative, though one person comments "the guy in the third photo reminds me of Josh Brolin." I reach the end of the messages and upvote them all. The post has 32 upvotes.

I check the /r/pics page. My pic is on the fourth page and fading fast.

I know at this point it won't go viral or even to the front page, but I keep checking it all day. I get a few more comments, a few more upvotes. Nothing more.

I've seen people upload things just like this that get a thousand times the upvotes mine has received. Don't tell me luck and timing isn't the deciding factor in success. Or a marketing budget.

That evening I sit down at my computer after another day at the office. My curtains are drawn and the sun is going down. Across town at the nursing home, my grandma is being fed strained vegetables and dribbling on her chin. She used to make the best green bean casserole for Thanksgiving. My parents are probably sitting in front of the TV flipping between Fox and CNN and getting into arguments with each other over how crazy the president is.

And I'm here, in my third floor apartment with the thermostat set to 70 degrees, clicking on the little circular arrow of my safari browser and hoping against hope that I'll see the numbers of upvotes explode into a glorious upward tick, boosting my spirits and my dopamine levels.

It doesn't happen. It will never happen. Because I am invisible and so is most everyone.

"Come on, you guys," I say, refreshing. "Help me out here."

I sit at my desk, tapping, tapping, tapping.

Above the Swarm

Brummler hit his lights and floored it when he saw the wall of traffic up ahead. He left his siren off.

There wasn't an emergency. He just didn't feel like waiting with all the other normies, sitting in their cars with their zombified stares. Everyone on the force did it. As long as you didn't do it too much and didn't cause any headaches for the desk jockeys, no one cared.

All four lanes were full so he sneaked over into the far left lane and then onto the shoulder between the white line and the four-foot cement wall. He kept a good 30 mph pace and his right tires hummed on the rumble strip. Cars rushed beside him, nearly at a standstill. If someone opened their driver door they would get creamed.

People's heads turned when he hurtled into their peripheral vision, and a few of them turned their wheels to the right and inched over even though there was nowhere to go.

The suburban beat was a breeze—not like the horror stories people had down in Detroit and Ypsi and up in Pontiac and Flint. Brummler mostly dealt with fender benders, petty break-ins and the occasional domestic dispute. He hunted drunks and sat in speed traps. Eighty percent of the people out here were just society's drones, working their lives away in offices towards a possible retirement and raising their kids to do the exact same thing. Almost none of them had ever been in a real fight, and as a result most were absolutely terrified of even the slightest physical pain. Their allegiance to comfort and the status quo made them the easiest sort of people to deal with.

They occasionally got entitled and snippy, especially a lot of women who were used to getting what they wanted by bitching at their husbands, but that was generally the worst of it. The real assholes—the millionaire business owners and corporate executives who thought they were the masters of the universe—those Brummler almost never had to deal with.

His job was the mushy middle of society and he liked it that way. He showed up, did his beat, put up with people's shit, cracked jokes when they were needed, got hard-assed when it was needed, wrote tickets, and mostly sat and drove around.

A lot of the guys on the force were jumpier now that the news had whipped up all this drama over cops shooting people, but that was mostly sensationalism—poorly-trained rookies or noodlebacks who panicked at the first hint of real danger. Their own damn fault. Most of the guys knew what they were doing, followed the protocols and kept themselves out of trouble. And unless you were in a notoriously shitty area, people probably weren't going to fuck with you.

Being a cop was an awful lot like being the parent of an especially dumb and reckless child. Every problem became Brummler's problem. He

didn't mind it for the most part— most people were whimpering and apologetic and easily deferential to his gun and badge—but it got old.

Once he'd been talking to an Iraq War vet at a truck stop off 53 and he'd happened to see a minivan pulling out of a parking spot with the right sliding door wide open.

The vet, whose name Brummler hadn't even gotten at that point, saw Brummler looking and turned and saw for himself.

"Why is that door open?" Brummler mumbled. He could already see how the next five minutes would play out.

There was a kid who looked about five or six crouching in a combat stance on the captain's chair, his arms out for balance and a cheeky, insubordinate grin on his face. He looked like he was trying to use the chair as a surfboard. Brummler could see the parents in the front— both overweight and flabby, the mom juggling a fat bag of McDonald's and a tray of drinks and the dad yelling, probably at the kid to sit down and close the door. They were in a hurry, not thinking.

"I could never do your job, man," said the vet. "I got my fill of that babysitting shit over in the sandbox."

Despite his attempts to get his kid to sit still, the dad didn't stop the van, and the kid lost his balance as the dad went to turn out of the parking lot, and sure enough, out he tumbled onto the asphalt.

"And there... we... go..." said Brummler, watching the kid topple out, headfirst. He smacked his head on the van's doorframe and somersaulted-- away from the wheels, fortunately.

Brummler sighed and calmly walked over, radioing in the incident like he was ordering a coffee. The kid was injured, but Brummler could tell he'd be fine as soon as he sat up and rubbed the trickle of blood on his forehead and looked at his hand in astonishment, as if it was smeared with liquid gold.

The parents were way more hysterical than the kid, slamming on the brakes and stopping traffic to come out and screech and screech at their offspring's totally minor head wound. The kid's siblings shared their brother's astonishment at the trickle of blood. It was actually kind of cute.

Brummler had spent the next hour there, as the parents insisted on calling an ambulance. He could've cited them for a couple different things involving recklessness but they were so apologetic he let them off with the proverbial warning. It wasn't their fault their kid was being a dickhead. He'd ended up missing the Tigers game that evening, all because the kid was fucking around.

Brummler smiled at the memory behind his aviators. The traffic was thinning out up ahead.

People wanted to believe they were special enough to do whatever their hearts desired while expecting everyone else to follow the rules. If they had real money they could buy their special status, but those folks were harder and harder to find nowadays. Everyone was struggling in some way, no matter what level they were on.

It was for this reason that little things like throwing on his flashers and skipping around a clog of rush hour traffic made Brummler know he'd made the right decision when he'd signed up for the Academy at the age of 22 after four years of construction.

The lines of cars finally loosened up when the freeway did a three-way split into 83 South, 338 West and 9 North. Cars revved and dodged and merged and weaved in and out with each other, everyone jockeying for their space, everyone the center of their own little universe.

They were a mindless swarm. And the only way out was to go up. Up and over.

Or, in Brummler's case, around.

Brummler saw an opening, swerved into the left lane, turned his lights off, and hit the accelerator.

Cassidy

I was seven the year that they finally took me away from my mother.

She had habits that ranged from crack to heroin. Once she tried to pimp me out to one of her dealers for a score. Thankfully, I had no idea what was going on and the guy just laughed at her. In fact, now that I'm thinking about it, he might have been the one to finally call her in.

When the cops and the child services people came, I ran out the back door. I don't have much memory of them. I wanted to get away. My mom was passed out in the other room. The apartment was filthy.

Despite it all, I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay where things were familiar. I wanted to stay with Miguel and my other friends. We'd play at the pond behind the apartment complex. We'd throw things in—a folding chair, a pumpkin, branches, sticks, rocks, whatever we could find—and watch the murky water slosh up against the swamp-mud. We'd share rides on the older kids' bikes and tear through the parked cars and brick walls. We'd just hang out under staircases and on cracked cement, having conversations about caterpillars and Marvel superheroes.

After I ran from the strange people that had just busted open my mom's door, I first went to Miguel's apartment. His family wasn't home. I pounded on the door, certain the people in cop uniforms and sunglasses were just behind me, ready snatch me with their hard fingers.

When it was obvious that Miguel wasn't there and I'd never see him again, I ran to the next place I could think of —Derek's. In hindsight, I don't know why I would've run to his place so quickly and not one of my other friends. I think it was because he lived closest to Miguel.

Derek occasionally bought weed from my mom, and he'd given me a few guitar lessons. My hands were too small for the instrument but he used to show me some things anyway. He let me play his guitars— he had an acoustic named Valerie and two electric Fenders named Cassidy and Mallory. He had a Les Paul named Haley that he wouldn't let me touch, but he showed her to me one time.

I liked him. He smelled good and his apartment was clean and smelled good and he was funny. He was handsome and in his early thirties and hippie-ish, and he always let me stay there later and watch movies from his DVD/Blu-Ray collection when my mom would forget to come get me. Then he'd walk me home once it was nine o'clock, and he'd smoke a cigarette along the way and tell me stories about hanging out with his favorite bands. I was fascinated by him. It was like he was telling me stories of about great warlords and brave knights and the Marvel heroes my friends and I would talk about.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" I'd asked him once.

"I have 2 girlfriends right now," he said. He had a really soft, gentle voice.

"What are their names?"

"Athena and Lani."

"How old are they?"

"They are 19 and 20."

"And who was your girlfriend before that?"

"Before them, there were briefly some girls named Imani and Jackie, and before them there was Cassidy and Noel, and before them there was Victoria, and before her there was Kajira, and before Kajira there was Chastity and before Chastity there was no one for a couple of months, and then there was Allegra..."

"You've had a lot of girlfriends," I said.

"I meet a lot of girls," he said.

"Are you going to marry any of them?"

"I don't think so," he said.

"But don't you want a family?"

"I have a family," he said. "A family isn't just moms and dads and their kids, you know."

"You have kids?"

"No," he said. "I don't want kids. I just mean, speaking in generalities, a family can be any group of people that loves one another, doesn't have to be moms and dads and stuff."

"What's generalities?"

"Generalities is like saying, 'the way things usually are.'"

In hindsight, it sounds odd that a man in his early thirties was that open about his love life with a seven year old, but I never felt uncomfortable around him. He never touched me at all and never made me feel strangely icky like when Mr. Carmody asked us kids if we wanted

to see his turtles and opened his apartment door for us to come in but we didn't feel right about it and ran off.

Now that I'm an adult, I can see that Derek was just a young, aimless stoner who also happened to be a decent person and could see that I was the product of a traumatic homelife. Nowadays, I'm not sure he'd feel comfortable being alone with me in his own apartment—but back then, just knowing he wouldn't do anything wrong must've been enough for him. He was just good. I could sense it then. I know it now.

I ran up to his door and pounded on it with both fists and he answered almost immediately.

"Hey, Zelda," he said. There was a cigarette between his lips.

My throat felt like overcooked meat. I was huffing and red with fear and anger. I could barely talk.

"They're going to take me," I tried to say.

He'd never shown any real affection for me before—though he was always friendly in an aloof, disinterested way. But now he squatted down and looked me in the eye. His cigarette reeked but the scent was somehow comforting.

"They're going to take me away," I tried to say again.

I couldn't get out the words. My face was very hot and getting wet. My chest felt like a freezer and my throat felt like an old rusted metal duct.

"What happened?"

I couldn't talk and so I just put my face in his shoulder and let it all pour out.

He awkwardly put a hand on my shoulder. I felt the muscles in his right arm fire as he pitched his cigarette.

"Come on," he said. "We gotta take you back home."

I cried harder.

He pried me off and looked me in the eyes. His were blue. He had long, blonde hair and a slightly darker blonde goatee. Years later when I saw Chris Hemsworth in the Thor movies, I'd think of him.

"Zelda," he said. "You have to tell me what's going on. Do I need to call the police?"

I finally was able, through my madness of sobs, to get out what was happening.

He shook his head and stood up.

"You're gonna get me in trouble if they see me with you. They're gonna have a bunch of questions, and I don't want them searching my apartment. But if you walk back over there with me, we can explain to them what's up and nothing bad will happen."

I lost my shit again, put my face in my hands.

"Hang on," he said.

He disappeared inside the apartment. A few moments later, he came out holding one of his guitars. It was a Fender Jaguar—a light blue one.

"You remember Cassidy?" he said. "You played her when I'd give you lessons. I said she liked you, you remember? Because you got a good sound out of her even though you didn't know how to play?"

I looked up at the guitar. The day was cloudy and chilly but somehow the guitar's surface was gleaming, as though the sun was out.

"Cassidy's very important to me," Derek said. "I named her after the real Cassidy, the girlfriend I had. I liked Cassidy a lot, maybe even enough to marry her."

He put her down, handed her to me. I took the guitar by the neck, and my hands were grubby and damp from rubbing all my tears away. The wood was smooth and chilly and the strings were cold. I could feel their symmetrical metal spacing pressing into my fingers. It felt good.

"I'm going to send her with you," he said. "Cassidy's going to protect you. I bought her off one of the guys in Sponge, do you remember them?"

I nodded. One of his warlord tales.

"Cassidy's been through a lot," he said. "And she's going to protect you now, wherever you go. You can take her with you. She's yours, okay? So you don't have to be scared or anything."

I didn't know what to say. But Derek pulled out a black case with a zipper and put Cassidy inside it. He handed me the case. It was heavy but I held onto it.

He held out his hand.

"Come on," he said. "We can say you came over here to get your guitar, and hopefully they'll just let you keep her. I'll talk to them. I can say that I'd promised her to you as a gift if you ever left, and you came to get her and that's why you ran off."

I finally stood up and walked with him. My legs felt like they were made out of blocks of wood. I didn't feel like me. Only my grubby hand, tucked into Derek's, felt like it was made of skin and bone.

He talked to me as we walked down the sidewalk, which was dotted with cold puddles. It had rained the night before. The cement was blotchy, both dark and light with dampness, and I watched my old shoes move as I walked. I watched Cassidy moving next to my shoes, the long end of the guitar pointed out in front of me. When I looked right down and couldn't see my hand carrying the case, it looked like Cassidy was flying along right next to me.

"You'll have to get an amp for Cassidy," said Derek. "But you can tell your new family about it and I'm sure they'll be more than happy to make it happen. I'd send a small one with you but I don't think there's room for it. There's a cord in the front pocket of her case that you can use."

At the words, 'new family', I started to get upset again. Derek lit up another cigarette and smoked it.

"Sometimes things change even when you don't want them to," he told me. "I don't really know what else to say, cause I don't know you that well, but sometimes things change. You get comfortable and then the universe sees you're comfortable and decides to change things up, cause it's gotta make you grow. You can't grow if things stay the same. But in another couple of months, you'll be comfortable again. I promise. You'll get older, and you'll get stronger, and you'll start to be able to see when things are gonna change and you can prepare for them. You get used to it."

He kind of paused, took a big drag on his cigarette. When he breathed out again the cloud of smoke engulfed his entire head and he looked like a dragon or something for a few seconds, like he was nothing but smoke and steam above his shoulders. Like some mythical, wise warlock or hero.

I heard his voice speak to me from inside the smoke.

"And now you've got Cassidy," he said. "We'll make sure the authorities let you keep her. I don't see why they wouldn't... but just stay with Cassidy, and everything will be fine. I promise."

Derek saw I was struggling to carry Cassidy's case, kind of letting it scrape against the sidewalk, and he took her from me and carried her himself. My arm was sore from holding her but I didn't say anything.

We walked along the damp sidewalk back towards my mom's building. I could see flashing lights ahead, and as I inhaled the cold air into my swollen, scorched throat, I could begin to imagine a time where the world would only be stories of heroes and warlords.

Tut-Tuts

"How the fuck did this get past everyone?"

Thaddeus Gibbons— CEO and majority stakeholder of Wonderkin Confections— tapped his fingers on the conference table. It was made of polished mahogany and ran the length of the entire room. Gibbons was very proud of it.

Gathered around the impressive mahogany conference table was his executive board of advisors. They all appeared nervous, and a lot of them were looking down at their laps. A few stared out the long, open windows to Gibbons's left, which gave view to the sterile green and grey of idyllic suburban sprawl, thirty-two stories below.

"Quit staring into your crotches," Gibbons snapped. "Someone answer me."

In his right hand Gibbons held a box of Tut-Tuts, the most popular breakfast cereal in the entire US of A. Tut-Tuts were a chocolatey explosion in your mouth. They were a mix of sugar-glazed corn puffs shaped into rings interspersed with little marshmallows that contained creamy chocolate centers. They were advertised by a trio of friendly-looking anthropomorphic marshmallows named Fluff (the leader), Stuff (the comic relief) and Gruff (the tough one).

Tut-Tuts were Wonderkin's top-selling brand. Ever since their release several years back they'd been positively ass-raping the competition. Imitations had been released and fizzled out. Gibbons was very proud of his Tut-Tuts. He liked to say they were his idea, which they were not.

There was still no answer from the table— Gibbons like to joke around that the table was just big enough to hide his impressive cock— and Gibbons thundered at his underlings.

"I want to know how the fuck something like this gets past every layer of design, every person in quality control, and the entire manufacturing apparatus without a single person saying, 'You know, maybe this isn't going to work.' So unless one of you toadies answers me as soon as I finish this sentence, I'm going to start chopping heads!"

"I have no idea, sir," said Valentina.

She was seated to his left, and as far as Gibbons was concerned she was the only person in that room worth their weight in Tut-Tuts.

"Thank you for answering me, Valentina," said Gibbons.

"I have no idea how it got through all the way to roll out," Valentine continued. "But it happened. And now the bed is made and we're going to need to put out a statement."

"I want to know who I'm firing for this."

"Sir," said Hacksey, a sycophant that Gibbons would have axed years ago if his uncle wasn't Gibbons' best golfing partner. "I hate to be the one to say this, but you were the one who suggested it."

Gibbons held up the box of Tut-Tuts and shook it. He could hear the cereal rattling around inside the plastic bag, making its delicious sugary goodness noises. It made him think of breakfast.

"How in the fuck was this my idea?" he roared at the table. He saw several of his underlings cringe at the volume of his voice. Good.

"Sir," said Valentina. "I think he's referring to the meeting last spring, when you suggested that we include more ethnic characters in our advertising line-up. You said you were worried because Fluff, Stuff and Gruff were regularly being used by alt-right trolls on social media as dog-whistles for white supremacy. You said we should counter by introducing another character with a more ethnic appearance. You specifically requested an 'authentic' and—these are your words, sir—'thuggish' representation."

Gibbons went grouchily silent.

Valentina, a black woman— not that that mattered in any way whatsoever — was right. The three mascots had been popping up in memes on /pol/ and various spaces on Reddit and Discord and elsewhere for the entire year before, all of them with their perfectly white marshmallow bodies modified to resemble KKK hoods.

But that wasn't the problem. The derelicts on the internet could have their fun with whatever the hell they wanted. No one took them seriously, even if Trump had been reelected.

The problem was something else. The problem was on the front of the box of Tut-Tuts, standing next to the three original soft, sugary mascots.

It was a chocolate marshmallow, rendered in the computer-animated commercials as a long-lost buddy of the three main mascots. He was fashioned with enormous brown lips and hoods under his eyes that gave the impression of either extreme fatigue or drug intoxication. He had a gold tooth and big bushy black eyebrows and an enormous black afro. The look on his face constituted both dutiful and oafish sincerity while simultaneously expressing an unpredictable capacity for sudden violence. He was behind and to the left of the other mascots, and he brandished a large, gleaming spoon.

His name was Ruff. Gibbons hated that name. Lazy. But Ruff had been added into the mix for a special edition roll out of Tut-Tuts, this version containing chocolate marshmallows with cream centers in addition to the regular white marshmallows with chocolate centers.

It didn't help that the marketing team in all their wisdom had decided to introduce Ruff by having him appear in a souped-up purple low rider while accompanied by a soundtrack of hamfisted gangsta rap. Riding with him in the low-rider was an entourage of stone-faced, lipsticked, aviator-wearing female corn puff 'O' Tut-Tuts that Ruff in the commercial referred to as his "O's", not once but three times.

Gibbons hadn't been able to watch the entire 30 second commercial spot. He'd shut it off after Ruff pulled out a .38 special and began threatening Fluff, Stuff and Gruff over, "lookin' at his 'O's all funny."

Millions of these boxes had been shipped around the country. The commercial had been airing nationwide since the previous Saturday.

The Washington Post was the first to break the story. It had been number one on Google News since then and social media was shitting its pants with glee.

Valentina was right. Gibbons would fuck the ass of whoever was responsible for this calamity, but only once the damage was contained.

"What do we do?" he asked her.

"It's very simple," said Valentina. "We say, 'We at Wonderkin Confections are committed to diversity and the sensitivity of all races, genders and creeds and we will correct this mistake immediately.' That's it. Then we pull everything and start over. The sales will be back to normal by next quarter. People don't just stop buying a household brand overnight because of something like this."

"And then Ruff is gone, right?"

Valentina nodded.

Gibbons looked around the table at the rest of his silent servants.

"Does anyone else have anything to add? Anyone else want to justify their existence here?"

There were no replies from the fifteen other people at the table. They all sat like beaten, terrified children.

Pussies, thought Gibbons. *This is why they'll never break nine figures.*

He turned to Valentina.

"Get to work on that statement," he said. "I want it out within the hour."

"Yes, sir," said Valentina.

"Meeting adjourned," Gibbons grumbled, slouched in his chair.

The rest of the table got up and shuffled out the door, none of them making eye contact. Valentina led the way, on a mission. Gibbons decided then and there— he was going to give her a big fat bonus check regardless of whether or not this all worked out.

He looked at the box of Tut-Tuts on the mahogany table, into the half-lidded eyes of the travesty of a marketing ploy soiling its otherwise pristine graphic interface.

My employees must really hate me, he thought. Whatever.

He tore open the box and tore open the bag. He shoved his hand into the Tut-Tuts and pulled out a fistful. He dropped them into his mouth and chewed.

They were pretty good.

The Work

I got assigned my first piece for the Californian out of nowhere.

There had been a press release sent out that morning by the PR team of wrestler-turned-actor-and-musician Robert "The Work" Dante. He was holding an emergency press conference on the third level deck of his yacht down in the harbor.

The press conference was a damage control move— his PR team was trying to fight allegations of child abuse and neglect by his ex-wife. The drama has been playing out for a few months now. The Work had been a beloved and scandal-clean pop culture figure before the New York Times broke the first story.

The statements were typical— The Work maintained that the rumors were only his ex-wife trying to defame him in the midst of a nasty divorce. He begged for privacy and of course received none.

I got the email in the morning. I'd slept in and wasn't expecting to hear from anyone. It said I had to be down at the docks in half an hour. I quickly got myself up and out of the apartment.

Apparently, the sudden announcement meant that I was the closest person the magazine had a contact with, and no one else could be there in time. So the rookie got his shot. The last line of the email was, "If you fuck this up, you will not hear from us or anyone affiliated with our publication ever again."

I sped through side streets, brushing my teeth in the car. Fortunately, I didn't kill anyone on my way there.

Upon arrival, I was first surprised at how empty the parking lot was and then at how big The Work's yacht was. It was parked among a slew of industrial-sized cargo carriers, and it rivaled them in scale. It looked like a cruise ship. I would later discover that The Work owns one of the largest privately owned ocean vessels in the world. He calls it "The Athena" but will probably change the name soon, as Athena is the name of his ex-wife.

I ran down the wharf and up the stairs. I boarded the yacht and was guided by security to the third floor of the yacht's five level deck. Apparently The Work would give the press a statement, no questions allowed, and then embark on a "much deserved" vacation to an undisclosed location.

There was a small press pool gathered, about twenty people roped in right at the top of the stairs. The Work himself was on a podium at the front, making his statement.

"I see someone's late," said The Work as I took my place at the back of the scrum, the private security guards breaking the circle they'd made to escort me. "Who are you with?"

The Work was a big guy, shaved head, Latino descent. Today he looked like an irritated genie. He wore a white t-shirt and bulky black pants.

Everyone else turned their heads to see who was late. I didn't see anyone I recognized at first. They all looked as irritated as The Work.

"The Californian," I said.

The Work threw his hands up like he was signaling a touchdown and made an expulsion of air from between his lips signifying great annoyance.

"Great," he snapped. "Now I gotta give you an exclusive to catch you up."

I thought he was kidding.

"Are you insisting?" I said, substituting "insisting" for "kidding" at the last second. Everyone else in the press pool was still glaring at me.

"Wait, someone shows up late and you give him an exclusive?" someone, I think it was Gail Barber from Vox, yelled.

"Yes, we are insisting," said a guy who must have been his manager, coming forward and gesturing to me. "I've never seen you before."

"This is my first assignment."

The Work finished his statement—his last words were "So I throw my gauntlet down on a vessel that was *named* for my love, in order to *prove* my love. Thank you." He stepped off the podium as the flurry of questions descended.

He and his manager pulled me aside and gave me the skinny—he said he had been enduring a custody battle over his 4 year old son and another celebrity friend of his wife's had bashed his fathering skills, so that morning The Work had put out a statement challenging the wife to come meet him so could have the kid decide between the two of them in public in front of the cameras. The Work was confident the kid would choose him.

I was buzzing with anticipation at my great fortune—I had prepared some questions in the car—but The Work explained all this to me tersely and then said, "Thanks for being fucking late. Real professional." before walking off without another word.

"When will the event be held?" I asked his manager.

"As Mr. Dante just stated, the date will be released via his official website once his vacation is over," said the manager. "We will be in touch."

"That really wasn't an exclusive," I said to the manager. "He just repeated his statement to me."

"Thanks again, please quote accurately," said the manager, who never introduced himself.

"Isn't he worried about what this might do to his child's psyche?" I asked. "To put this much pressure on him at such an age in public?"

"Mr. Dante loves his children," said the manager. "Now off you go."

He took me by the elbow and led me back to the press pool like a teacher with an impudent student. I felt very flustered. Less than an hour ago I'd been in bed.

The Work and his entourage disappeared, and the press had some downtime before security would escort us all off the boat.

I sat around and discussed the event with Maria from the Atlantic.

"I see you finally got the call," she said. She's friends with my girlfriend—they both went to Amherst together.

"Yeah," I said. "Wasn't expecting it. Lucky to get down here in time."

"What did he do with the exclusive?"

"It wasn't an exclusive," I said. "I think he just wanted to make sure I got the whole statement since it's the Californian."

We talked to a guy who turned out to be married to Janice Hoop—the media mogul—who said that the readership of all journalism is completely down and wouldn't ever come back up again.

"People don't read anymore," the guy said sadly. "It's really a loss."

"I think it'll come back," said Maria. "My husband says people lose interest with things and then pick them up again once they realize they're going to be gone for good."

"I've never heard that," said the guy, who also never gave us his name. He was a handsome, balding African American with a fuzzy beard. He looked to be in his mid-fifties and had a soothing, calm voice. He

said he was here with the Washington Post but wasn't doing the actual coverage. He'd just come along to "watch the fireworks".

"I still read," I told him. "I have my list of magazines that I go down every morning when I get up."

"Then you're in the minority," said the guy. "Never thought I'd say that to a white person."

"But you want to write for them," said Maria. "Would you be reading them if you weren't trying to write for them?"

"True," I said. "I think people are too busy working to read nowadays. Trying to get by."

"It is a struggle," said the man. "Everyone struggling, 'cept for people like this guy." He gestured around us at the opulent yacht. "Look at this thing. This cost more than all of us will make in our lifetimes."

He shook his head. I thought it was rich for him to be talking about struggle, given that he's married to one of the most powerful women in the business, but of course I didn't say that.

The security was taking their sweet time getting us off the yacht, and we weren't allowed to leave until they came with us. I'm not sure what the hold up was. The Work had gone below deck to his suite and was talking to his captains of security, probably giving them orders for what to do after he'd gone to sea.

I asked if there was a bathroom I could use. My body was just now catching up with my quick wake up call, and my bladder was realizing it was completely full. I called the security guys over and asked where I could go.

A short bulldog of a security guy brought me down another level to the bathroom. His gold nametag read Jones and I saw an arsenal of pepper spray, a taser, a billy club, and a Glock on his hip. He pointed to a handsome door down the hall with frosted glass and didn't say anything. He stood with his arms crossed and his eyes forward.

I was almost to the bathroom when the door flew open. I was shocked to see The Work come swaggering out. He didn't even look at me, made a quick right down another hallway and was gone.

The inside the of the bathroom was nicer than my apartment. Crystal trim, brass fixtures, marble floors and cedar molding.

Inside the small stall I discovered an enormous, unflushable shit. The turd was actually exactly what I'd expect from a protein factory like

The Work—it was the size of a child's arm and curled like said child flexing their bicep. The smell wasn't that bad, actually.

There was a moment where I thought about showering the stool of an international celebrity with my own urine, our bodily fluids making us one and the same in a way, but the thought passed and I elected to hold my piss until I got back onshore.

I did, however, pull out my phone and snap a picture.

Angel of Darkness

There were more brunettes than blondes this time, which made Ninneman happy.

Noway announced the entertainment for the evening and pointed to the doorway as an array of nubile young women (and a few young equally-nubile twink, mostly for Dupette and Keithwood) came parading out. They were all completely naked save for satin sashes that had the company's logo printed on them with a festive smiling birthday cake emoji. All of them were 19 years of age—no more, no less.

They dispersed among the executives, and the party was on.

There was a large multicolored wheel set up on the stage. Written on each of the colored wedges was a dare involving one of the naked 19 year olds. Nearly everyone partnered with a 19 year old and lined up to play. There was food and drink—only the swankiest and most expensive brands.

Dupette and Keithwood were soon over by the diamond punch fountains chatting up a tight-looking brunette twink with a bodacious ass that was just begging to be railed. Dupette and Keithwood were always trying to outdo one another.

One of the blondes came over and sat on Ninneman's lap and asked him what he did. He said he was in charge of an engineering division and left it at that—these college kids wouldn't ever understand what it was he actually did.

(Truthfully, he sat in his office and went on Reddit and obsessively checked his stocks and bank accounts, but he'd never admit that to any of these lesser people)

The blonde told him she wanted to see Aruba and Ninneman said he'd just have to show her later that night, then. He'd call some numbers and have the jet ready to fly within an hour—a lot of his co-workers were jealous of that time frame.

"Once we're there I can show you the Serenity," he said.

"What's that?"

"My yacht. 300 footer. You'll love it. Due Lipa rented it from me for one of her videos."

"Oh my God," said the blonde, holding out a hand and touching him on the chest. Her nipples were perfect and Ninneman wanted very much to lick them. "I love Firefly!"

He grinned, showing lots of expensive dental work, and nodded. He'd known she would love that. These young zoomers just loved their retro nostalgic shit, especially if they came from the Before Time when the Internet was a novelty and regular people could afford houses.

"My daughter loves it too," said Ninneman. "She's the one who named it."

"How old's your daughter?"

"She's in her mid-twenties. She's at U of M getting her master's in pharmacology."

"Wow," said the blonde. "I'd like to get my degree in education or social work but I can't decide where to go yet."

"You'll figure it out," said Ninneman, squeezing her ass.

He was having a blast and considering going to spin the wheel until he looked over and saw Noway with the Angel of Darkness.

She was absolutely stunning—just enough innocence to give the sullen look on her face an irresistible, barely-concealed naughtiness. Her lips were bowed, her eyes dark and melancholy, her cheeks tastefully freckled and her hair lank and straight. She sat next to Noway with terrible posture, his arm draped around her rounded shoulders. She was adorable. Jenna Ortega and Selena Gomez with Sydney Sweeney's chest and Zendaya's attitude.

All of a sudden the blonde on his lap seemed bland and boring. Ninneman hadn't even bothered to ask her name.

"Sorry, I have to go," he said, gently removing the blonde as she babbled on about why she wanted to work with people for a living and how much she enjoyed helping them.

The blonde wasn't upset at all, chirping, "Oh, okay, bye then!" and scooching right over to the next table, taking a seat on Smellings' lap. Smellings' accepted her with open arms, kissing her on her cheek and cooing, "Well, whadda we have here...?"

Ninneman walked right over to Noway and his lovely young find.

Last year the company had a naked 18 year old party for their 18th birthday. Ninneman had gotten shit-faced on thousand- dollar a bottle wine and fingered a thick little redhead in front of the CEO. He'd played Spin the Wheel and licked chocolate and peanut butter and cocaine out of her armpits, navel, and buttcrack. Later that night he creampie'd her on one of the meeting tables. Then he'd taken her to Rome.

The year before there had been naked 17 year olds, but only the higher level execs (Ninneman included) were invited to that one. There had apparently been ones with younger teens in the years prior, but, to Ninneman's infinite consternation, he wasn't invited to those.

This year was going just fine so far, though.

"Hey," he said to Noway when he'd made it across the room. "I think your wife is looking for you."

"Oh, fuck me," said Noway, rolling his eyes. "Take care of this little troublemaker while I'm gone, will you?"

"That's why I came over here," said Ninneman, looking right down at the Angel of Darkness and locking eyes with her. She regarded him with her sullen expression and he felt the beginnings of a raging erection stir in his bowels. He felt it in his gut, in his fucking soul.

"So," he said, sitting right down and pulling her close. "Where do you want to go?"

The Angel of Darkness rolled her eyes, in thought or in derision Ninneman couldn't tell. He had a pleasant buzz going, and he wasn't going to let anyone harsh it, by God.

"Puerto Rico," she said finally, jumping right into the game with him, getting it, sharp as a pin. "Haven't been to Puerto Rico yet."

"Puerto Rico?" he said. "Pfft."

With his lip sputtering scoff, he saw a small gob of his saliva sail through the air and land smartly in the center of a half-full cocktail glass stained with purple lipstick.

He pretended he hadn't noticed and kept talking.

"With all the hurricanes? You don't want to be anywhere near the gulf right now."

"I don't?"

"No, but you know what's really good?"

"What?"

"Iceland. Most peaceful place you've ever been. Like another planet. I could take you there tonight. We could be wheels up at midnight."

He traced a finger along her collarbone. She itched the spot like she was getting rid of a mosquito.

"Oh, really," she said.

"Yeah, and when we're there I'll take you out on the Enterprise."

"The Enterprise?"

"My yacht. It's a 400 footer, you'll love it. MrBeast rented it for his spring break last year."

"I was on a 500 footer last week," said the Angel of Darkness. "I'm not really interested in yachts."

"Oh, well, I can totally understand," said Ninneman. "It's not for everyone."

He looked around. Noway was gone. He'd kept his word.

Ninneman and Noway had an arrangement. Ninneman had done Noway a solid the previous year, taking the hit the previous fall when Noway's wife had nearly discovered him with one of his mistresses— one he hadn't told her about. Ninneman had stepped in and taken responsibility for why the 22 year old had been at their getaway cabin, and Noway had declared his undying allegiance to Ninneman's well-being, a true Godfather moment.

"Next time we have a party, you know I always get the pick of the litter," Noway had told him.

"Right," said Ninneman. He'd watched Noway waltz off with some of the most prime pussy a tech bro could buy over the years. He was green with envy.

"Next time, just come up to me and say, 'Your wife is calling,'" Noway had said. "And she's all yours."

"This is why I'll never get married," Ninneman had told him. "Why would I trade in all these pretty fresh faces for one that's just going to dry out over the years, and bleed me dry while she's at it?"

"You'll settle down sometime," said Noway. "When the time is right and when you find someone who'll appreciate the arrangement for what it is. It's good for your career, good for politics. You'll always be able to get your pleasure wherever you want. That's why everyone wants to be us."

Back in the present, Ninneman squeezed the Angel of Darkness's shoulder and beamed down at her.

"Well, we could just go on an adventure, then," he said. "Come with me to Iceland right now and I'll show you the time of your life. I'll show

you the volcanic rock. It's seriously the most beautiful thing. We'll skateboard through the hills like Ben Stiller in that one movie."

The Angel of Darkness shrugged.

"I was actually in Iceland a year ago—Elon took me and a bunch of my sorority sisters there for his birthday..."

Ninneman's lip involuntarily curled at the name "Elon". The guy's talents were as fake as his hairline. He talked a big game but other than that he was dogshit. Barely above Jobs level of skill when it came to actual coding. And after everything he'd done with the Trump administration, no one knew what the fuck was really going on with him anymore. The guy was doing too much.

"And come to think of it, Leo took me there when I was 16, too," said the Angel of Darkness, still looking bored. Ninneman wondered why the fuck she was even here, and he also wanted to be pelvis-deep in her as soon as possible. Her forced apathy and pouty face were beyond enticing.

I'd be eskimo brothers with Musk and DiCaprio, thought Ninneman. He couldn't help but grin. That was way better than being eskimo brothers with Zach Braff and Dane Cook, which he already was.

"We can do anything you like," he said. "Where haven't you been yet?"

The Angel of Darkness thought about it. Ninneman couldn't help but stare at her body. Her breasts were worthy of Michelangelo. Ninneman licked his lips.

"Antarctica," she said after a minute, looking up at him with her sullen dark eyes.

He stroked her hair and laughed. Her expression remained the same, her eyes like obsidian jewels. He wondered what ethnicity she was—she was olive skinned but had a typical Midwestern American accent. Greek descent, perhaps? Maybe a light-skinned third generation Middle Eastern? But her freckles! Did Greeks or Arabs get freckles? Maybe she was Italian...

"Yeah," she said. "I've never been there, and no one ever suggests it."

He smiled warmly.

"I've never been there either," he said. "But we have to go now."

The Angel of Darkness nodded and sipped her wine.

"Cool."

"I can make arrangements tonight but for something like that I don't think we could leave right away. So if you want we could go to Argentina and wait for the word there? I'll show you Eva Peron's tomb. Maybe get a peek inside."

The Angel of Darkness shrugged.

"Sure, that sounds good, I guess."

Ninneman put his arms around her and kissed her cheek. She didn't look at him.

"It's settled, then," he said, out loud.

Ninneman smiled to himself and looked around at all the streamers and cups and balloons strewn everywhere. The place was filled with middle-aged and thirtysomething guys in half-undone button-up shirts cavorting with naked 19 year olds, most of them female.

There were a few girls dancing with streamers for the CEO and a group of his cronies over by the spinning wheel. The blonde from before was now balanced on Smellings' knee with her hand down Smellings' pants, massaging his balls. The girls around him twirled and tossed the yellow and red streamers every which way, draping them over their hard nipples and running them through their legs. Noway was gone.

"What is your name anyway?" Ninneman asked the Angel of Darkness.

"Abby."

"Nice to meet you, Abby. I'm Joel."

"Hi, Joel."

"So yeah, Antarctica. You know, it's going to be changing quite a bit in the next few decades, so might as well get a look at it now. If you want, on the way back I could show you my emergency air strip and farm in New Zealand."

"Yeah, definitely," said Abby. She sipped more wine.

Ninneman squeezed her shoulder and pulled her in. She leaned against him like he was a wall.

"Happy birthday to us," Ninneman thought.

Misogynistic Violence

I walked out of the theater quite satisfied with the reaction.

Groans, boos, hisses, cries, screams, shrieks, every vocalized manner of a strong emotional response. Disgust and anger and fear.

This is why I do what I do.

And what's that?

I make movies. None you've heard of. Til now anyway.

Today I released an indie movie that includes an extraordinarily graphic scene involving the murder of a woman.

Essentially, this is the set up—the movie follows this cam girl who becomes a prostitute. She goes on a journey of self-discovery across the nation, finds love, loses it, gets it back again, does all the romantic and touching shit that a movie about a woman needs to do in order for it to appeal to its target demographic.

At the end, the world finally treats her as the special, unique being she's always seen herself as and all is well. She doesn't have to sell her pussy anymore, and she finds a nice beta male to settle down with, and they watch the sunset entangled in each other's arms.

Then, at the very end, she's brutally murdered by one of her former simps from the camming site. He tracks her to her apartment in San Jose after she's settled down and beats her to death while the beta guy is at work. The reasons why are apparent in the film but I won't go into them here. They involve all the usual issues—jealousy, bad mental health, etc.

When the screen went black, there was silence at first, everyone going quiet as they expected her to wake up in the hospital or something.

When my name came up as the director and the credits started rolling, that's when they understood it was really over, and they started to react. It was glorious, I tell you.

The scene took three days to film. The actress is this little sprightly thing—built like a bird and very pretty in a Natalie Wood kind of way. The actor is a bald bruiser who kind of looks like a cross between Paul Giamatti and John Cena, and he used to work construction before he started his c-level acting career. His arms are three times the width of hers.

The guy is waiting for her when she comes out of her bedroom to make breakfast. Like I mentioned before, her current squeeze has left for work in Silicon Valley. She sees the intruder, freezes. The audience probably expected the movie to end after the last scene, her falling asleep in her "right guy" lover's arms.

He smiles at her.

"You already know me," he says.

She doesn't say anything. All cornered prey have the same expression on their face, regardless of species. The actress did a great job with it.

He charges and starts on her. It's not poetic.

The blows are meaty and weighted. You hear her ribs crack and cave in like a wet bundle of sticks. You hear her skull smash. Her limbs snap. The actress made the most beautiful noises. Helpless groaning cut off by his fists. Unattractive noises, like a cow giving birth or something, but at the same time there's an ecstasy to them, a release. The character knows it's over. He doesn't just murder her—he ravages her. And the camera doesn't cut away.

But the real piece de resistance is where he starts ripping her hair out. He kind of feels it after he's reduced her to a motionless pulp, runs it through his fingers delicately. Then he grips it and takes a huge chunk of it and just starts tearing. You hear it come out, like grass getting pulled up by the roots. You hear parts of her scalp come away. The sound design team did a bang-up job on that.

The actors really knocked it out of the park—I prepped with them on this specific scene before I did anything else. And the crew only knew of it as a pick-up shoot that would come at the end of production. Except for me and the two leads, everyone in production assumed that the movie would end with that sunset scene.

The beating scene lasts ten minutes. Ten minutes of this guy slamming his fists down on this small girl's body and face. He chokes her for two of the ten minutes. I heard the actor had a nervous breakdown some time after. Poor guy.

The female actress thought it was disturbing, but that was a good thing—the controversy would definitely elevate her career to the next level. She's a nice girl, just looking to get ahead like everyone else. She kept asking me if I really wanted to do this. I kept telling her I knew what I was doing and that she should trust me.

I haven't spoken to either of the actors since we filmed. They didn't even come to the premiere today. They'll take the publicity but not the responsibility. Whatever. I wish them the best.

I don't think I'll make another movie after this—and a lot of people probably won't want me to anyway—but I can already tell I'm finally going to be famous. The reviews are already going viral. X's got a hashtag trending. Hilarious, really—they could've just ignored this and

no one would've known about it but they have to trumpet their outrage. More people will be drawn in and soon the movie will be a household name.

They'll call it gratuitous, distasteful, pornographic, uncultured, disrespectful to women (and men, too) who've actually had something like this happen to them.

They're all correct. That was the point.

The publicity will attract business looking to capitalize on it. The suits will come for me, maybe offer me a film for some intellectual property with a built-in audience. Maybe they won't. If they do, I'll turn them all down. I've made my point.

As I walk out of the theater people are staring and glaring and calling me a bitch and a cunt and an enabler and everything else.

Some of the more sensitive audience members are barfing into their popcorn bags or running for the trash cans. There are a lot of wet faces, hands over mouths and eyes squeezed shut.

Triggered.

I smile to myself.

I don't know what I'm going to do next, and that's awesome.

Out & Gone

Wes Slade knew it was time to make the phone call when they forgot to fix his goddamn in-ears for the third time in a row. They'd had a week to fix them, and they hadn't.

The in-ears didn't work in Philly, they didn't work in Baltimore, and now they didn't work in Cleveland. Scratchy noises whenever he'd sing too loud or go for a high note. As a result, his performances were stunted, and the crowds knew it.

The Cleveland show had been a clusterfuck all around, everything going wrong. Heiney kept missing the fucking beat, Jonesy was fucking around with his solos again, and Reese barely even looked like he wanted to be there. It wasn't worth it anymore. The crowd didn't care. They just stared up at Wes, begging him with their eyes to remind them of when they were younger. Their applause was muted. Their actual cheers were few. The wild noises of his youth had been numbed into middle-aged nothing.

At one point, they had started to play their biggest hit and the crowd barely registered it. Even five years ago, the intro to the song would've elicited delight and excitement. Now, they just kept watching.

"Are you even out there?" Wes had snapped. He'd immediately regretted it. This wasn't their fault. They just wanted him to make them happy for an hour or so. Some of the people in the front row looked at him like scolded puppies and Wes felt horrid pangs of guilt. He finished the set and stormed offstage without waving.

Later, he sat in his hotel room with his acoustic guitar on the chair next to him. He mulled it over one final time.

He'd be leaving behind the life he'd built for himself. Forever. His wife, his kids. But they'd be set. He'd bought them a multi-million dollar home, and they'd have all his money to live on.

He would be an ordinary person again, for the first time since his band's second album broke the mainstream in the early 90's.

Ordinary people didn't know what they had going for them. Fame and fortune had its obvious perks, but there was always a trade off. And Wes missed what he'd traded.

The program was called Out & Gone. It was like witness protection. You got the phone number once your net worth stayed above a certain threshold for a certain number of years. An escape hatch for the isolation tank that was fame and fortune.

He'd be dead, essentially. Everyone would consider the legendary Wesley Slade dead.

He'd first heard of Out & Gone at a party some fifteen years ago. An executive at his record company told him about it. The executive was a

stereotypical cokehead d-bag that everyone called The Freeze for some fucking reason.

Wes had made an off-hand comment about wanting to eventually get out of the lifestyle.

"Too bad you can't get un-famous," he'd said.

The Freeze had grinned, finger sliding thoughtfully on his whiskey glass.

"There's a way," he'd said.

He'd taken Wes aside and explained everything to him. You could even get plastic surgery, and it wouldn't take much. Even a little procedure would do the trick. Look at Jennifer Grey.

Wes had accepted the phone number, half of him believing he was getting punk'd.

In truth, he didn't really mind being famous. The attention and amenities aside, most people that wanted to meet him were considerate enough. The occasionally psycho or rude grease monkey was more than outnumbered by the polite, adoring, fawning types.

But after tonight, after the past year or so, he'd started thinking about that phone number. And it wouldn't go away.

"Maybe I'll go to Canada," Wes thought. "Way up north somewhere. Or Europe, deep in the Alps. Or Australia, out in the bush. New Zealand is really popular nowadays, too. Just somewhere where I'm not recognized, where people don't want my attention anymore. I want a quiet life, a farming life. I'll learn how to farm, like Pap Pap did when I was a kid. Potatoes or corn or something. Nice, honest living. Great way to spend the last couple decades of my life."

He'd get a new name, new identity, new look, everything. A complete and total restart, all at the age of 47. Half his life left to enjoy, most likely.

Yeah. It was time.

Wes held his phone, dialed the number, took a deep breath. There was no going back now.

It rang twice, then a voice answered.

"Hello?"

"This is Wes Slade, and I'd like to exercise my Out and Gone privileges, please."

"Stand by," said the voice.

There was a pause and Wes, for a second, reconsidered his decision. But then he remembered the roadies smoking after the show and the utter contempt on their faces as he'd attempted to ask why the hell his in-ears were still not working. He'd asked politely for them to be fixed at the last two stops. Insecure bastards. Let them be jealous of him. It was their problem.

The line clicked as the person on the other end returned.

"Wes Slade. Love your work. Had enough, eh?"

"Yeah," said Wes. "I'm ready."

"How would you like to execute our exit plan?"

"Whatever's easiest for you, man," said Wes, rubbing his forehead. He could feel a headache coming on. He had pills for them but he was fucking sick of pills. He knew what the real problem was—stress. Get rid of the stress, get rid of the headaches.

"I'm assuming you want it done tonight?"

"Yeah, man, as soon as possible."

"Well, you have a history of substance abuse and depression. Suicide would be the easiest way for me. Are you comfortable with your loved ones living the rest of their lives thinking you took your own?"

"Yeah," said Wes without hesitation. "They're strong. They're wealthy. They'll be just fine."

In truth, he'd never loved his wife. His kids gave him that special feeling that came with fatherhood, but he craved his freedom more. They barely saw him as it was. He'd toured so much, the kids wouldn't ever really know him anyway. And they'd resent it. Part of him ached, but it wasn't enough for him to hang up.

"Suicide it is then. It'll most likely be hanging, since I'm assuming you don't travel with weapons."

"No," said Wes. "But I don't need to know details, man. Just make it happen."

"Whatever you want, Mr. Slade. I'll be picking you up in a green minivan behind the casino in exactly half an hour. If you are late, or you change your mind, never call this number again."

"K," said Wes.

They hung up.

Wes looked around the hotel room. He didn't feel very different, but his heart was beating a little faster.

It was so simple. All from dialing a phone number. Such a monumental change seemed like it would require more action, something more.

20 years of mega success, platinum albums, multiple awards and all the trappings that came with it. A trophy wife and gifted children acquired after years and years of drunken debauchery on the road, more women and girls and drugs and drink than Wes could remember, literally.

And all of it added up to this— him in his hotel room with his pills and his acoustic and a small bag of clothes that he took with him when he toured. Alone.

He thought of the better years, when he'd been on the upswing, his band getting signed and then that unmistakable swell of momentum, the wave of demand sweeping them up on a beautiful crest of commercial bliss and cultural dominance. And now here he was, faded and middle aged and getting pissed off because the roadies wouldn't do their fucking jobs.

He sighed. It was time to go.

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The next morning, a man stepped off a plane at Wellington airport and inhaled the winter breeze. He smiled for the first time in years. His head was shaved. He wore normal, nondescript clothes with sunglasses and a baseball cap. He carried a small bag.

Inside the terminal, numerous people were on their phones and gathered around TVs.

"Did you hear the guy from Grey Shemps died?" someone asked someone else as he passed. "Hung himself in his hotel room."

The man looked up at the nearest TV. Indeed, there was a picture of the old him— long, greasy hair and a goatee, dressed like a grunge circus act. Beneath his picture was a set of dates.

Wesley Slade, 1970- 2017. The headline read, "Grey Shemps rocker found dead of apparent suicide"

"Yeah, it's a shame," said the man. "But you know what?"

The two men turned around, surprised they'd been addressed by this stranger.

There was absolutely no recognition on their faces. That hadn't happened in years and years. For the first time since he was a young man, Wes Slade was just a guy. A free, unattached, unencumbered guy.

"What?" they asked.

Wes couldn't help but smile as he thought of the years ahead, completely unplanned and uncharted.

"It's good to be alive."

**In memory of Chester Bennington and Chris Cornell*

She woke up in the backseat of his car.

The last thing she remembered was asking him, "You know we're closing, right?"

He was driving, hunched over the wheel. She could see sweat on his upper lip. She tried to get up and couldn't. She looked at her wrists and saw she was handcuffed to the seatbelt clicker. She tugged on it. It wouldn't give.

He'd knocked her out cold, that much was apparent. Her head ached, and the world was fuzzy. Her mouth felt like it was lined with cotton. Her jaw was so sore she could barely move it.

"You hurt my feelings," the guy mumbled. His voice was hollow-sounding over the noise of the freeway.

"I'm sorry," she said immediately.

She wasn't sorry. She was repulsed by him. But she was also afraid.

"No, you're not," he said. "You're just scared. And I overreacted and now I've gotten us both into this mess."

They rode for a bit longer, and she forced herself to stay calm.

It was dark out. Cold. She watched lights go by. The handcuffs kept her low to the seat, away from the windows. She couldn't see where they were.

"I'm sorry," the man said. "I'm sorry I had to do this. I overreacted."

She didn't say anything. She was too scared. She couldn't decide if she wanted to scream or try to kick out the windows. She didn't know if she could. He'd taken her shoes. She was barefoot.

Finally, she had to say something.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Home."

She swallowed.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"I don't want to think about that right now," he said.

He stopped at a stoplight. He turned around and leaned back toward her. She pulled away, trying to sink into the seat itself. In his hand was a black t-shirt. It stank of B.O.

"Lean forward," he said "Now that you're awake I gotta do this."

She obeyed him, shutting her eyes, fear racing through her veins, freezing. He slipped the shirt over her head and she gagged on the smell of his dried sweat.

"Sorry," he said again. "About the smell. That's my workout shirt. It's all I have in here. I didn't plan for the night to go like this. All I wanted was..."

He trailed off.

"...all I wanted was a can of Pringles."

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"You're all over the Internet," the guy said. "I'm in deep water now."

"You can just let me go," she told him. "At any point. I'm not going to tell on you."

The guy snorted. He was ugly. He was badly dressed. He was alone.

"I'll run," she said. "I'll find someone, I'll tell everyone I got drunk and passed out and woke up in the woods and I was lost. I swear I won't tell anyone about you, please."

"Don't beg," the guy said. "It's depressing."

He paused.

"I'm so ashamed to see a pretty young girl like you is afraid of me. I'm saying exactly what I mean from here on out. I wish I'd done that my whole life. Maybe I'd of been different."

He looked at her for a moment with his sad eyes. The eyes of someone who is alone and knows it.

"All women have always been afraid of me. I don't know why. Before this, I never did anything bad to anyone."

She'd been down here at least three days. He'd fed her, brought her bowls of homemade chicken soup that he watched her eat. When she tried to smash the bowl over his head he stopped bringing her soup and instead brought her soft ham and cheese sandwiches. She drank water from a hose attached to the faucet in the laundry sink.

Her wrists ached and her butt ached and her neck ached and her jaw REALLY ached where he'd punched her. Her mood alternated from furious (when she thrashed about and tried to break the chains he'd locked around her, cutting her wrists and ankles raw) to horrified panic (in which she wondered if she was even real anymore) to finally a deep well of sadness (where she sobbed with her face against the cement floor, sobbing until she felt like a shriveled, wet dishrag).

She knew he had a gun. It was a shotgun. She hadn't seen it since the last time he'd taken her to the bathroom. He just carried it, never outright threatened her. He told her he'd only use it if he had to, but he may have just been trying to be nice. He was always trying to be nice.

There was no window in the bathroom. There were no windows she'd seen in the entire basement.

"They're all calling you, 'Poor thing'" he said, standing in the doorway, the light from the basement hallway turning him into a silhouette. "Sharing your picture. Thousands of shares. You're really popular."

He paused again.

"It's cause you're pretty. If you were ugly or fat they wouldn't care as much."

"My family will pay to get me out," she said. "Whatever you want. You haven't touched me. You haven't hurt me other than when you knocked me out. You said yourself that you didn't mean for this to happen. You can end it, you can end it right now, the right way..."

He didn't say anything, just shook his head and closed the door.

"Wait," she cried. "Wait!"

She was angry at herself and at him. She wondered what her family was saying, how they were looking for her. She wondered what her boyfriend was doing, how he was feeling. She wondered if anyone had fed her cat.

She could hear him as his footsteps receded upstairs and she could hear him in the room above her.

=====

"You were right to despise me," he said, standing in the door again. "I am not worthy of love. I've known that my whole life. I'm sorry I took it out on you. Really. I overreacted."

It was another few days later. He had brought her food and blankets over the last few days, said nothing as he dropped them off. Every time she asked him questions, he didn't answer. She slept on a dirty rug with the clean blankets wrapped around her and hoped she wouldn't get her period.

"I just want to go home," she said to him. "I don't hate you, I just want to go home."

"I know," he said. "I can't believe this is real."

He was holding the shotgun, but it was pointed at the floor.

"I might let you. I don't know yet. But you have to listen to me first."

He grabbed a rusty old folding chair next to the door. He opened it and sat in it, with the shotgun across his lap. Her eyes never left the shotgun, but she listened to him.

"When I came into the store the other night, I didn't know you," he said. "I just wanted a little snack on my way home from work. I worked twelve hours that day. You ever work twelve hours straight? Probably not. I hated my job. I say 'hated' cause I quit it the other day. Just stopped going in. No big loss. For anyone."

She remembered him. The door had clinked. She had been ready to go home. Then he'd come in, just at closing time.

"Then I see you behind the counter," he said. "Pretty young thing, but you can't help that. I wasn't mean to you. I was polite. All I wanted was some Pringles. And you could've been somewhat nice to me, and you could've just stomached my presence for the five minutes it would've taken to get me my Pringles, and it would've been fine, but you had to make that mean little comment."

She didn't remember what she'd said anymore. It was something innocuous. Whatever had pissed him off, it hadn't been her words, but the way she'd said them. The memory was knocked out of her.

She didn't care about this guy at all, no matter what he said. He was invisible to her. She cared about herself, like any normal person.

"I hit you," he said. "I was tired, already pissed off... I didn't even realize I'd done it until you were on the floor, bleeding and unconscious. I thought I'd killed you. I panicked. I've literally never hit anyone in my life before. Especially not a woman. A young woman. An attractive young woman. It wasn't even a decision. It just

happened. I should've just left you there. But I didn't. I took you with me."

She stared at the shotgun, at the cold black hole at the end of its barrel. He kept talking.

"There were cameras, of course. There are cameras everywhere. They saw me doing it, they had to, but they haven't found me yet. I haven't slept in a week. I imagine you haven't either. But they will find me. Eventually. Are you listening to any of this?"

She didn't say anything.

"I'm alone," he said. "I'm alone in this world. And you are not. You are young and beautiful and female. You have a boyfriend. Your family is well off. You have everything I never had. You have something that everyone wants—beauty. And I have nothing that anyone wants. And that's just how it is."

Tears were beginning to spill down his ugly face.

"All I want out of this, I guess, is for you to see me," he said. "For someone. To see me. For a moment. I want you to recognize what you have and respect it, and I want you to see that I don't have it and to imagine what it must be like to be me... I know this is asking a lot... you probably think I'm crazy. And now my life is over, because for one second I let my frustration get the best of me and I punched you right in your pretty mouth."

He stood up. She held her breath.

"But that's over now."

He pointed the shotgun at her. He cocked it.

"I just want to go home," she said, over and over. "I don't hate you. I just want to go home."

He kept pointing the gun at her. His cheeks were very wet.

The moments passed and nothing happened.

"I can't do it," he finally said, lowering the shotgun.

He looked at her and she looked at him for a long time.

"You're beautiful," he said. "Even after being locked in a basement for a week, you could walk into a bar and get any man you want."

He shrugged. He seemed so sad. She hated him.

"I guess that's that then," he said. "Looks like my killing spree will be short. I'll be going for a grand total of one. I've had enough. My time is over. No point in going on now."

He bent down. She could smell him. She wondered if anyone had ever kissed that hideous face.

He spoke to her, his lips an inch away from hers.

"I have a soul," he said. "I just want you to know that. I have a soul."

He took off her chains but kept her handcuffed. Her wrists felt cold. Her clothes were disgusting. She hadn't showered since the morning before work. She didn't know how long she'd been gone. Time didn't pass normally in the basement.

He took her upstairs. She saw the modest house he lived in. She saw his life. She saw his dirty kitchen with one chair at a small table. She saw his unkempt living room with a couch and a dark TV.

He let her out the front door.

The last thing he did was take off her handcuffs.

"Run," he said, shoving her gently.

She didn't know where to go first, so she started walking. Her feet were bare and they were numb in the snow before long, but she kept moving.

She didn't look back. It was going to be all right. Her breath was so hot it was cold. Her feet felt like they were on fire.

She made it to the corner and flagged down the first car she saw. It slid to a halt.

I'll be home in time for Christmas, she thought.

She shut the car door. The car was wonderfully warm, heat pumped in through roaring vents in the front. Her feet felt like blocks of wood attached to her shins.

The woman in the front seat gave her a jacket to warm up and said, "Oh my God, you're the girl from the news."

"Holy moly," said the man behind the steering wheel. "She *is* the girl from the news! Imagine that! In *my* truck!"

"You poor thing," said the woman. "You must be terrified. We'll take you right to the police station."

She looked at the two of them—an aging couple nearing retirement, probably with children and grandchildren of their own.

"I just want to go home," she told them.

The Fastreader

The Fastreader came into Wixom Station roughly twice a week. Hope really saw him for the first time on a Tuesday.

He always had a book with him. The first time it was NK Jemisin. Then David Foster Wallace. Then Danger Slater. Then Lynne Rae Perkins. Then The Lodger. Then Dostoevsky. Then a bunch of the Animorphs books. Then Hope lost track of them.

He must be a fast reader, thought Hope. The description stuck. It gelled into one word in Hope's mind.

He always ordered the same thing – the grilled salmon with a side of rice. It came with breadsticks and a side salad. He always got raspberry vinaigrette.

He was always seated in Hope's section, usually against the windows. Always on weeknights, usually between 5:30 and 7.

He looked like he was in his late twenties. He wasn't particularly handsome but he wasn't ugly either. He always wore t-shirts and jeans and sometimes a hoodie. He didn't have a ring on his finger. He didn't seem like he was stepping out for the evening to get away from a significant other. He seemed like a regular single guy taking a walk to get his dinner. He probably lived in the apartments down the road.

He ate his salad with his fingers, picking up the lettuce and croutons and cucumbers one by one and dipping them in the ramekin of raspberry vinaigrette. The first time Hope noticed this, it irritated her.

The other girls were noticing him, too. For some reason he always got put in Hope's section.

"Is he cute?" Mandy asked Hope one day. "I can't decide."

"If you can't decide then the answer is probably no," said Hope. "He looks cute at first but the closer you get to him the more you see that he isn't really that attractive. He's got moles on his face and his face is kind of shaped weird, and his eyes are shaped weird, and his hair is really stupid. And his nose is too big. And his beard isn't full enough. And he never smiles, like ever. And his eyes are shaped weird."

"Yeah, you said that already."

"And he eats his salad with his fingers. Have you noticed that?"

"No. He does?"

"He does. It's like, 'Use your fork!'"

"I think his beard looks fine."

"I don't. It's not full enough. It's a pube beard."

"...yeah, I guess."

"Did you know that they just discovered that tons of bacteria live in men's beards? It's like, a whole ecosystem."

"Gross. You know what else?"

"What?"

"We just failed the Bechdel test."

The next time the Fastreader came in, Hope watched him. He was indeed kind of ugly – the more you looked at him the more you noticed all the little imperfections – but maybe that was true of most people.

Hope had read somewhere that people did an experiment where they were told to stare into a mirror for a certain amount of time. No one could do it for more than a few minutes tops, regardless of how attractive they were. They said they saw a monster or something worse.

One day The Fastreader came in and got seated in Tina's section instead of Hope's and despite all her attempts to the contrary, Hope kept looking at him every time she went to check on her tables. She would sneak glances on her way out and way in to the kitchen. He was reading Stoner by John Williams.

He read fast, turning pages quickly.

He must be really smart, thought Hope. Or maybe he's one of those people who fakes reading because he wants people to think he's smart.

Even though his eyes had this weird shape to them, they were this striking, shockingly electric blue. Hope could see it even from across the room. And his voice was deep – resonant and deep.

Shut up, she told herself.

One of the only things he'd ever said to her other than, "Hey."

"Thanks." and "I'll have..." had been to compliment the breadsticks they served with every meal. The bread was just heated flat little breadsticks painted with some melted butter substance. Hope didn't even know where they bought them from. But the guy loved those warm little buttery breadsticks.

"These are really good," he'd told her with his mouth full when she came to refill his water. "Like, ridiculously good."

"I'm glad you like them," was all she'd said.

Occasionally he got wine. He had wine today. White wine. Chilled. Hope heard him order with Tina. He got the salmon again. A salad with the fucking raspberry vinaigrette that he would eat with his fingers, picking up each leaf and cucumber slice and dipping it in the dressing and popping it into his mouth like popcorn or something. God, that was annoying and Hope had no idea why. His fork was just sitting there, clean and useless until the salmon came.

Hope wondered what he did for a living. Maybe he was a professor. Maybe he worked in a library or a book store. It had to be something with books. How could someone read that much and not do something with book for a living? But then —

What the fuck? thought Hope. Why can't I stop thinking about him?

You have a crush on him.

No, I don't.

Yeah, you totally do.

But he's not even in shape. He's got, like, flab. He never talks. He's so boring.

I know. But you're crushing on him. Just admit it.

No. His eyes are shaped weird.

She missed work for a couple days due to a mishap involving a pierced septum. The guy hit something in her nose that was complicated-sounding and started with a K. It was the following week before she could show her face in public again.

He'll probably be here today, getting his fucking salmon, Hope thought upon walking in. It was a Tuesday.

She found herself worrying if he'd notice her nose was fucked up and had bled intermittently for several hours and scabbed over so hideously that she'd sobbed herself to sleep that night, convinced she was permanently deformed. It looked fine now — the injury was mostly internal anyway — but she was worried people would notice. Not just the Fastreader, she told herself, but people.

But the Fastreader didn't come in that day. Or the day after that. He didn't come in that week at all. It was the longest Hope had gone without seeing him since he'd first started coming in.

Maybe he's on vacation, Hope thought. Maybe he injured himself. Where was he?

Hope's mind wheeled with possibilities.

Okay, yeah, I have a crush on him, she admitted to herself. I can't stop thinking about him. I don't know fucking why. It just happened.

But he's not conventionally attractive and kind of weird.

I know. But if he comes in again I'll try to strike up a conversation, even if he's not in my section, and I'll see if he gets the hint. Just see what happens.

I wonder what his name is.

Hope prepared herself for this scenario. Every day she went in telling herself this was what she'd do if he showed up.

But a week went by. Then another. Then another. And the Fastreader never came in.

Hope never saw The Fastreader again. But sometimes she'd see a lone man in a hoodie reading by a window, and her mind would return to their brief time together, and she'd start to wonder where he was, how he was, and what he was reading.

Ms. Swan

"Hello?"

"Hello! Is this Mr. Hobbs?"

"It is."

"I want you to fuck me with your big penis!"

The voice spoke in an exaggerated Asian accent, nasal and insistent, pinched through the nose and the front of the mouth.

Hobbs didn't understand. He adjusted his phone, got a better grip on it.

"What?"

"I said, 'I want you to *fuck* me with your big *penis*!'" said the voice again. It was young, female.

Hobbs instantly knew who it had to be. It was his foreman's daughter. That little teenage bitch. A junior or a senior at Mohawk Valley High. Always with the varsity sweaters. A cheerleader.

Hobbs had never met her in person, but he knew who she was. She must've gotten his number off her dad's phone.

Fallworth was always showing him Snapchats and Instagrams and Tiktoks and whatever else the insufferable little bitch was posting. She was always on a beach somewhere, in an arena, at an amusement park, wearing sunglasses, always with a carefree smile on her face, blissfully unaware of life's hardships. Her epic buoyancy was extremely trying for a battered old cuss like Hobbs.

Just that morning Fallworth had shown him a video she'd had posted. They'd been sitting in the carpenter shop at break. Hobbs had just finished painting the new signs for the boat launch. His back was hurting and he'd shuffled into the break room to drink some water.

Fallworth was sitting at his desk, looking at his phone with a big smile. Hobbs knew what was coming.

"Check this out, Hobbsy," said Fallworth, motioning him over.
"Millicent saw a bee."

There she was, the phone pointed up at her face, her hair in a bun on top of her head, sitting in a friend's car, screaming in slow motion as a bumblebee clumsily buzzed around her face through the open window. The vid had almost ninety thousand likes.

"She freaked," said Fallworth. "She got stung when she was a toddler. She can't handle those things. Such a little pistol. Just got accepted to Michigan. Wants to be a doctor."

"Yeah," said Hobbs. "That's great."

He sat down and didn't say anything else.

Hobbs had lived by himself for most of his adult life, at least until that year, when his brother Todd had moved in after being diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. Todd was currently in the other room, bedridden, emaciated and reeking of urine. He lay on sheets that were clammy with sweat no matter how much Hobbs changed them. His breath was harsh and rattling, through his nose.

"I'm sorry, who is this again?" Hobbs said gruffly into the phone.

He'd been smoking all night. The pack of Marlboros was dwindling. Before the call buzzed in, he'd been debating if he wanted to go out and get another pack or just go to sleep and get more in the morning.

"This is Ms. Swan!" said the voice. Barely concealed laughter was audible in the background, stifled giggles.

"No, I mean, who is this really?"

"Oh, I can't tell you that!"

"Why not?"

"Don't worry about it, sweetie! You don't know me, I don't know you."

He could hear more stifled laughter. His blood pressure began to go up.

"So what are you doing tonight, Mister Hobbs," the young girl pretending to be Ms. Swan merrily asked him.

"Nothing," he muttered.

"I just want you to know that I heard you have a *very big penis*," she said, stretching the last three words out in mocking orgasmic ecstasy. "Do you want to come over and put it inside me?"

Hobbs gritted his teeth. Earlier today he'd changed his brother's diaper, and his brother had been groaning like an animal as Hobbs wiped.

The stench was unbearable. Hobbs had puked afterward, even though he'd been changing his brother at least once a day for several weeks. The nurses did it when they came by, but when they weren't here it was just Hobbs and Todd.

After puking he'd sat by the toilet, perspiring and exhausted. He wondered what the hell had happened to him. He wondered where the hell all the good times had gone. What had happened to his days on the beach? Where were his ninety thousand likes?

Todd had initially been given about a two week expected term when he was put on hospice. That was four months ago. Since then the Todd that Hobbs had known and grown up with, the Todd he'd climbed the tree at the end of the court with and the Todd he'd once almost blinded when he chucked a plastic dinosaur at him and it hit him in his right eye, was effectively gone. He was replaced by a thin, mummy-toothed, bald, mumbling, living corpse with hollowed eyes and clutching velociraptor hands.

He remembered Fallworth showing him pictures of Millicent in her bikini with her little friends, all of them mugging for the camera with utter abandon, willing to look completely goofy because no one had ever shown them anything but adoration and attention. They gave peace signs and made duck faces behind their sunglasses. They held drinks in glasses slippery with condensation – alcoholic ones, no doubt, despite their ages – and stuck their tongues out. Boys with

flat stomachs and backwards baseball caps pressed their crotches up to the girls butts and put their arms around them.

"Spring break this year," said Fallworth, smiling. "She went snorkeling with dolphins!"

Fallworth didn't ever seem to notice that no one on the maintenance crew ever gave a fuck about what his daughter was doing. Hobbs had never been on spring break. Millicent would've never spoken to him in high school had they been the same age. She would've ignored him at best and tormented him at worst.

"Well, if you'd tell me who you are, maybe we could work something out," Hobbs said to the supposed Ms. Swan.

He knew Millicent wouldn't ever rat herself out, but maybe if he kept her on the phone long enough he could hear something in the background that would give her away.

He was so angry that this was happening that his hands shook and his heart pounded. He'd been sitting here minding his own fucking business, lounging in his chair after watching the evening news, smoking his cigarettes and thinking and wondering if he wanted to get something for dinner and wondering if he wanted to go get more cigarettes.

His phone had buzzed with a restricted number and when he'd answered it there had been the Ms. Swan impersonator in his ear. Ms. Swan, the diminutive character once portrayed by Alex Borstein on MadTV with her dumpy red and yellow frock and her straight black hair and her exaggerated Asian accent. If Hobbs ever talked like that people would call him a racist. Lord knew how Millicent had ever even heard of Ms. Swan — the character was over a decade and a half removed from her adolescent experience.

"I can't tell you that," said Ms. Swan in her thin, creaky singsong of a voice.

"Can you give me a hint?"

"Well, my initials are M and S," said the voice.

"M and S?"

"Yes," said the voice. "For... Ms. Swan!"

The stifled giggles became gales of gleeful laughter. The girls were really enjoying themselves at his expense. He was just one more loser to be taunted, one more guy who missed his chance at a good life. Too bad, buddy.

On second thought, time to end this, thought Hobbs. He was bitter and he knew it, but his brother was dying in the next room and he was old and tired and he didn't deserve to be bothered like this.

The longer he stayed on with them, the more time he wasted. The more entertainment he'd give them. Let them call someone else.

"All right, young lady," he said. "I'll be sure to tell your father about this tomorrow. Have a good night."

He hung up without waiting for a reply. The laughter chased him off the line.

His brother's concentrator bubbled in the next room.

Hobbs lit up another cigarette and enjoyed it.

Saved by a Sandwich

Blake pulled out of the Subway blitzed on Hellcat's Breath and headed for the park when the cop appeared and Blake's heart dropped out his ass.

He'd toked up as soon as he'd put his seatbelt on, Subway bag on the passenger seat. The blissful buoyancy hit him as he shifted into drive. Life was good.

He tore out of the parking lot and down Milford Rd, beating a quick left through a yellow arrow. Admittedly, he may have screeched a bit on the turn. But he was in a hurry – he had to get to work later and wanted to have as much chill time as possible.

Then, the cop. Hiding in the Arby's parking lot. Blake tried to hit the brakes as discreetly as possible but it was too late. He blew past and the cop pounced. He was on Blake's tail within seconds, lights flashing.

Blake looked down at the freshly-smoked bowl, sitting in the cupholder next to his dew-beaded medium Coke. The bowl was silver, streamlined, a heavy metal with a magnetic lid that covered the bowl itself. It looked like a bowl that Apple would make, sleek and smooth and space-age. Because of this, Blake liked to call it the iBowl.

Blake didn't know what to do at first. The iBowl may have just sent him to jail.

He latched onto the first cognizant thought out of the hundreds that raced through his head – rolling the windows down. The sudden wind sucked the stale air from the car, and hopefully most of the weed smell.

His sandwich lay on the passenger seat, wrapped in Subway paper in its plastic subway bag with three chocolate chip cookies and a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos.

Blake looked back at the cop in his rear view mirror, the spinning lights going crazy in the daylight. How long had it been? Was he taking too long? Oh God, he should pull over.

He slowed and came to a stop only a few hundred feet from the roundabout that would've taken him to the park.

Without thinking, he took the sub out of its bag and unwrapped it. The cop was still sitting in his car. Time stood still and sped up simultaneously.

Blake made his movements covert, leaning over and hoping it would look like he was fiddling with his glove compartment in an effort to get his registration and proof of insurance.

Carefully, Blake lifted the iBowl from the cupholder, opened the sub and shoved the iBowl in with the lettuce and turkey and roast beef and American cheese and ham and mustard and mayo and olives and banana peppers and green peppers and onions. Then he slammed the sandwich shut and hastily wrapped it again.

Next, his eyes. Blake examined them in the rearview. They didn't look too red. But he didn't have any eyedrops or sunglasses. Hopefully the cop wouldn't notice.

He went to the glove compartment as the cop finally emerged from his cruiser like a terrible cyberpunk gladiator. He was a big guy with a shaved head, a stereotype.

By the time the cop got to Blake's window, Blake had his license and registration ready. He summoned up every available brain cell and regained his composure.

"You were swerving back there pretty bad," the cop said as Blake rolled down his window. "Going a little fast, too."

Blake handed him his papers and license without being asked and tried to look innocent.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"...I wasn't intending to."

The officer looked at Blake's license, eyes hidden behind his sunglasses. He sniffed the air. He leaned down to Blake's level, sniffed again. Blake tried not to react.

"When was the last time you smoked marijuana in here?"

"Never, sir," said Blake, the lie erupting from his lips before he realized he'd even thought it. He was surprised and pleased at how convincing it sounded.

The cop looked at him, Blake's license and vehicle registration in his hand.

"Never?"

"No, sir. Never."

The cop leaned down and sniffed again — big, lung-filling, nostril-clenching sucks of air.

"It smells like marijuana in here, very strongly."

"I don't know why, sir. I don't smell anything."

"Step out of the car, please."

For some reason, in that moment, Blake looked at the cop's gun. He thought of all the news stories of cops shooting civilians of all colors.

"It's okay," Blake told himself. "You're a skinny suburban white kid, you have no weapons, and you're not that high yet. He's going to search the car and not find anything. Your stash is at home where it belongs. The iBowl is the one place he'd never think to look. There's nothing to find. It's going to be all right."

He obeyed the order, opening the door and stepped out as casually as his body would allow.

Again, words came from his throat and he didn't remember forming thoughts to create them.

"You mind if I eat my sandwich while you look through the car?"

"Yes," said the cop. "Put your hands on the roof and keep them there."

"Yes, sir."

Blake obliged. The car's roof was smooth and hot on his palms. He saw little silver twinkles in the metal, a zillion little sun clones.

Fuck, I'm high, he thought.

No, I'm not. It's fine. Shut up.

The cop leaned into the open driver's side and began rummaging through the garbage collected in the passenger side foot space. Blake hadn't cleaned his car in months. The front passenger foot space and the entire back seat were random trash pits.

"Jesus Christ," he heard the cop mutter, digging.

The cop dug through Blake's car trash for what seemed like a full minute. Blake felt the warm roof metal and stared into the beautiful blue sky.

When the cop came back up again, the wrapped Subway sandwich was clenched in one muscular hand. The cop brandished the sandwich, a stray flap of Subway paper seeming to wave at Blake in the breeze.

"Got some lunch, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mind if I have a bite?"

"Not at all, sir," said Blake immediately, his hair standing on end.

He envisioned himself in a jail cell, dreading the call he'd have to make to his step father. It would have to be his step father. His mother would probably castrate him.

The officer opened the top of half of the paper, exposing the sandwich. Blake waited for the iBowl to clink to the ground, spilling its little blackened crime onto the asphalt.

The cop sank his teeth into the sandwich. He started, grimaced.

Blake had the urge to vomit and fought it back.

The cop spat the bite of sandwich on the shoulder of the road.

"You got *banana peppers* on this thing?"

"I did," said Blake, trying to see if the bite had exposed the hidden iBowl.

"Nasty," said the cop. He set the sandwich on the windshield, balancing it on the wipers. The spat-out bite of sandwich lay cooking on the asphalt.

The cop nudged Blake out of the way, not roughly, and opened the driver's side back door. He shuffled around in Blake's back seat. Then he went back to the front again, sniffing all the while like a curious dog.

When the cop emerged a second time, he was holding something. He took off his sunglasses and narrowed his eyes, staring into Blake's soul.

He presented the object in his hand.

It was Blake's lighter.

He knows I'm high, Blake thought, not looking at the sandwich resting on his windshield wipers. But if he doesn't find anything, I'm fine.

"You don't have anything in this car that's illegal do you?" the cop asked him, eyes flinty and tired of civilian bullshit.

"No, sir," said Blake.

"Do you smoke?"

"I don't, sir," said Blake. "No."

"Then why do you have this?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You don't know?"

"No," said Blake. "I didn't know it was in there."

They stood there for a second, eyes locked, the lighter in the cop's palm.

"Maybe one of your friends left it, I guess," the cop finally said.

"Yeah, maybe."

The cop glared.

"I'm just gonna ask you. Where's the weed, son?"

"I don't have any."

"Lying just makes it worse, you know."

"I'm not lying, officer. There is no weed in the car right now."

"There isn't any weed in this car. *This* car. This car that reeks like weed and has a warm lighter on the passenger seat underneath all your other crap."

Blake kept his eyes on the cop's face. The unwrapped sandwich lay motionless on the windshield in its dog-eared roll of paper.

"No, sir," said Blake. "There is no weed inside the car. I swear it on my father's grave."

The cop lowered his sunglasses again and continued to look at Blake, his emotions unreadable.

He sees my eyes are red as fuck, thought Blake.

He saw that before.

Shut up.

The cop looked in the car one more time. He looked at the sandwich on the windshield. He looked at Blake.

"You sure you don't have anything illegal in your car, son?"

"I'm sure of it, officer."

"Where you going?"

"To the park. I just got Subway. I want to sit on the guard rail on the eastern bluff and watch the traffic on the highway and eat my lunch before I have work later this afternoon."

"That's pretty fucking poetic. Where do you work?"

"McNab's, sir. I drive a forklift."

"They drug test you there?"

"They do, sir," said Blake.

That was true. Blake had to take two weeks off of smoking every year to pass it. He didn't mind.

The cop stared at Blake some more. Blake looked back into the cop's eyes. He saw a meat-headed 40 year old who'd probably done at least a decade on the force. He was probably married, maybe divorced. Maybe he didn't get along with his kids. Maybe he did and they loved him. Maybe he would be at a Little League game tonight, or maybe he'd be down at the bar wondering how he'd ended up alone. He was clean-shaven and double-chinned. His eyebrows were only hair he had on his entire head.

They were blonde, sun-washed. Blake could see each individual strand of hair in the cop's eyebrows. It was actually quite beautiful, just like the sky and the zillion little sun clones sparkling on his car roof.

Eventually, the cop shrugged. He picked Blake's sandwich off the windshield and handed it to him.

"I guess I'd better let you go enjoy your lunch," he said. "I'm sure it'll taste extra good today."

Blake didn't answer.

"Wait here," said the cop.

He went back to his patrol car and got in and closed the door.

Blake waited, holding his sandwich in both hands like a wedding gift and watching the passing cars and rubbernecks, everyone side-eying, judging him for getting searched. His mind buzzed. He fought it like a swimmer in a current.

Finally, the cop returned.

"I'm gonna give you a ticket for reckless driving," said the cop. "I think we both know how lucky you are, but I've got to get back to the station and your car is a fucking mess."

He handed Blake the ticket — folded in on itself like a CVS receipt — plus his license and registration.

"You be good now," the cop said. Then he walked back to his cruiser without another word and sped off.

Blake waved stupidly as the cop passed him. The cop didn't wave back.

He got back in his car and sat there for a second. He heaved deeply. His head vibrated with relief. He was really super high.

Never again would he smoke in the car. Never.

Blake put the ticket in the glove compartment with his license and insurance. He'd worry about it tomorrow.

He took his bowl out of the sandwich and wrapped it in the Subway paper. It would need to be rinsed off, but it was due for a cleaning anyway.

When he finally made it to the park, he went right to his favorite spot on the guard rail. He watched the sky and the afternoon traffic and ate the sub, tearing off the piece the cop had bitten and throwing it in the grass where it would stay until the ants carried it off.

The Eagle Is Flying

"The eagle is flying," Darren declares. He's looking out the window.

I lean over to see for myself.

There he is, languidly strolling up the front sidewalk. People notice him, recognize him, raise their phones for a picture.

He's wearing a business casual suit with no tie, a blue baseball cap with LOGIC written across the front, and a gaudy American flag scarf draped around his shoulders like a shawl.

He's a second generation Indian immigrant, a STEM kid who worked as a controls engineer for the auto industry, started his own company, sold it and became a multi-millionaire. He did the whole investment portfolio thing, his most famous endeavor a nation-wide STEM training program.

His name is Alexander Arya. 44 years old and running for president with no previous political experience. Polls have him in 4th place nationally. He's generating buzz unlike any other candidate.

His flagship proposal is the liberty dividend – twelve hundred dollars a month to every person in the US from the age of 18 till death. He wants to pay for it with a tax on Wall Street and a tax on technology. He's got some other ideas, too – make election day a national holiday, Medicare for all, research on reparations for descendants of slaves, decriminalization of all drugs and total legalization of marijuana, modernizing voting (whatever that means), etc.

Campaign slogans wring every possible pun out of his last name, including references to the Game of Thrones character. Of course there's, "Arya ready?" But there's also, "Arya thinking?" and "Arya good at math?" and "Arya down for twelve hundred bucks a month?"

I first heard him on Joe Rogan back in February, and was impressed with his practicality and his "Aw, shucks" charm. I consider myself a casual supporter. I like his ideas, even if I know the establishment will never allow them.

This story begins when my boss at the podcast studio messaged me earlier this week. I work part time as a show engineer, picking up hours when I can.

"Can you cover Motor City Monthly this Saturday at the DSC from 4 to 5?" my boss had texted me out of nowhere.

"Sure," I replied.

"Great, we'll have to get you up to speed on the livestream software because they have a presidential candidate coming in."

"Wait, what?"

"Don't worry, it's not anyone with a chance."

"Who is it?"

"Alexander Arya."

I couldn't believe it. I was so excited. I knew who this guy was. Maybe I'd get to have a real conversation with him.

Saturday comes and my first glimpse of him is through the second floor studio window. He's walking down the sidewalk in the aforementioned outfit, smiling presidentially and greeting pedestrians. There's a twentysomething Wall-Street-looking guy with him, backpack slung over one shoulder.

The studio is located in the Detroit Shipping Company, a start-up behind the Masonic Temple that's constructed out of old shipping containers. There's restaurants and bars downstairs, arranged around an open-air courtyard where Arya will give a speech later.

The podcast studio itself is long and narrow, located in the southeast corner of the building. A long table with ten microphones and a control console consisting of a laptop and soundboard take up all the space. Moving around is a challenge.

The Motor City Monthly host Darren and his co-hosts DeAndre and Jerome fidget nervously as Arya makes his way through the restaurant area downstairs, shaking hands and patting backs and answering questions with quippy, feel-good answers. He's half an hour late.

Darren can't believe he actually got this interview. Motor City Monthly is a monthly (duh) podcast broadcast on the Podcast Detroit

network, focusing on events and goings-on in the downtown area. It doesn't have much of an audience yet and doesn't get big name guests. Darren says he just kept messaging the campaign until they responded. When he found out Arya would be at the DSC for a speech anyway, he saw his opening and went for it. The campaign agreed to appear but it sounded like there was some metaphorical fishing line to untangle. When Darren got here earlier he mentioned to me they'd changed the interview length on him already several times — first it was a half hour, then fifteen minutes, then half an hour again, and now it was back to fifteen minutes.

"They were like, 'No offense, but you're not NBC'," Darren explains to me and his co-hosts. "Fair enough."

Beforehand, Darren informed me that Arya's campaign had asked if they could use the studio as a green room after the interview so Arya would have a private place to hang out before and after he goes onstage.

"It's not really up to me," I say. "But yeah, I guess."

I text my boss and ask just to make sure. It's not a problem.

I'm psyched. This is incredible. I'll be able to talk to him even though it's not my interview.

Arya enters to the studio with two campaign staff — the Wall Street guy with the backpack is named Bryce. He's the campaign manager. There's also a girl whose name I don't catch who seems to be an event coordinator. Pleasantries are exchanged. I say hi but I'm unable to shake his hand from behind the board. He sits down and the interview begins.

I've prepared everything already, the equipment is up and ready to go. Just push some buttons in SAM and OBS and bring up the pots. Fortunately, nothing malfunctions.

The first thing that strikes me is Arya's overall vibe. On TV and on the Internet, he's small and roundish and self-deprecating and quick with a sheepish smile, like a supporting character in a Judd Apatow rom com.

In person he has the same gravitas as the owner of the company you work at. You can tell, this guy owns shit. He owns property and wealth and doesn't have to worry about resources. He worries about how he spends his *time*. People listen to him and do what he says without

arguing. It's amazing how someone can pull this off – play the on-camera personality of a lovable harmless dork while this Silicon Valley ruthless nerd capitalist lurks just below the surface.

The expressions on his face do not match the practical friendliness in his voice. His eyes give him away – he'll do this but he doesn't think it's worth doing and he has no problem showing us because who the fuck are we going to tell? He stares Darren down over the mic. Darren wilts, stammering his questions out. Arya answers them like a robot, but still sounding like his typical persona– jovial and knowledgeable and gosh darn it just happy to be here with you fine people.

The interview goes a little long but no one on Arya's side objects. Arya says nothing I haven't heard before. He goes over all the platform points I brought up earlier, gives us reasons for why they should be implemented.

Then it's over and Darren is stammering his thank you's and DeAndre and Jerome are silently shaking Arya's hand. The air is filled with that tension that appears whenever someone of importance or authority is in the room. Someone you desperately want to please because they could make your life much easier or much harder depending on what happens.

Pictures are taken. Darren asks if I want one.

"I'm good," I say. I don't want to bother him. I want to have a conversation. I want to connect with the guy.

"I feel like I'm gonna cut a track in here," Arya says, motioning to all the microphones.

Bryce hands him a bag of chips.

"Can you sing?" I ask him, trying to make a joke.

Arya makes a facial expression that suggests he's surprised at my ability to speak. He snorts and turns to Bryce.

"He just asked me, 'Can you sing?'"

Stung, I decide to try again.

"Have you ever been asked that before?"

He doesn't answer, tears into the bag of chips and eats.

I need to establish a rapport. He's going to be sitting in here for at least an hour – the speech isn't until 7, and I don't want to leave, and probably shouldn't anyway. Someone needs to watch the studio. And I'll never get an opportunity like this again.

Darren explains that the studio is free for them to use as a green room. He motions to me and says I'll be in here but they're free to use it as long as they need to.

Bryce smiles with too many teeth and ushers him out the door, thanking him profusely.

"I didn't know I was doing this until this week," I explain to Arya. "...so, you know, don't worry, I won't..."

I mean to say, "...bother you," but Arya's unsmiling face, in the middle of chewing a mouthful of chips, makes me stop talking. I don't finish the sentence. I just gesture with my hands.

Arya waits a second, then responds.

"Yeah, man, no problem."

I'm really only trying to be friendly, but Arya is giving off a seriously prickly vibe and it's making me even more awkward than I normally am.

Darren slips out of the studio with everyone else and it's just me and Arya and Bryce.

They discuss the logistics of his speech. Bryce explains where he'll be standing down in the courtyard, which is overlooked by the second-floor walkways.

"People are gonna be looking down at you," says Bryce. "It's gonna look cool but feel awkward."

"I'm kind of intrigued by this layout," Arya says, motioning around. "Let's go take a look."

Bryce pulls a radio out of his pocket.

Arya goes over to the door and opens it, letting in a cacophony of crowd noise.

"The eagle is flying," says Bryce into his radio just before they step out.

I have my first epiphany — though it looks like it's just Bryce and Arya, there is a presence here. A private security presence. Campaign staffers blending in with the crowd. Tough, official-looking dudes in tuxes with sunglasses hang just outside the room.

That's the bubble, I think. That's what the bubble looks like.

I sit alone in the studio, mics off. I don't know if I should stay. I might as well. Arya and Bryce left all their stuff in here and the door locks automatically. They'll need me to let them in.

A couple minutes later, Arya and Bryce come back and I let them in. They sit on the other side of the studio, talking logistics and punching messages into their phones. The air conditioner hums.

They are aggressively ignoring me, and it's then that I have my second epiphany — there's nothing that the successful hate more than someone silently begging to be let onto their level.

They think I'm trying to get something out of them. Maybe I am. But what? I don't know. I just wanted to have a real conversation with a presidential candidate I happen to be a fan of. I'm not asking for a job or anything.

The third epiphany — "All men are created equal" is just a lie we tell ourselves for sustainability purposes.

"You guys want me to step out?" I ask after a minute of uncomfortable silence.

Without looking up, Arya responds.

"What, so we can talk trash about people?"

He chuckles, shakes his head, rips open a bag of vending machine cookies.

"Let's tell him what we *really* think," he says to Bryce.

Bryce doesn't say anything, eyes glued to the smartphone in his hand.

"That's kind of what I was hoping for," is all I can think to say.

The animosity from these guys is so thick you could poke it with a stick. I don't understand why. I just gave them an out and they didn't take it. I'd happily leave at this point.

"No, it's fine," Arya says, not looking at me. "Hang around."

More moments pass. Outside, the crowd is chanting, "Ar-YA, Ar-YA!"

"Chanting my name in Detroit..." Arya says to Bryce, amused.

"It's a strange universe we've created," Bryce responds. "But I gotta say, regardless of the outcome or however this turns out — I like this version of 2020 with you in it better than the one without you."

Arya rolls his eyes, chewing his Famous Amos.

"Dude, without me... fucking shitshow."

He looks out the window at the gathering supporters. Him and Bryce exchange more logistics and shit-talk the other candidates. Beto's having a mid-life crisis. Harris is a spoiled, conniving megabitch. Biden's going senile. Bernie is an egomaniac. Buttigieg is an Amazon plant. Somehow the pathological ruthlessness of America — founded on genocide, slavery for the first 150 years, mass shootings, etc — comes up.

I decide to try one more time.

"Do you think it will actually happen?" I ask him.

Arya's hard brown eyes are on me again.

"Will what happen?"

"The liberty dividend. I mean, do you think people's lives will actually get better? Based on how pathological America is?"

Arya stares at me for a second. He shrugs again.

"It had better, or there's going to be a million guys hanging around with nothing to do and a lot of guns."

His demeanor is starting to piss me off. It would be one thing if they politely asked me to leave, but they're acting like they just want me pick up on their hostility and go away on my own. Fuck that. Have the balls to treat me like a person. I understand if you're tired or just don't want to talk.

I try to spark a few other conversations. Fuck these guys. I deserve to be here, too. I fucking work here and I'm doing them a favor by letting them use this place as a hideaway. Otherwise he'd be out there having to entertain the other peasants. It's not my fault they didn't prepare for this.

I ask him about the ironic support he's getting from far-right online groups. He doesn't think it'll stick, cause he's Indian.

"Do you ever get tired of talking to people like me?" I ask.

Arya shrugs again.

"I mean, this" — he gestures back and forth between us — "...is totally fine, but when people come up to you when you're eating with your family..."

It's not totally fine. But he doesn't seem to think I'm smart enough to pick up on that. Whatever.

He trails off, holds out the bag of cookies.

"Want one?"

"I'm good, thanks," I say. "Did I hear you say Buttigieg is an Amazon plant earlier?"

"He's got a lot of people on his campaign who work for Amazon."

Bryce chimes in.

"It's going to be very difficult to call Pete a man of the people," he says, looking at me like I'm something he banged his shin on.

The conversation attempts are futile and I should've known better than to even think these guys would be interested in talking to me. They're annoyed I'm in here and now I can't leave.

Arya finishes his cookies, stands up. He and Bryce stand by the door with their backs to me. It's almost time for the speech.

Another advisor comes into the studio, a skinny Asian guy. He turns around upon entry and his backpack knocks one of the mics off the table. The advisor whirls around, startled.

"Don't worry," I say, getting up to fix the mic, picking it up and adjusting it. "I didn't see anything."

The guy mutters an apology and turns away.

The three of them converse quietly. I can't make out what they're saying. Campaign stuff.

I sit down again. I really, really want to leave now.

A couple of twenty-something women wave coquettishly at Arya from the studio window. He waves back with both hands. Hey-o.

My final epiphany sinks in. I've been using that word a lot, I know, but that's what's happening. The next few paragraphs occur to me in about a second and a half.

Arya's overall vibe is... coasting. He's going to be fine regardless of how this turns out. There is no desperation, no general buzz of anxiety that you get off regular citizens who are constantly teetering

on the edge of personal or financial ruin. People who know they're invisible. People who don't command fortunes and who've never had their asses kissed.

Arya exists within true freedom. Freedom to be himself and freedom to walk away. No consequences. He has his own liberty dividend — his investments and the interest he makes off them.

I keep thinking. None of these candidates are for regular people. None of them are "men of the people". They are not regular people. They don't want to be regular people. They either hate regular people or look down on regular people. Regular people are cattle to them. NPC's. They are costs and obstacles at worst, tools and resources at best.

No one wants to be a regular person. No one considers themselves a regular person. But most people are. Everyone is looking for an excuse to rise above cattle-status.

Arya is playing the game. He's getting his name out there. Whatever happens will work in his favor, even if it's just the sale of a few more books or a cabinet appointment or more appearances on cable news. He's on a comfortable level. He's made it to the coasting level.

The people who haven't figured out the game yet? The people who haven't figured out how to make enough money so the money just makes more money and you never have to sell your body for labor or anything else again? They're not really people.

In a capitalist economy, you have to earn your humanity by showing you know how to play the game. And the game is played with large amounts of money. Wages are for suckers. Anyone working hourly is a fucking sucker, because there's no way out of that. You're digging a trench with a spoon.

It was stupid to think they'd treat me with any sort of civility. But I never would have assumed otherwise if Arya wasn't marketed the way he is.

Arya is marketed as someone who would talk to you. He's supposed to be something else entirely as a candidate. That's just his persona, his mask. He isn't a friendly Apatow supporting character. None of them are. A person like that would never get to this level.

Something else occurs to me — Arya's not even a top-tier candidate. If this is what Arya's like, imagine what it'd be like sharing a room with Biden or Bernie.

The answer to my question, the one about "Will it really happen?" is no. Because that's not really the question I was asking. The question is, "Will life get better for regular people, and by regular people, I mean me?"

No, it won't. Not unless I figure out how to play the game. Because we can't have better lives on a collective scale if Arya and his class is to keep living the way they do now. And the fact that I even bothered to ask gives away my naiveté and simple-mindedness. It betrays my cattle status. It means I'm not worth engaging with. I am a cow that has learned to talk.

It's speech time. Arya waits by the door, American flag scarf around his neck and LOGIC hat on. The crowd is chanting his name. There's several hundred people out there.

"The eagle is flying," the skinny Asian advisor says into the radio.

Arya steps out the door into a sea of cheers, tough dudes in sunglasses ushering him through the cattle. Bryce and the skinny Asian advisor follow.

I'm left behind in the darkened studio with only padded silence and useless epiphanies.

The Good Incel

A young man was taking a trip from Chicago to Detroit. He stopped at a McDonald's along the I-94 corridor for a piss and a Big Mac. The McDonald's was outside Battle Creek and quite the shithole. It was dark and rainy, and the young man regretted stopping. But he really had to piss.

The young man saw the guys at the counter when he came out of the bathroom and knew they might be trouble. He went right to his car but they followed him out. One pulled a gun.

He was stripped of his jacket, beaten, and robbed. They left him on the side of the road. They took his car back to their headquarters and stripped that, too.

The man lay there in the ditch, barely conscious, in the cold rain.

The first person to come along was a liberal activist. She parked her Tesla and got out and saw the guy in the ditch.

She was squeamish at the sight of blood, and almost dry heaved at the man's battered face. She stumbled away.

"I was never here," she thought. "Best not to get involved. He's probably just drunk anyway. Plus he's a white male so he probably did something to deserve it in the first place. Fucking white males..."

The second person to come along was an Evangelical Christian. He parked his SUV in the parking lot and got out and saw the guy in the ditch.

At first he thought the guy was a mannequin that someone had thrown off the side of the road, but upon realizing it was an actual person, he turned tail and jogged back to his car.

"I was never here," he thought. "The guy definitely did something stupid to get there... probably homeless and on drugs. What a hassle it would be, and would I be brought in as a suspect? It would be best to not get involved. I'm sure Jesus will forgive me."

He said a prayer that the guy in the ditch would get his life together.

The third person to come along was an incel. He was a confused, greasy wreck of a young man, bitter and angry at the world, and with terrible bone structure. He was already balding and still a virgin at 24. All he wanted was to get home so he could log onto Twitch and play Fortnite, masturbate to models on fansly and fall asleep in his own mess.

He parked his 13 year old Civic in the parking lot and got out and saw the guy in the ditch.

Adrenaline rushed. There was no way something so interesting was actually happening to him.

He walked over to the man, feet squishing on the wet grass. The cold rain misted in his hair and eyelashes. He was pretty sure the guy in the ditch was dead. But he pulled out his iPhone and turned on the flashlight and held it over the guy's nose and saw the guy's breath fog in the night air.

"Holy fuck," the incel said out loud. He'd just discovered an attempted murder victim. Years before, he'd harbored a brief ambition to go into criminal justice. Maybe this was the universe telling him that would be a good idea after all.

For a second the incel was too excited to do anything except stand there. Something was actually happening to him. Then he decided there was only one thing to do— help the guy.

Collecting himself, the incel dialed 911. As he told the dispatcher of his discovery and whereabouts, he pulled a mat out from his garbage pit of a car, shook the dust and crumbs and crap off it as best he could, and used it to cover the guy from the cold wind and rain. He crouched down as the dispatcher gave instructions not to move the victim.

"Can I talk to him at least?" the incel asked. "You know, in case he can hear me? Give positive vibes or whatever?"

"If you want," said the dispatcher, who was already tired of talking to the incel.

"Sorry, bud, people are fuckin' animals," the incel said to the guy. "Don't worry, though. I got help chopping in. You're gonna make it. We'll get you back up and running in no time."

The man was barely aware of the incel, but he shifted under the mat. The incel poured some Smirnoff vodka he had on a napkin and dabbed at the man's wounds, cleaning them. He even tried to give the guy a sip—"It'll help with the pain, bro,"—but the guy wasn't up to it.

The incel stayed on the line with 911 until the paramedics arrived. The professionals did their jobs, the incel was questioned and released, and the man was treated successfully at a nearby hospital. He later sent the incel a McDonald's gift card for 25 dollars and a brief thank you note. The incel was delighted.

The incel got his picture on a bunch of local newspaper articles. He'd never received so much positive attention in his life. Everyone liked the incel and called him a hero until he started talking about women's inherent duplicity and their inability to be appreciative of the reality men facilitate for them. The comments turned sour and the emails stopped coming.

However, it wasn't a total loss. The incel's brief brush with viral fame lasted just long enough for a couple of young women to think he was cute despite his misguided frustrations and misogyny. They reached out to him via social media. He ended up hanging out with one of them, nervous as fuck. She was kind and interesting and inspired him to modify his behavior. Then he ended up banging her, which made him no longer an incel.

So it all worked out.